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EMPATHY AND MORAL MOTIVATION

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Any justification ends finally with the rationally gratuitous presence of the emotion of sympathy; if that condition were not met, one would simply have no reason to be moral.

Thomas Nagel, The Possibility of Altruism (11)

1 The Empathic Motivation Hypothesis

The thought that empathy plays an important role in moral motivation is almost a platitude of contemporary folk psychology. Unlike many folk platitudes, however, it also has a long and distinguished history in philosophical theory. Early British sentimentalists accorded to it (or to “sympathy,” as it was then labeled) a central role; Hume’s premiss that “the minds of men are mirrors to one another’s” lay at the heart of his etiology of the “moral distinctions” and their ability to move us to action (Hume, 1739/1978: 365). In the nineteenth century, Adam Smith followed him in locating the affective power of moral claims in our natural propensity to reflect one another’s behaviors and inner lives (Smith, 1759/2002). Parallel themes were mooted in German moral philosophy and aesthetics in the 1700s, and versions of the empathy construct remained prominent in continental accounts of moral motivation through the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries (Schiller, 1794/1967; Schopenhauer, 1840/1995; Lipps, 1903; Scheler, 1923/1954; Husserl, 1931/1988). In the second half of the last century, however, mainstream analytic philosophers largely abandoned empathy and its cognates, notwithstanding its close association with prominent notions such as universalizability, interpersonal cognition, and internal reasons. With a few notable exceptions, moral philosophy then regarded empathy with suspicion, as an ill-defined, psychological construct that had no place in reasoned moral justification and motivation.

The current resurgence of interest in whether and how empathy motivates moral conduct owes something to the experimental turn in moral theory, but it is even more indebted to developments in experimental psychology. One principal catalyst was Daniel Batson’s landmark studies of moral motivation in the 1980s and 1990s (Batson, 2011; Batson, 2012). These studies put to the test what Batson called the “egoistic hypothesis” – the claim that the ultimate goal of all human action is to promote the agent’s own welfare. The competing hypothesis was that, in certain facilitating conditions, agents’ choices and actions can be altruistically

motivated – motivated directly by a non-instrumental or ultimate desire to benefit another, even when doing so incurs personal costs. Batson’s particular focus was empathic concern, which he understood as involving “vicarious other-focused emotions, including feelings of sympathy, compassion, tenderness and the like” (Batson, 1991: 113). His studies explored the effect of empathic induction on subjects’ preparedness to respond altruistically to others, both in attitude and in action choices, using experimental designs that controlled for egoistic motives of reward seeking, punishment avoidance, and relief from aversive arousal. While his findings have met with many challenges, they are widely regarded as lending support to the ‘empathy-altruism’ hypothesis – the claim that as “empathic feeling for a person in need increases, altruistic motivation to have that person’s need relieved increases” (Batson, 1991: 72). Batson’s claim that empathy evokes altruistic motivation harmonizes well with the common assumption that empathy moves us to do the right thing, and is a force for the (moral) good (see Chapter 19, “Empathy and altruism”).

In everyday life, however, human empathy can be capricious and double-edged. As Primo Levi observed, its workings are often unreliable and “elude all logic.” There is no proportion, for instance, “between the pity we feel and the extent of the pain by which the pity is aroused: a single Anne Frank excites more emotion than the myriads who suffered as she did but whose image has remained in the shadows” (Levi, 1988: 56). Levi’s skepticism about the contributions of empathy to moral conduct is at least partly borne out by its role in countless everyday, moral failings; as Jesse Prinz has observed, empathy can move us to be “grotesquely partial to the near and dear” and lead us into “profound moral error” (2011b: 224). Even if one rejects the thought that partiality and morality are incompatible, it is clear that empathy can sometimes deform our moral judgments. The same may be said of empathy’s contributions to moral motivation. There is compelling experimental evidence that its force is fickle (ebbing and waning whimsically), irrational (unmodulated by the seriousness or size of its targets), and wildly prejudicial (subject to in-group biases, to proximity, salience, and cuteness effects) (Konrath & Grynberg, 2013). Perhaps worst of all, the allure of its verdicts can persist even when they contradict our considered moral judgments (Navarete, 2012; Batson et al., 2004; Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995). So does morality really want empathy on its side?

Perhaps it does, despite these perils. It is generally (and, I think, correctly) assumed that empathy can, in some circumstances, provide a powerful motive to right action that sometimes defeats, and often competes with, the two forces most hostile to morality: indifference and self-interest. Empathy competes with indifference in its epistemic role, by alerting us to circumstances that demand moral attention, and in its motivational role, it serves as a corrective to our default position of egocentrically pursuing our own ends, and only our own ends. The reasoning behind the assumption is straightforward. Other-regarding or altruistic moral requirements often enjoin actions that compete with our concern for our own welfare. If we are to be moved by them, indifference and self-interest must be counteracted by a motive force of equal or greater power. In our species, empathic concern is that motive. Hence empathy is, in such cases, necessary for moral motivation.

This reasoning is plausible so far as it goes. Nonetheless, any identification of empathy and moral motivation *tout court* would clearly be a mistake: countless moral requirements do not directly concern personal welfare at all, and enjoy no direct connection with empathy. Among these empathy-irrelevant norms are various sexual, dietary, and hygiene prohibitions, norms deriving from religious commandments, and norms based on conceptions of social honor and prestige. Empathic responsiveness to human weal and woe will not dissuade a man from acts of necrophilia, nor keep him Kosher, nor prompt him honorably to fall on his sword.

