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**THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE NECESSITY OF EMPATHY IN ETHICS**

by

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## Abstract

Although empathy has been implicated by both academics and pop culture as nearly analogous to morality, some philosophers have taken issue with this assessment. It has been argued that empathy is biasing, myopic, and perhaps more trouble than it's worth from an ethical perspective. In this paper, I first address whether empathy is a necessary baseline trait for having some degree of ethical motivation. Based on the differing ethical experiences of sociopaths and autistic individuals, as well as empathy's unique ability to motivationally bridge the gap between self and other, I conclude that empathy is a required trait for the moral agent. Assuming empathy is present in the moral experience, I then delineate the negative and positive effects empathy has on the ethical outcome of actions. Empathy does appear to cause prejudiced biasing and derogation of self-respect, but it also acts as a powerful motivator for other-oriented action and provides ethically valuable information about mind-states. Ultimately, I conclude that empathy cannot be a standalone ethical trait, but when filtered through reason, it can be invaluablely useful.

## **Introduction**

In the segregated era of the late 1950's, Texas-born John Howard Griffin decided that he wanted to truly know what it was like to be black in a deeply racist time and place. After dyeing his skin darker using sun lamps and medication, Griffin spent six weeks traveling and working in four Southern states. Griffin was struck by the reality of racism. He was verbally and physically abused, dehumanized by white people, and had to walk miles to access colored water fountains and toilets. At the end of the six weeks, Griffin found himself deeply moved by the experience. He went on to campaign for the civil rights movement, writing a widely-read book about the ordeal and working with Martin Luther King Jr. to make the voices of black folk heard. Griffin's book carried an empathic message: "If only we could put ourselves in the shoes of others to see how we would react, then we might become aware of the injustices of discrimination and the tragic inhumanity of every kind of prejudice," (Krzmaric, 2014). While this kind of activism might be ethically questioned today, given its use of blackface, in Griffin's spatial and temporal context his journey shows the powerful impact that a truly empathetic experience can have on one's moral motivations.

This thesis focuses on empathy's role in morality. First, I will conclude the introduction by outlining exactly what empathy means. In the following section, I explore whether it is possible to be a moral agent without any capacity for empathy, concluding that empathy is likely a baseline ethical trait based on its potentially singular capacity for motivating other-regarding concern. Next, I will elucidate the complicated nature of empathy's positive and negative impacts on the individual's pursuit of moral action. In conclusion, I suggest how empathy might be used most effectively in attempting to be ethical.

Though empathy has been implicated as an essential - or at least important - aspect of morality since Hume's time (Hume, 2011, and Slote, 2007), it has more recently been criticized as unnecessary or even detrimental for morality (Prinz, 2011, Furlane & Maibom 2017, and Terjesen, 2009). The list of charges include empathy's tendency to induce oft-undue partiality, to induce concern for a select few while ignoring the masses, and to potentially cause a harmfully unbalanced degree of self- versus other-concern (Bloom, 2018).

However, I would argue that the criticisms leveled against empathy fail to acknowledge several key considerations. Firstly, it is important to note the differences between ethical motivation and ethical judgment. Ethical motivation has to do with which forces are motivating an individual to act ethically, while ethical judgment is concerned with the process of deciding which choice is the ethical one. However, a judgment can only be acted upon if there is sufficient motivation in place to do so, and so in exploring empathy's normative role in ethics, we ought first to consider the degree to which empathy may be necessary to motivate morality. If empathy *is* required, then it is no longer warranted to say that empathy shouldn't be used in ethical situations- rather, arguments ought to focus on how to mitigate the potential negative aspects of its presence in a moral dilemma.

Before exploring what empathy does in ethics, however, it is important to understand that empathy is a multifaceted construct, with several separate domains that each have different functions and implications for morality. Because of this, discussions about empathy's use in ethics are often muddled by theorist's tendency to come to conclusions about empathy and morality that may not be valid, since the arguments unintentionally conflate various aspects of empathy. Decety and Cowell (2014) outline the three basic empathic functions as emotional contagion, empathic concern, and cognitive empathy or perspective taking.

Affective empathy, or emotional contagion, denotes the capacity for ‘catching’ another’s emotional state. Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson (1993) theorize that this process begins with unconscious and involuntary mimicry of the other. Evidence for involuntary mimicry has been found in various studies, including research by Harrison et al. (2006) finding that participant’s pupil’s shrunk when looking at sad faces with smaller as opposed to larger pupils. Furthermore, Laird (1974) found that when inducing smiling or frowning without participant’s awareness (ostensibly the intent was to study effects of various facial muscle contractions), frowners reported increased feelings of anger while smilers felt happier. Thus, during the process of unconscious facial mimicry, bottom-up feedback aligns the mimicker’s emotional state with their partner’s. An essential component to the development of motivation to care for others, emotional contagion is considered the most basic form of empathy and is seen across a variety of animal species (Bartal, I., et al. 2011). However, research has found that degree of emotional sharing is significantly biased towards kin (Cheng et al., 2011) and ingroup members. For instance, Xu et al. (2009) found that neural pain circuits activated more when viewing an ethnic ingroup member in pain versus an ethnic outgroup member, while Weisbuch and Ambady (2008) found a similar reduction in emotional sharing for racial, political, and sports team outgroup members. The ethics behind the issue of empathic bias will be discussed far more exhaustively in Section Two. However, in this brief delineation of the types of empathy, it will suffice to say that favoritism towards loved ones may be ethically acceptable but racist, sexist, etc. bias in emotional contagion presents a clear ethical issue. An additional concern with emotional contagion has to do with personal distress, a specific aspect of contagion. During empathic personal distress, individuals experience negative and self-focused aversive emotion in response to another's distress; this tends to result in avoidant behavior as opposed to helping behavior (Feldmanhall,

Oriel, et al. 2015). Thus, emotional sharing can be useful for encouraging prosocial behavior, but left unchecked it can be unreliable or even detrimental.

Empathic concern is an other-oriented emotional state wherein an individual perceives someone in distress, which then motivates intent to increase the other's welfare (Batson, 1981 & 2003). It involves a wide variety of brain areas, which "appear to exploit the strong, established physical pain and reward systems, borrowing aversive signals associated with pain to indicate when relationships are threatened." (Decety & Cowell, 2014). So, these systems work to encourage learned and automatic concern for others via neural-based conditioning- a highly effective manner of inculcation. Because empathic concern denotes concern for *others* as opposed to concern for *one's own* negative feelings, it leads to prosocial, altruistic behavior rather than avoidant behavior (Feldmanhall, Oriel, et al. 2015). Motivation to care is also "both deeply rooted in our biology and very flexible," (Decety & Cowell, 2014), as people can show empathic concern for a wide range of both human and non-human creatures, depending on the saliency of need and vulnerability cues. Again, however, biases towards ingroup members can affect one's degree of empathic concern. Studies have found that individuals both self-report and show behaviorally (through costly helping) decreased empathic concern towards outgroup members in racial groups and sports teams (Cuddy et al., 2007; Hein et al., 2010).

Additionally, in regard to empathic concern, it has been shown that inducement of empathy can cause the empathizer to preferentially help the empathized entity even when it goes against justice principles. One widely cited study by Batson, Klein, Highberger, and Shaw (1995) examined empathy's role in inducing partiality in altruistic decision-making. In the study, participants were randomly sorted into high or low empathy conditions. Each then listened to the story of a terminally ill girl who was on the waiting list for a children's health charity. Prior to

this, those in the high empathy condition were told to imagine how the child feels about her situation and how it has affected her life; those in the low-empathy condition were told to remain objective. Then participants were given the opportunity to move her off the wait list, with the understanding that they would be reducing the chances of children higher on the list who likely had more need. The participants in the low-empathy condition mostly acted in the interest of fairness and chose not to move her, while those in the high-empathy condition acted out of partiality to move the girl up in the list- even though they themselves stated that they did not perceive their choice to be fair or moral. Batson et al. show here that concerns about empathy's biasing potential goes beyond the ingroup as it can apparently lead to unfair partiality towards any entity an individual is induced to feel empathy towards.

Perspective taking, closely related to cognitive empathy, comprises the final facet of empathy. This is the ability to put oneself in another's shoes and understand what they may be thinking and feeling. Importantly, research has robustly indicated that perspective taking is a powerful tool for not only increasing one's empathic concern for others, but also for reducing bias and prejudice along with increasing concern for outgroup members as a whole (Batson, 2011). Research by Oliner and Oliner (1989) on those who rescued Jews during World War II found a pattern in rescue involvement, in which helpers initially joined due to compassion for an individual, which then led to increased concern for the group as a whole as well as a higher concern for justice. Perspective taking, therefore, comprises a vital aspect of empathy that can address issues arising from inherent biases in empathic concern and emotional sharing.



## Section One: On Empathy's Status as a Baseline Trait for Morality

In exploring whether a certain capacity is necessary for another to occur, it is useful to examine cases in which a person does not have that pre-conditional capacity and explore whether examples exist *without* the pre-conditional but *with* the posited additional trait. Consider the sociopath. Defined by a lack of empathy and guilt along with a tendency towards amoral behavior, current research appears to support the commonsense idea that the sociopath's amorality can be traced to their empathy deficit. Aaltola (2013) notes that "psychopaths seem to struggle to recognize the moral value of other individuals: at best, others are instruments for one's own benefit, not Kantian 'ends in themselves'... Psychopaths' capacity to respond to the emotions of others is very low, and indeed they may enjoy viewing negative stimuli. Yet, their cognitive empathy levels are typical or stronger than average." (p. 78) Here, Aaltola points to the fact that while psychopaths have extremely low or nonexistent levels of *affective* empathy, their capacity for *cognitive* empathy is typical or better than average. In practice, this means that they are unaffected by other's emotions but are able to understand what's going on with others emotionally. Furthermore, they do not suffer from any difficulties with reasoning abilities (Mahmut et al., 2008). If anything, their executive functioning appears to be *better* than average- at least when looking at so-called "successful" psychopaths, or psychopaths who are not criminals (Ishikawa et al., 2001). Thus, as Aaltola concludes,

"If we concede that psychopaths are rationally able individuals incapable of affective empathy, and furthermore if we acknowledge their tendency towards moral transgression, it becomes increasingly untenable to argue that rationality alone is the necessary criterion of moral agency." (P. 78).

Aaltola makes a strong claim here in favor of empathy's role as a necessary ethical motivator, but skeptics may find the current evidence to be insufficient. There are, firstly, the same sorts of concerns one would have with any psychological-research-based argument: the research may not have been conducted well, and even if it was, researchers may have simply made the wrong inferences regarding cause-and-effect. Psychopaths constitute a mere 1-2% of the population (Marsh, 2013) and by their nature, are unlikely to be particularly driven to volunteer for a study without much personal gain, and potentially a lot to lose if their community discovers their psychopathic status. For that reason, much of the research has been done on prison populations (Hosking et al. 2017, and Roberts & Coid, 2007) making it difficult to say how much of the results have to do with their status as prisoners rather than psychopathy on its own. Prinz (2011) argues that a psychopathic child could still be taught to be moral even if she experiences no emotional response to other's distress and thus doesn't understand why harm is bad, because other forms of punishment will suffice:

She might be spanked, yelled at, sent to her room, or deprived of some privilege she enjoys. All these interventions will cause her to suffer... In each case, she will also recognize that the love she depends on from her caregivers has been threatened, and the potential loss of love can be a source of considerable anguish.  
(p. 220)

Prinz also argues that psychopath's lack of morality could be attributed to their numerous other emotional deficits such as fear and disgust. These concerns are valid, especially considering the issues with psychopathy research. Thus, it will be helpful to explore a further line of reasoning in understanding whether some capacity for empathy is a precondition for morality.

To further examine the degree to which empathy is a required trait for one to be ethical, it is helpful to look into another type of individual who suffers from empathy deficits: people with high functioning autism (HFA). Those with HFA are severely lacking in their capacity for

Theory of Mind (TOM), which is the ability to attribute mental states to other people (Begeer et al., 2010). To elucidate the concept, TOM allows the individual to understand that other people have differing beliefs, moods, and knowledge than one's own, and additionally realize how these mental states may affect their behavior. Perspective taking falls under this umbrella, but is specifically concerned with the intentional effort to understand and predict another's emotions and cognitions. The two have been found to be correlated, however (Shamay-Tsoory, 2003). Despite their deficit in this empathy-related ability, "they often have a very strong moral conscience." (Feinstein, 2010). Indeed, autism expert Simon Baron-Cohen explains that they can actually give the impression of being "super-moral", and are "often the most loyal defenders of someone they perceive to be suffering an injustice." (Baron-Cohen, 2003, p. 137).

This obviously differs significantly from the behavior of sociopaths, leading some theorists to consider the existence of the autistic person to show that empathy is not a required trait for acting morally. Kennet (2002) discusses this view, arguing that the discrepancies in psychopathic and autistic moral behavior provide evidence against empathy being a necessary moral motivator, since "another group of people, autistic people, who even more conspicuously lack empathy as I have so far described it, do in some cases seem capable of compensating for this deficit and becoming conscientious, though often clumsy, moral agents." (p. 345). It is important to note that Kennet describes empathy as "[an] imaginative process of simulation with its resulting emotional contagion and reciprocal awareness," (p. 345). To expand on this process, one cognitively simulates the other's mental states during empathy, leading to secondhand emotion ("emotional contagion") which precipitates those emotions becoming a "voting member of our own motivational system" (p. 344). This definition appears to collapse cognitive empathy and emotional sharing, and the resulting conclusion serves as a strong example of the importance

of theorizing with the awareness that empathy has several entirely separate functions. Kennet fails to recognize that it is not the case that both psychopaths and autistic people lack empathy; rather, psychopaths lack *emotional* empathy while those with HFA lack *cognitive* empathy. In line with this, Smith (2009) notes that autistic people "have 'a deficit of cognitive empathy but a surfeit of emotional empathy.'" (p. 489). This likely explains Baron-Cohen's description of people with HFA as being super-moral; they may not understand what is happening with other people but they care a great deal about it. Interestingly, because they lack the ability to accurately guess other's emotions and what they need in order to be helped in an effective way, they often become social and moral "hypersystemizers" (Jaarsma, 2013), meaning that they do their best to work out highly complex rule sets that dictate the right ethical (and social) behavior in a given situation. Considering the difference in the types of empathy that autistic and psychopathic people lack, it actually appears to provide evidence in favor of emotional empathy's role as an ethical motivator- even if people can't understand what's happening within the minds of others without being told explicitly, as long as they have the ability to be emotionally affected by others they will still be driven to help. But if they lack the capacity to feel with others, it seems that they can understand another's plight perfectly and yet never care about them in an ethical sense.

Evidence derived from the difference in ethicality displayed by sociopaths and people with autism is certainly a helpful starting point in examining empathy's status as a baseline ethical capacity. However, given the previously discussed limitations of empirical psychological research in providing conclusive evidence, a more philosophical argument may be useful in exploring the idea.

This second argument originates in the hardly contentious argument that morality is inherently interpersonal; that is, it necessarily has to do with one's interactions with other people

(however one chooses to define personhood). If a person only cared about doing what was right for themselves, with no consideration of the wellbeing of anyone else, this cannot be considered a genuine ethics. Though it is true that one ought to count themselves in their ethical sphere, constraining one's circle to the self constitutes a highly implausible ethical theory. Only the theory of ethical egoism, to my knowledge, argues in favor of a selfish ethics. Zagzebski (2007, p. 252) explains that the ethical egoist maintains that the fact of other people's having their own ends is never a reason to change one's actions; rather, they ought to act in consideration of others only if it serves themselves. In her words, "the extreme ethical egoist puts no practical or moral value on the interests of others." This view is exceedingly difficult to coherently argue for, and numerous objections have been placed against it. For instance, Campbell (1972) points out that for any prescriptive theory to be coherent, it ought to be the case that it does not allow for a person P to be ethically obligated to do X while person R is ethically obligated to do something that expressly prevents X. To explain further, let's say two men both want to marry the same woman. It would be most beneficial for each man to marry her, thus preventing the other from doing so, but it is impossible for both men to do this. Ethical egoism prescribes a moral 'ought' to the both of them that is logically impossible to carry out. A more simple and intuitive problem with ethical egoism is that it is self-defeating. Focusing exclusively on one's own interests will make life difficult for the egoistic individual; therefore, one actually goes against the self's interests in doing so. Bernard Williams, one of the most highly esteemed moral philosophers of the 20th century, analyzes in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* what sorts of considerations have bearing on one's actions but are *not* ethical:

There is one very obvious candidate, the considerations of egoism, those that relate merely to the comfort, excitement, self-esteem, power, or other advantage of the agent. The contrast between these considerations and the ethical is a platitude, and is grounded in obviously reasonable ideas about what ethical

practices are for, the role they play in human societies... However vague it may initially be, we have a conception of the ethical that understandably relates to us and our actions the demands, needs, claims, desires, and, generally, the lives of other people, and it is helpful to preserve this conception in what we are prepared to call an ethical consideration. (Williams 2015, p. 13)

Ethical egoism seems highly unlikely to be a valid ethical theory, however, I will briefly address further objections about conceptions of ethics necessarily having to do with other people. As discussed earlier, Prinz (2011) points out that one can experience moral disapprobation even in cases without an apparent moral victim; cases include transgressions such as tax fraud or deforestation. However, in both of these cases (and arguably any other ethical situation) it is still the fact that these situations are moral in virtue of their involving interpersonal dynamics. With a social wrong like tax fraud, moral outrage emerges from the unfairness of one individual contributing less than others towards shared goods. With deforestation, one could argue that the problem lies in reducing the aesthetic beauty in the world as well as contributing to climate change; both of these issues ultimately rest on negative impacts on people's wellbeing.

Having examined ethical egoism and other objections, sufficient evidence is in place to accept the principle that ethics is inherently interpersonal. Based on this, I will argue that in order to be ethical, it is therefore necessary to have some sort of motivational bridge between the self and the other in order to facilitate other-oriented actions. I argue that empathy, in its various forms, represents this bridge in a number of ways.

Firstly, let us discuss empathy in its most basic form: emotional contagion. As Pavlovich and Keiko (2011) explain, advances in neuroscience have found evidence for an explanation of emotional contagion in the presence of 'mirror neurons'. Essentially, when seeing another's emotions, these neurons activate almost in the same way as they would were the emotion our own. For instance, Fadiga et al. (1995) found in their studies on macaque monkeys that the same

area of the brain (Brodmann area 44/45 in the premotor cortex) was activated regardless of whether the subject was doing the action or observing it. Additionally, in a meta-analysis by Lamm et al. (2011), 32 fMRI studies collectively showed that the act of empathizing with another's pain uses the same neural structures involved with directly experiencing the same kind of pain. The presence of mirror neurons points to the fact that emotional contagion constitutes a uniquely other-orienting emotion; unlike other phenomena which could either be self- or other-oriented, empathy is explicitly related to the other in that it makes the experiences and wellbeing of others forcibly and emotionally relevant to the self. Of course, one could argue that in experiencing the distress of others, the resulting rational motivation would be avoidant rather than appetitive; if someone hurts themselves and an observer experiences negative affect in response, one could easily leave the room in order to relieve this feeling as opposed to helping the other, which may come at some cost to the agent. However, decades of research by empathy expert C.D. Batson (Batson et al. 1981, Batson et al. 1983, and Batson 1990) find that adults very often help others even when they could easily escape the situation.

Expanding on the idea of empathy as a self-other bridge, Hourdequin (2011) discusses the apparent incoherence in acting morally that arises from the idea of internalism, which she ultimately argues can be resolved through consideration of empathy. Internalism states that for an action to constitute a reason to act, the agent must have some internal and subjective motive that is furthered by performance of the action. If there is no internally-based motive to perform the action, the agent will not be motivated to do that act. Moral reasons, however, purport to apply to the agent regardless of whether they further the individual's subjective goals. Richard Joyce (2001) argues that this indicates that morality is incoherent and therefore a "myth". However, Hourdequin argues that it is possible to expand an internalist conception of morality

by explaining a mechanism through which an agent can be motivated by normative reasons that do not connect with their pre-existing ends. To explain further, people are obviously typically motivated by reasons based in self-focused ends. However, as she argues, reasons are also able to motivate through connection with a "general human capacity to recognize and be motivated by the ends of others, and to see others' ends as providing reasons to act." (p. 407). This is something typically presupposed in countless situations. To take just one, when we tell someone that they should tell us the truth about something, we are typically not saying this in virtue of it being in the other's best interests or advancing their goals. Rather, we are saying that our *own* ends constitute a valid reason for them to tell us the truth. Hourdequin argues that the mechanism by which other's ends can be a coherent reason for the agent to act is empathy. As she explains, Hoffman (2000) found that empathetic arousal tends to initiate other-oriented concern and a motivation to relieve the other's pain. The fact that empathy can lead to concern for the other makes it an emotion that provides coherent reasons for the agent to act even if the action reflects no prior goal for the agent: "Through empathy, the emotions of others point to reasons for action: reasons to alleviate distress and to attend to others' desires, interests, and ends, whose frustration generates distress. Empathically shared emotions thus provide a motivational link to others' ends." (p. 410).

To expand on empathy's role in facilitating care for other's wellbeing, Simmons (2013) argues that when one fully empathizes with another (by fully, he means both affectively and cognitively) the empathizer not only feels the emotions of the other, but they feel it in the way that the other feels it. Others view their emotions as involving "a purpose which matters and is worthy of being fulfilled." (p. 102). Therefore, it is not possible for one to fully feel and cognitively understand the emotions of the other (to the best of their ability, limited- of course-



by the inherent subjectivity of the individual) and not also feel some degree of concern for that entity.

Pavlovich and Keiko (2011) take this argument a step further and argue that empathy actually "dissolves the barrier between self and others," because "when we feel another's pain [through mirror neurons], we become connected in a shared reality." (p.133). They go on to object to conceptions of the self as being exclusively ego-based, stating that "the independent 'ego-encapsulated' model of self has hindered mutual understanding and cooperation." (p. 134).

Through its ability to bridge the gap between self and other, empathy represents the mechanism through which one is able to transcend the ego and have one's conception of self expand to encapsulate all entities within that person's moral sphere. Of course, we still retain an awareness of our individual autonomy and personhood, but through empathy's ability to facilitate concern for others, the salient ends of others become reason-giving in a way that could not be possible without this instrument of self-other boundary dissolution.

Thus far, empathy has been the only capacity discussed as a necessary baseline trait for one to be morally motivated. However, as previously hinted while explaining Aaltola's argument for empathy's role in the psychopath's amorality, various scholars have implicated reason as the most central morally motivating capacity. Immanuel Kant remains well-known for advancing this concept in his works on ethical theory, eschewing empathy as a necessary moral trait.

One of the most basic aspects of Kant's theory is that human morality is a law and a duty emerging from our status as *rational* and *free* persons (Wilson and Denis, 2018), meaning that we are free to choose our actions, and we have the capacity for reason. These two capacities are all that Kant implicates as necessary for morality, rejecting the need for affective traits, including empathy. Given that the sociopath is apparently both rational and free, this seems to indicate that

a sociopath is a moral agent, theoretically capable of inclusion in Kant's moral theory and obligated to be ethical. Throughout Kant's writings, he also praises the ability to remain stoic and apathetic in the face of any sort of affect, claiming that affect can cloud one's ability to make accurate moral judgments. For instance, in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, he enthusiastically recommends avoidance of emotion:

"The principle of apathy-namely that the wise man must never be in a state of affect, not even in that of compassion with the misfortune of his best friend, is an entirely correct and sublime moral principle of the Stoic school; for affect makes us (more or less) blind." (Kant 2006, p. 152).

Exploring Kant's reasoning behind the praise of separating emotion from ethics, Sorenson (2002) explains the different valuations Kant gives to various types of emotions. Inclinations, or desires without any sort of reasoning behind them - such as love and sympathy, or the desire for self-preservation - are thought by Kant to be poor foundations for morality for four reasons. First, they cannot work well as a criterion for judging morality because people might be inclined to do the wrong thing. For instance, someone may have an inclination to take someone's phone, but that doesn't make it acceptable. Second, inclinations are unreliable as moral motivation because people may *not* be inclined to do the right thing; an example would be an instance where someone knows they ought to care for their child, but they may be tired and thus *not inclined* to do their duty as a parent, though they are still obligated to do so. More importantly, Kant does not believe inclinations are moral because they are not the products of one's free will but rather simply things that we passively possess, and also because any action is only moral to the degree that it has to do specifically with a prior commitment to being moral (Sorenson 111).

To expand on this, Sorenson explains that when an action is not caused by free will, it has nothing to do with our intention. Since intention is the only aspect of our actions that we have full control over, only freely willed actions can be moral. Related to this, if one's intention is not

specifically to do the right thing, then the action cannot be a moral one because the intention was not a moral intention. Actions done solely from a commitment to duty do not suffer from these shortcomings, since one is obligated to do the right thing because it's the right thing, *not* because you just happen to want to do that thing (Sorenson).

However, what about emotions like love and sympathy? As previously discussed, the capacity for emotional empathy (if not cognitive) appears to be likely necessary for being moral. In fact, Kant does sporadically endorse the importance of empathy. To expand on this, Kant states in the Anthropology that despite his endorsement of apathy,

"Nevertheless the wisdom of nature has planted in us the predisposition of compassion in order to handle the reins provisionally, until reason has achieved the necessary strength; that is to say, for the purpose of enlivening us, nature has added the incentive of pathological (sensible) impulse to the moral incentives for the good, as a temporary surrogate of reason." (Kant 2006, p. 152).

Here, Kant only allows for sympathy as a motivation *until* reason develops to the point that it can take the reins, so to speak. In his later works, however, he appears to give sympathetic motivation a stronger role. In the Duty of Sympathy section in his Metaphysics of Ethics, he states:

"Neither ought we to desert the chambers of the sick nor the cells of the debtor, in order to escape the painful sympathy we might be unable to repress, this emotion being a spring implanted in us by nature, prompting us to do what the representation of duty on its own might be unable to accomplish." (Kant 1886, p. 276).

Kant both admits that we may be unable to suppress the emotion, and also acknowledges that representation of duty on its own is not always capable of motivating morality.

Exploring Kant's Duty of Sympathy further, Fahmy (2009) argues that Kant intends at least some forms of sympathy to be a direct moral duty. In the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant divides the Duties of Love into three categories: beneficent activity ("to promote according to one's

means the happiness of others in need" [Kant 1996, p. 453]), gratitude, and "Teilnehmung", the duty of sympathy. Fahmy explains that the general account in the secondary literature has been that the duty of sympathy has two components: "an obligation to make use of our natural receptivity to sympathetic feelings as a means to fulfilling other duties of love, and an indirect duty to cultivate these feelings." (p. 31). Neither of these components implies a direct duty to be empathetic; they both point to the duty of sympathy being important only to the degree that it can aid in the fulfillment of the first two duties. However, she points out that Kant does discuss the importance of "Teilnehmung" in itself:

"But while it is not in itself a duty to have sympathetic sadness (Mitleid) (and so also sympathetic joy (Mitfreude)) with others, active Teilnehmung in their fate is; and to this end it is therefore an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings in us, and to make use of them as so many means to Teilnehmung based on moral principles and the feelings appropriate to them." (Kant 1996, p. 457, in Fahmy p. 32).

Here, he distinguishes between raw compassion and *cultivated* compassion. To better understand this distinction, it is important to know the difference between what Kant calls *humanitas aesthetica* and *humanis practica* (Fahmy p. 36-37), as Fahmy states that there is no distinction between *humanitas practica* and Teilnehmung (Fahmy p. 42). The first is the experience of being passively affected emotionally by one's environment; for instance, becoming upset because you see that your friend is upset. This is functionally identical to the empathic concept of emotional sharing. Simply having these feelings cannot in itself be moral, because it is not freely willed. Conversely, the second, *humanitas practica*, requires free will and reason. It involves interaction between people that is informed by one's sympathetic feelings for the other, and since it is actively willed rather than passively experienced, *this* is what we have a duty to do. Kant states that "active Teilnehmung" in others' fate is a duty in itself, while the cultivation

of compassionate natural feelings is merely an indirect duty- this reflects the difference between passive and active feelings. Cultivated feelings, not to be confused with cultivation *of* feelings, are those that "have been subjected to moral scrutiny and thought prior to expression" (Fahmy p. 40). Considering all this, it would appear that Kant makes sympathetic feeling a direct duty, at least when those feelings are freely and actively willed and have been filtered through a lens of reason.

Yet, in the *Metaphysics of Ethics*, Kant also clearly states that the sympathy planted by nature "is one of the springs to do good, not the only one. Hence compassion, whether in natural or cultivated form, cannot be a necessary, i.e. a general condition of charity; nor can any other feeling be such a necessary condition, except Achtung [respect]." (Kant 1886, p. 277). Contrary to his earlier assertion, he now states that it is not a duty in any manner to have compassion, regardless of whether it is a cultivated feeling or not. It is simply one of any number of motivational springs, and importantly, it is not a *necessary* motivation- it would be perfectly alright to eschew one's empathy altogether and utilize other forms of motivation.

Even more blatantly, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant states that, "there is here in the subject no antecedent *feeling* tending to morality. For this is impossible, since every feeling is sensuous, and the motive of moral intention must be free from all sensuous conditions." (Kant 1889, p.168). Thus, while Kant does acknowledge that empathy may be morally useful as one potential motivating force, particularly as a provisional motivator prior to reason's full development, he ultimately argues that reason is the only necessary ethical capacity.

However, various scholars have argued against this concept. Addressing the idea that reason is effective if fully developed, Roskies (2003) discusses the impacts of "acquired sociopathy." This occurs when a patient experiences damage to the ventromedial prefrontal

cortex (a brain area related to emotional processing) and thereafter exhibit massive change in their social and ethical behavior. Researchers administering a variety of tests have found their reasoning and intelligence levels are functionally the same as they were prior to the accident (Roskies p. 56), and notably, "when presented with hypothetical situations, the conclusions they reach about moral questions concur with those which normals typically reach." (Roskies p. 57). The only significant difference is that when a patient experiences ethically-charged situations, they fail to experience "appropriate" emotional and motivational responses, not only according to their subjective analysis but also in comparison to the typical person's self-reported and physiological responses (Roskies p. 57). Because of this lack of appropriate affect, patients are "impaired in their ability to act effectively in many moral situations." (Roskies p. 57). For instance, Blair (2000) discuss an acquired sociopathy patient who demonstrated a lack of concern for other's safety, roughly pushing a wheelchair-bound patient around despite her terror-filled screams and showing no remorse or acceptance of responsibility (p. 1124). This research seems to indicate that even when a person's reasoning capacity is fully developed, and their ability to make ethical judgments is unaffected, a lack of affective response to ethical situations appears to cause significant dearth of concern for acting ethically. It expands on the earlier sociopathy argument in that it presents a person who was previously both ethically motivated and cognitively developed, providing a clear causal direction between lack of empathy and lack of moral motivation.

Providing sufficient evidence for a necessary condition of any capacity is difficult, as just one instance of the presence of the relevant capacity without the apparently necessary condition can take down the entire argument. However, significant evidence does implicate the importance and perhaps necessity of empathy in order to have sufficient moral motivation. Empirical

evidence from sociopathy and autism provides an initial intuition that this is the case, and consideration of empathy's role as a motivational bridge between self and other bolsters its baseline status. Had John Howard Griffin lacked the ability to feel with and care for others, perhaps he would never have had the desire to fully understand segregated Black folk's experience. Empathy, however, is not without its faults. In the following section, I will discuss the negative and positive impacts that in-the-moment empathy has on ethical decision-making.

## **Section Two: Problems and Positives Regarding Empathy's Relationship to Morality**

In the previous section, I tentatively concluded that some level of empathetic capacity is required in order for a moral agent to be sufficiently motivated. Without it, the individual may lack a mechanism to bridge the gap between self-concern and other-concern and therefore fail to achieve the type of non-egoistical motivation required for genuinely ethical action intention. Considering this, it is important to then explore whether we ought to augment individual's levels of empathy in the pursuit of increasing morality. If it's a baseline trait for morality, shouldn't increasing it subsequently boost one's tendency to act ethically? One may initially assume that this is obviously correct, but the answer is more nuanced. In the following section, I will discuss both the ethical problems and benefits that empathy can create in order to increase understanding of how empathy can most effectively be utilized to increase one's tendency to act morally.

The most well-known moral concern that empathy presents may be its tendency to bias the empathizer. Empathy is not equally doled out to individuals based on the salience of their emotions, as one might hope, but instead it is subject to several types of partiality. Partiality of any kind presents a potential problem for the ethicist, because it is at odds with the moral principle that all humans are of equal ethical worth and ought to be given the same ethical consideration (Friedman, p. 818) [note- I know you said here to weaken 'at odds' because it's not always at odds with morality, but I believe it's sufficiently weakened by describing it as a 'potential problem for the ethicist' because ultimately I'm saying partiality is at odds with the idea that every human is of equal moral worth and ought to be treated equally, which I think is probably always and not sometimes true, and I'm not saying that it's directly at odds with morality]. It is for this reason that, for instance, racist ideology that argues for the moral



devaluing of non-White individuals is unethical. However, the natural bias towards family and friends may be less problematic. Cialdini et al. (1997) found that one's degree of empathic concern increases with relationship strength, supporting the intuitive idea that humans tend to feel more empathy towards family and friends. Given that the study also found a robust correlation between empathic concern and willingness to help, it appears that the closer we are to an individual in need, the more likely it is that we will provide aid. However, as Friedman (1991) discusses, "Hardly any moral philosopher, these days, would deny that we are each entitled to favor our loved ones. Some would say, even more strongly, that we *ought* to favor them," (p. 818). She goes on to explain Bernard Williams's argument that close relationships can be described as "ground projects" which are a fundamental aspect to human flourishing, and that some degree of favoritism is necessary to satisfactorily maintain these relationships. Close relationships provide powerful benefits, such as intimacy and emotional support. In addition, given that everyone can participate and benefit from special relationship prioritization, there is no overarching unfairness at play. Thus, partiality in these special relationships is ethically acceptable because of their integral role in cultivating a good life for all (p. 818). While the theoretical backings of special relationship partiality have been contested, a full analysis would require a second paper. Therefore, it will suffice to say that the acceptability of this type of empathetic bias is generally agreed upon by philosophers today.

However, as previously discussed, empathy is also vulnerable to a far more insidious breed of partiality- the similarity bias. This is what Prinz (2011) points out as one of empathy's greatest flaws. Prinz defines this bias as the innate tendency to feel more empathy towards individuals who appear to be more similar to us. This concept has been supported by empirical research finding both correlational (Heinke & Louis, 2009) and causal (Batson et al., 1995)

relationships between increased overall similarity and increased empathy, in the form of perspective taking and empathic concern. Additional studies have examined connections between empathy and more specific types of similarity. Many focus on racial biases in empathy. Avenanti, Sirigu, and Aglioti (2010) found that individuals measuring highly in implicit racism have strongly reduced sensorimotor contagion when seeing a racial outgroup member in pain, a type of physical reactivity in which corticospinal excitability occurs upon seeing someone get hurt. A later study by Neumann et al. (2013) found that individuals reported decreased perspective taking and emotional contagion towards racial outgroup members. Additional empathic similarity biases have been found across gender (Feshbach, Norma, & Roe, 1968), university affiliation (Tarrant et al., 2009), and as discussed in Section One, political and sports affiliation (Weisbuch & Ambady, 2008; Cuddy et al., 2007; Hein et al., 2010). Perhaps it is ethically admissible to feel more empathy for loved ones, with the accompanying favoritism that this entails. However, it is unacceptable for factors completely irrelevant to morality- like race and sports affiliation- to hold sway in one's empathic motivation to help. As Prinz argues, "Empathy pushes partiality into prejudice. It is fine to be a good friend, but empathetic bias can promote nepotism, negligence, and moral myopia," (p. 229).

This is obviously a significant problem for those who champion empathy as a natural precursor to ethical behavior. While the concerns it raises may not be entirely addressable, some hope can be found in psychological research on how empathic outgroup biases might be reduced. One study found that individual's empathetic neural response to racial outgroup members' pain significantly increased to the degree that they reported more contact with that outgroup (Cao et al., 2015). Importantly, the increased neural response was not due to augmented relationship closeness from frequent contact, but simply from the presence of the outgroup. In line with this

discovery, Hein et al. (2015) found causal evidence that merely three positive experiences of being helped by an outgroup member led to a significant increase in empathic neural responses that generalized to the outgroup as a whole. Contact is not the only method proven to reduce the empathic similarity bias, however. Several studies have found that the simple act of trying to take the perspective of an outgroup member led to an increase in all three empathetic facets, which then fostered a lasting reduction in prejudice (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Taken together, this research indicates that a more optimistic outlook on the possibility of reducing empathic bias may be justified. While Prinz conjectures that “we can no more overcome [empathy’s] limits than we can ride a bicycle across the ocean,” (p. 229) actual empirical knowledge suggest otherwise. Not only can the motivated individual choose to reduce their bias through actively attempting to view the world through the dissimilar other’s eyes, but this reduction in empathic partiality can also be achieved on a wide scale regardless of individual intention through programs increasing general, and especially positive, intragroup contact.

Beyond the similarity bias, there exists a much less widely discussed issue with empathy’s role in morality- that of its potential to reduce self-respect. When one habitually takes the perspective of wrongdoers and feels their emotions, with the resultant concern for the other, it may be the case that they forgive and allow transgressions regardless of whether the wrongdoer has apologized or intends to continue harming the individual. This concern may be viewed through the lens of Carol Gilligan’s (1977) three-tiered theory of ethical development, in which the individual progresses ethically by first acknowledging her duty to act out of concern for other’s welfare, but eventually growing into the last stage through including herself within her ethical sphere. Within this framework, the empathetic individual is problematized when their unexamined empathic processes lead them to subsume their own welfare under that of the

empathized individual. Gilligan's theory is intended to act as a feminist response to the male-centric and male-created popular theories of ethical development, which fail to acknowledge the care-oriented female perspective.

The relationship between empathy and forgiveness has been well-studied. Perspective taking involves understanding of the other's contextual reasons for wrongdoing, and inducing this aspect of empathy has been found to result in higher levels of benevolent emotions towards one's transgressor and higher likelihood to forgive (Takaku, 2001). Macaskill (2002) similarly found that increased trait empathy correlates with increased ease and frequency in forgiveness. In line with this, McCullough et al. (1997) studied the empathy-forgiveness relationship using participants who had been significantly wronged by another without apology, including situations such as a mother telling the individual that they were unwanted and evil, and an ex-boyfriend purposefully impregnating a woman, then leaving due to concerns about the required responsibility. The researchers found that an empathy seminar led to an increase in emotional empathy towards the transgressor and, through this, an increase in likelihood of forgiveness.

Although the empathy-forgiveness relationship may be positive in some respects, as it can allow for interpersonal conflict resolution and perhaps decrease the individual's negative affect, it has the potential to interact negatively with self-respect. The hyper-empathetic individual may fail to maintain a healthy boundary between self and other, allowing others to wrong them and failing to emote appropriate moral disapprobation. Jeffrie Murphy discussed this concept in *Forgiveness and Resentment*, pointing out that if a victim fails to feel appropriate levels of injustice and resentment towards their transgressor, this is indicative of a failure to take one's projects, entitlements, and the self seriously enough, since "the primary value defended by the passage of resentment is self-respect," (p. 16). Accordingly, it is an affront to one's self-

respect to dissolve one's feelings of resentment to forgive one's wrongdoer if it seems that the self is still in danger from the wrongdoer. While forgiveness may stem from understanding of the reasons behind the other's actions, reasons do not automatically morally justify. Every unethical act emerges from at least one reason that the actor did not choose- biological makeup, upbringing, random environmental factors- but that does not make actions ethical, simply understandable. If one believes that the transgressor will continue to harm them, and forgives nonetheless in light of the reasons for their wrongdoing, one fails to treat the self as a being worthy of moral consideration. Novitz (1998) expands on this idea, first arguing that taking the other's perspective is a necessary component of forgiveness, because an increase in understanding of what it might feel like to be that other will destabilize one's angry attitudes. He then discusses how cultures which promote self-respect and pride ideals will consider empathy to undermine an individual's sense of self, and this is a legitimate concern because there exists a "straightforward tension between retaining a view of our own importance, and the empathy that requires one to lose sight of oneself and fixate on the claims and emotions of the other," (p. 310). While almost every individual has both self- and other-regard, the two can often be at odds in situations wherein the interests of self and other are in conflict; in a zero-sum game, the individual must decide whether to act out of internal or external concern.

Empirical research supports the idea that forgiveness and self-respect can have a tenuous relationship. Luchies et al. (2010) explored the relationship between forgiveness and self-respect, with results indicating that when forgiveness is expressed without the perpetrator having made amends (defined as verbally expressing and thereafter acting to ensure that the victim will be safe and valued in their continued relationship), the act of forgiveness causes the victim's self-respect to be diminished. However, when proper amends were made, forgiveness led to bolstered

self-respect. Consider the following situation. Jane and Anna have been close friends for a long time. Jane is known to her friends as a highly empathetic person, one who is always able to listen without judgement and feels other's emotions almost as though they were her own. One day, after years of yearning and in an emotionally unstable state from the death of a family member, Anna tries to sleep with Jane's husband. Initially, Jane is shocked and angry. However, upon talking to Anna and hearing that her deeply fractured emotional state was what led her to make the choice that she did, Jane feels overwhelmed with concern for Anna and forgives her transgression, despite her continued resentment and a lack of apology. Anna continues to make less egregious advances on Jane's husband, which Jane continues to forgive because she can feel Anna's grief and can't help but view the situation from her perspective. From an outsider's perspective, this forgiveness of Anna's unethical actions likely seems unreasonable. Regardless of the fact that Anna's emotional state caused her to be more vulnerable to giving in to immorality, it remains the case that Anna betrayed Jane and, importantly, failed to take full responsibility for her actions and convey that Jane would be emotionally safe with her in the future. Grounds for forgiveness are therefore lacking, yet Jane's perspective taking and sharing of Anna's pain, with the resultant automatic feelings of concern, lead her to prematurely forgive Anna's actions.

In considering how this issue might be addressed, Gilligan's theory provides a useful framework for delineating how the empathetic individual ought to adjust. First, it should be acknowledged that there *is* virtue in the act of sacrificing the self and, overall, having a strong degree of care for the other's wellbeing. The second stage in Gilligan's ethical development, as previously discussed, involves this kind of moral concern with other's needs. However, when only others are viewed as legitimate recipients of moral concern, Gilligan argues that this leads

to “psychological violence,” which then leads to a reconsideration of the relationship between self and other in order to strike a balance between “selfishness and responsibility,” (p. 492). This engenders entry into the final level of ethical development, in which “the self becomes the arbiter of an independent judgment that now subsumes both conventions and individual needs under the moral principle of nonviolence. Judgment remains psychological in its concern with the intention and consequences of action, but it now becomes universal in its condemnation of exploitation and hurt,” (p. 492). The goal here is to attempt to view the self and social convention through an objective moral principle, evaluating as independently as one can, given the reality of the embodied individualized ego. Thus, the empathizing individual can avoid the tendency to allow others to hurt her through consideration of herself from an impartial perspective. She takes a step back and views herself with the same degree of care and concern as she does others, and in doing so, leaves space to consider whether acceptance of the other’s behavior is warranted based on the likelihood that she will thereafter be safe and valued in the relationship. One method through which this detachment may occur lies in mindfulness meditation, defined by Baer (2006) as the intentional, uncritical observation of one’s emotions, cognitions, and sensory information along with focusing on the present. Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, and Freedman (2006) explain that the primary significance of mindfulness lies in its ability to facilitate “reperceiving”, in which the individual experiences a shift in self-perception such that they are not immersed in the drama of their personal narrative, but rather are able to step back to dispassionately observe it. Through this reperceiving, the empathizer can view both themselves and the other as worthy of moral consideration, and allow for the positive moral aspects of empathy to remain. [note: unfortunately, the vast majority of psych resources I use don’t have page numbers because they’re just online, so there’s only separation by article sections... I could include those?]

While considering the potential ethical pitfalls of empathy is unquestionably important, the reasons for trying to mitigate these problems while continuing to augment empathy ought to be acknowledged and understood. One of the most valuable effects of empathy lie in its powerful ability to motivate prosocial behavior, as discussed briefly in the first section. A significant amount of research has consistently found support for this phenomenon, including a meta-analysis of 76 studies by Ding and Zhaohui (2016) that found a significant relationship between empathy and prosocial behaviors, with a medium to large effect size. Paciello et al. (2013) also found support for the relationship between empathy and even high-cost helping, noting that “The more participants experienced compassion and concern for people in need, the more they felt responsible for others and had a desire to improve others’ condition.” Neurology-based studies bolstered evidence of the phenomenon as well; Morelli et al. (2014) indicated that stronger brain-based empathetic reactions to other’s pain/anxiety/joy predicted higher likelihood of helping behavior in the real world. However, in considering whether empathy leads to specifically *ethical* prosociality, it is important to consider the differences between altruistic and egoistic motivation to help.

Daniel Batson, an expert on empathy, has extensively studied the relationship between empathy and altruism throughout two decades of research in order to address whether empathic helping is truly other-oriented. Batson describes this relationship as the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson et al., 1981, p. 290), and argues that the empathic motivation to help is altruistic as opposed to egoistic. He defines altruistic helping motives as being “directed toward the endstate goal of reducing the other's distress,” and egoistic motives as “ultimately directed toward the endstate goal of benefitting ourselves,” (p. 290). Assuming that intention is a vital aspect of morally assessing an agent’s actions, it is arguably more morally praiseworthy to help



others altruistically rather than out of a desire to reduce personal distress or feel good about oneself. From an outcomes perspective, egoistic helping is less ethically desirable because the helpers will only help to the degree and kind necessary to help *themselves*, rather than base their actions on the wellbeing of the other.

However, Batson's work has found powerful support for the idea that empathy leads to prosocial actions that are based out of genuine concern for the other. In one of the first studies Batson performed to test the empathy-altruism hypothesis, two experiments found that in conditions wherein the participant was induced to feel high empathy towards a distressed individual, they were more likely to help at personal cost regardless of whether escaping the situation without helping was easy. Conversely, in low-empathy conditions, participants only helped when escape was difficult (Batson et al., 1981). This supported the hypothesis, as the researchers argued that egoistic motivations would lead individuals to help only if it was the easiest way to reduce their personal distress. In a later study, Batson et al. (1988) performed five experiments to test various egoistic alternatives to potentially altruistic empathy-induced helping. Alternatives included intent to gain self or social rewards (e.g., praise or pride), intent to avoid self or social punishments (e.g., shame or censure). To test the helping-reward hypothesis, researchers had participants encounter a person in need (PIN) and told them that they could provide relief to the PIN at little cost to themselves. Then, half were told they actually could not perform the helping task. Across both helpers and non-helpers, half were then told that the PIN no longer needed relief. Given these four groups, the helping-reward hypothesis predicted that for high-empathy subjects, mood should increase only in the helping/no prior relief group, while mood should become more negative in the other three because they had been deprived of the opportunity to obtain the anticipated positive mood reward. Results instead supported the

empathy-altruism hypothesis, as high-empathy participants showed negative emotion only in the no-helping/no prior relief group and had no emotional changes in the three groups wherein the victim's need had been alleviated in some way.

Batson et al. then performed three studies that explored whether helping is done to avoid punishment, through examining the effects of providing three types of justification for not helping, so that participants would feel they did not deserve self or external punishment. These included justification based on other's inaction, ambiguity of causal attribution, and difficulty of qualifying to help. Across these three studies, the helping-punishment hypothesis predicted that in high-justification conditions, less helping would occur. However, they found that that high empathy-subjects helped *more* when there was high justification for not helping, suggesting that they were not helping simply to avoid feeling guilty or ashamed. The researchers then performed a study testing both hypotheses again, by having subjects listen to a broadcast describing a woman in need then performing a task in which their reaction time to reward-goal and punishment-goal words was measured against a control group who had not heard the broadcast. Results indicated that there was no significant difference between reaction times, indicating that the reward- and punishment-goal words were not especially present in the minds of the subjects after hearing about the victim's need for help.

Batson also studied the effects of inducing empathy in a prisoner's dilemma situation (Batson et al., 2001). A dilemma was set up such that raffle tickets had varying positive and negative values, and three outcomes were possible based on two individuals' choices. If both chose selflessly, both would end up with 15 tickets. If one chose selflessly and the other selfishly, the selfless individual would receive zero tickets while the selfish person would have 25. Finally, if both chose selfishly, both would receive 5 tickets. Notably, the participant already

knew before choosing that the other person had chosen the selfish option. Participants were sorted into one of three conditions: no-empathy (zero communication) low-empathy (instructed to remain objective while reading a note from the other describing her suffering over a recent breakup and her desire for anything to cheer her up) or high-empathy (instructed to read the note while trying to imagine how she was feeling). The results were quite significant, with an effect size rarely seen in social psychology. In the no-empathy condition, zero individuals acted selflessly. In the low-empathy condition, the number jumped to 10%. Finally, in the high empathy condition, in spite of their knowledge that the partner acted without their interest in mind, almost *half* of the participants chose to give up any possibility of reward so that their partner would have a larger reward.

Considering the aggregation of Batson's findings, evidence seems to suggest that empathy is a powerful tool for shifting the balance between self- and other-oriented concern. It should be noted, however, that this literature does not guarantee a direct connection between empathy and morality. As argued in the first section, actions that result from concern for others' wellbeing have a relationship to morality that is somewhat analogous to that of a square and a rectangle; while most moral actions are based out of concern for other's wellbeing, not all actions based on other-concern are necessarily moral. To give an example, consider the previously-discussed Batson (1995) study in which participants chose to move up a sick young girl on an organ donation waitlist, despite moving down others with more need. They reported that they did not think it was the ethically correct action, but because they had developed empathy-based concern for her, they wanted to prioritize her welfare regardless. Therefore, it is most accurate to state that the evidence shows empathy's powerful ability to generate *potentially* ethical actions.

The scope of empathy's ethical benefits go beyond the motivational. It may also serve as a useful tool in guiding one's ethical judgement-making. Earlier, it was briefly noted that those with autism- who lack cognitive but not affective empathy- develop highly complex systems of rule sets dictating right and wrong in a given situation (Jaarsma, 2013, p. 293). Jaarsma notes that this systemization approach is due to the presence of "impairments in integrating mental state information (e.g., beliefs, intentions) for moral judgment," (p. 293). The autistic individual's difficulty in accurately assessing the emotions and beliefs of others leads to significant hardship in making effective ethical decisions. For instance, Grant (2018) describes an extreme case in which an autistic individual's lack of empathetic understanding lead to him peeping at women in his school's locker room through holes he had made: "He... appeared unable to focus on the emotional meaning of events or experiences. He was never able to develop any understanding of the fear or violation that the women felt in the locker room, perseverating instead on the inconsistent and minutely incorrect aspects of their testimony," (p. 65). Autistic individuals show how difficult ethical judgement-making becomes without sufficient awareness of the emotions, cognitions, and intentions of others, and research on non-clinical populations supports this concept as well. Cushman (2008) found that individuals heavily rely on their knowledge of other's mental states in forming ethical judgments, and Lane (2010) found that higher levels of children's emotional and cognitive understanding predicted higher likelihood of both considering other's emotions and mental states and also using societally-oriented reasoning while making ethical decisions.

Clearly, empathetic understanding plays a significant role in moral deliberation. How might this process work? One important function of this understanding is to provide morally relevant information that may be not only useful but sometimes necessary in making an ethical

choice, from both outcomes- and rule-based moral perspectives. Blum (1991) points out that “many rules or principles are formulated in too coarse-grained a fashion to capture the relevant moral detail in particular situations and thus require something beyond the rule itself to apply them adequately to the particular situation,” (p. 709). In other words, one may attempt to utilize a certain moral principle in pursuit of acting in an ethical manner, but without awareness of important situation-specific details, one may be unable to appropriately apply the rule. Blum gives several examples to illustrate this idea. Here, I will discuss a version of his example, modified slightly to make the ethical concerns more clear. “Joan” and “John” are both sitting on a crowded subway train. All the seats are full, and in front of them an elderly woman is standing up with two heavy shopping bags. While Joan is distinctly aware of the woman’s discomfort, John fails to empathetically “imagine into” the woman’s mind-state, and thus perceives nothing beyond sensory data. Both might follow an ethical rule along the lines of, “Give up some of your own comfort if another person is significantly more in need than you,” but because of John’s empathetic failure, only Joan is in a position to be able to apply this rule. John may be able to sidestep this issue, if he is concerned with acting ethically and realizes that he is not particularly empathetically perceptive, through creating more specific rules like “Always give up your seat for an older person.” However, this requires a more complicated set of rules, and it may be very hard or impossible to create rules that “catch” all possible ethical scenarios. Perhaps a friend is very upset and needs help, but the only indicator that she is upset requires some level of empathetic assumption- an anxious-looking face, for instance. A low-empathy person may need their loved one to tell them they need help before they could do their duty as a friend, making the moral agent less independently capable of assessing and performing their desired ethical obligations. Therefore, empathic understanding streamlines the ethical process in ways that are

sometimes necessary if the agent does not wish to be dependent on external sources to make ethical needs salient.

From an outcomes-based ethical perspective, cognitive empathy is important because of its ability to provide knowledge about how one's action might impact a given situation. In the case of John and Joan, Joan's awareness of the woman's discomfort informs her that the other woman would have significantly more of a negative impact from standing than Joan would. Therefore, unlike John, she knows that switching places with the woman will lead to an overall better state of affairs. Clearly, not only does empathetic knowledge increase the salience of the moral importance of a situation, it also provides information that guides how one chooses to respond to the situation in an ethical manner.

Despite the ethical importance of mind-state awareness, some have rightly pointed out that empathy's ability to provide this awareness is flawed in several ways. Campelia (2017) discusses how the ego-encapsulated nature of the human condition prevents empathy from guaranteeing accurate perceptions of the other (p. 531). In a more specific attack, she argues when an individual has not had a similar experience as another, they may be less able to empathetically perceive the other, creating unfair biases in one's ability to appropriately respond to an ethical situation (p. 531). Thus, an individual may base their actions off of an inaccurate appraisal of a situation, with that inaccuracy increasing to the degree that they have had more dissimilar experiences to the given other.

However, empirical evidence has found that empathic accuracy is often fairly accurate- Regarding the empathic ability to guess what another's exact thoughts are at a given moment, a skill requiring high levels of empathic ability, Hodges et al. (2009) reported that individuals were on average 50-70% accurate in their empathic appraisals. Moreover, this accuracy was similar

regardless of whether the individual had had a relevantly similar experience. Guessing emotions is arguably an easier task due to the reduced specificity of possible answers, and indeed a study that used the well-established “Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test,” to examine individual’s accuracy in perceiving another’s emotions found that people guessed correctly 75% of the time (Baron-Cohen, 2001). Therefore, it may be the case that a moral agent can be fairly reliant on their empathetic abilities. Of course, one can never be *certain* about their accuracy in a certain situation, but given that the human condition precludes absolute certainty about the contents of another’s mind in any case, empathy represents a tool that allows one to at least be *more* accurate in our pursuit of moral action. And as the differing moral experiences of non-clinical populations and autistic individuals illustrate, this tool is apparently extremely helpful in successfully traversing ethical mores.

Ultimately, empathy proves to be an ethically complicated trait when considering its effects on a given moral agent. Although it represents a powerful mechanism through which one can increase both concern for others and also one’s own ability to attain morally relevant information, it originated evolutionarily not as a tool to directly enhance morality, but rather as a catalyst for group cohesion. It is an inherently biasing trait, and while it is arguably acceptable to favor loved ones, ethical problems arise from its tendency to cause partiality towards those who are similar to us in race, gender, and other morally irrelevant variables. This problematic bias can be reduced through both individual intent and programs encouraging intergroup contact, but the fact that this unethical partiality is inherent to empathy is cause for concern if one hopes to increase tendency and ability to be ethical. Its origin in group cohesion also results in the issue that one may be overly concerned with harmonious relationships, and fail to respect oneself as a rightful recipient of moral concern to the degree that one is overwhelmed with concern for the

other. Again, this is an addressable problem, but the fact that it must be addressed indicates that empathy is not automatically ethical. So, considering the pitfalls and positives, should one try to increase empathy in pursuit of a more ethical life? My answer is a caveated yes. Both the yes and the caveat will be elucidated in the following section.



### **Section Three: Towards an Effective Use of Empathy in Ethics**

It's not controversial to state that moral enhancement is perhaps one of the most important goals one can have, both as an individual and as a larger collective. Morality is inherently good. In fact, one could even say that the phrase "morality is good" represents a tautological statement. What's more controversial is how moral enhancement ought to be done, and what the end goal looks like. In this paper, I targeted the latter by focusing on empathy's role in ethics. Prior to discussing the impacts empathy has on moral action, I explored whether it's necessary in the first place in order to be a moral agent. Empirical evidence from psychopathic and autistic populations suggests that this is the case, and consideration of its unique ability to provide a motivational bridge between the self and the other constituted further evidence in favor of its baseline status for moral agency. However, does increasing empathy past whatever level is ethically required lead to a more moral agent? The answer is complicated. Empathy did not originate on a species-wide level in order to cause individuals to be more ethical. Rather, it simply happened to be evolutionarily useful in virtue of its powerful ability to enhance group cohesion. Left unchecked, it creates bias towards one's various groups, and can cause individuals to derogate their own self-respect due to an unbalanced valuation of other's welfare relative to one's own. However, there's a reason why "empathy" has practically become a stand-in for "morality" in pop culture. It increases motivational concern for other's wellbeing and provides ethically valuable information about others. Furthermore, the biasing and self-respect problems can be reduced if one is motivated to do so.

Ultimately, I stated that empathy ought to be increased, but with an important caveat. That caveat is that it is enhanced alongside relevant reasoning capacities. Reason is what makes

empathy more than a simple tool to enhance relationship and group harmony. Empathy provides powerful fuel for other-oriented action, but without rationality driving the car, the empathetic individual will make choices solely based on whether it feels right. As discussed, this unedited empathy can lead to a number of unethical actions. Across every potential problem and benefit provided by empathy, the additional ingredient that created moral action was reason: conscious intent to be unbiased, active consideration of oneself as worthy of moral consideration, and using empathic information to plan actions. Załuski (2017) argues in line with this, suggesting that ‘perfect empathy’ consists of cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and *ethically proper* empathic action: “Perfect empathy is not a free-standing, independent moral capacity; it implies a sense of justice, or more generally, the knowledge of moral rules, which specify in what circumstances an emotion of sorrow or joy is justifiable, and what action is ethically appropriate in a given situation,” (p. 5). This concept aligns with Kant’s argument that only ‘cultivated feelings’ can be considered ethical; when emotions have been filtered through an ethically-oriented cognitive lens, they can then be effectively harnessed for ethical action. Empirical support for an ethics of cultivated empathy can be seen in research on Need for Cognition (NFC), a construct outlined by Strobel (2017) as the degree to which one enjoys and has motivation to engage in effortful cognition (i.e., more elaborate decision-making and deeper processing of information). Strobel et al. examined NFC’s relationship to moral behavior, finding that NFC predicted higher likelihood to make ethical choices over and above a variety of other morally relevant traits, including empathy. Deepening one’s thought processes while interacting with the world enhances one’s ability to utilize pre-existing sources of other-oriented motivation and awareness in order to do the right thing.

Emotions are powerful. Empathy forcibly aligns one's wellbeing with that of others, connecting those with a capacity for other-regard in a tapestry of loving concern. One cannot genuinely empathize without acknowledging the other's status as an autonomous being who is an end in and of themselves. This innate tendency represents one of the most beautiful idiosyncrasies of humanity, that of our deeply and widely felt compassion for other beings. Ethical action, however, is not intrinsic to us as humans. Without active consideration of justice, and universal as opposed to strictly partialized concern, empathy cannot transcend mere good intentions. Learn to understand the perspectives of others, acceptingly feel their emotions with love, but always filter your empathic activity through moral scrutiny.

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