These exceptions acknowledged, considerations of other persons' interests still justify a central and ubiquitous core of moral prescriptions. Others-welfare or altruistic norms prescribe actions that are pro-social; they direct the agent to protect or promote the interests of another person or persons. Among these are certain harm norms (prohibitions against harming persons and their property) as well as norms reflecting Aristotelian and Humean natural virtues, such as friendship, kindness, generosity, compassion, and loyalty. There is good reason to suppose that a *sine qua non* of being moved by such norms is a propensity to be moved by other *people*, and that being moved by other people involves being moved empathically.

I will put a label to the basic hypothesis that empathy is necessary to motivate compliance with our others-welfare judgments: the Empathic Motivation Hypothesis (EMH). The EMH is ambiguous as between two claims. First, it may be taken as a claim about the motivational contributions of immediate and occurrent empathy to token others-welfare judgments. This is the synchronic claim that, necessarily, whenever an agent is motivated to act on a judgment of that kind, he is then empathically motivated. Second, it may be read as making a claim about the developmental contributions of empathy to moral motivation. This is the diachronic claim that empathy is necessary for the development of the capacity to be motivated by others-welfare judgments.

Is the EMH true, in either version? That question can be addressed from several different perspectives in both philosophy and psychology. I cannot investigate all of the options here, and will focus on elucidating the EMH and setting out some of the conceptual and empirical challenges it faces. §2 deals with preliminaries, distinguishing empathic concern from other dimensions of empathy (resonance, attunement, distress, and non-empathic concern). §3 presents the skeptical case against the synchronic version of EMH. §4 examines the merits of EMH as a developmental, diachronic claim, focusing in particular on the evidence from psychopathologies and attachment theory.

2 Dimensions of empathy: mindreading, resonance, attunement, distress, and concern

What is empathy, and how does it matter to moral motivation? In this section I will navigate some of the conceptual territory these questions inhabit.

Empathy is not an emotion, but a way of identifying and representing emotions and other affective states. I will use the terms “empathy” and “affective empathy” interchangeably; when we empathize, affective states are our objects of thought. Some use “empathy” more broadly, to include exercises in cognitive mindreading or perspective-taking. However, it is now generally recognized that mindreading and affective empathy are distinct capacities: a plethora of experimental evidence testifies to this at both the functional and neurophysiological levels (Decety et al., 2013; Blair, 2006). “Mindreading,” as psychologists use the term, refers to a capacity reliably to identify others' action-explaining intentional states – typically their beliefs, desires, and intentions. It is an ability accurately to represent the propositional attitudes that render actions intelligible, and to exercise these representations in explaining and predicting others' behavior. Affective empathy can also represent propositional attitudes, but it does so by a different mechanism and in a different mode. Jean Decety refers to affective empathy as empathy “proper,” and defines it as “a construct broadly reflecting a natural capacity to share and understand the affective states of others, comprising emotional, cognitive, and motivational facets” (Decety & Cowell, 2014). This requires that the empathizer not only represent, but also *share* in another's target states: affective empathy is an experiential as well as a representational capacity. When we empathize, we do not only identify

and individuate another's affective/motivational states (emotions, sensations, aversions, etc.) but do so by instantiating some of their first-personal experiential character. The distinction between first-personal and other-personal representations of experiential states is key to empathy's motivating force: a solely conceptual or propositional representation of, e.g., another's pain or pleasure, however detailed and accurate, does constitute affective empathy, and indeed requires no affective or motivational engagement whatever. An empathic representation, by contrast, is what elsewhere I have called a "subjective conception" – a conception as from the first-personal perspective of the experiencing subject (Denham, 2000; Denham, 2012). If one represents another's pain by way of affective empathy, one's own experience must feature some of the target state's phenomenology – its qualitative and motivational characteristics. To some degree, it is itself painful.

So described, affective empathy is not yet a capacity for the solicitous concern that matters to moral motivation. To get there from here, we must trace four different dimensions of affective empathy: empathic resonance, empathic attunement, empathic distress, and empathic concern. I will briefly sketch each in turn.

Empathic resonance. Infants famously mimic the facial musculature of their caregiver's expressions, probably from only a few hours after birth (Hoffman, 2000). Such motor mimicry is a) reflexive and b) non-referential: the mimicking subject does not exercise voluntary control over his motor state, nor is he typically consciously aware of its occurrence. Nonetheless, motor empathy arguably plays an important role in the development of affective empathy and interpersonal emotion regulation in the first few months of life; at the neurological level, the causal pathways between motor and affective responses are bi-directional (Hoffman, 2008). Motor mimicry persists throughout our lives, and is an early and basic form of what is often called "empathic resonance" – an innate capacity to reflect some features of the behavior (especially facial expressions) and experiential states (especially the affective states) of others. Resonance is vividly illustrated by Hume's analogy between our responses to one another's sentiments and the sympathetic vibrating of strings on a violin: when one string is plucked or bowed, it directly causes a vibration in the others (Hume, 1739/1978). Empathic resonance is automatic and non-rational. As Hoffman observes, resonance (in his terms, "emotional contagion") is "passive, involuntary, and based on surface cues; it requires little cognitive processing or awareness that the source is [someone else]" (Hoffman, 2008: 441). It is not yet a representational state, save in the attenuated sense of representing the resonating subject's own condition. It serves no interpersonal, referential function.

Empathic attunement. Most developmental psychologists regard empathic resonance as a developmental precursor to a second, cognitively more complex dimension of affective empathy: I will call this (empathic) attunement. Attunement occurs when (a) a subject conceives of (represents in thought) another's experiential state, the conception being typically elicited by observing or remembering or imagining the other; (b) via resonance, the subject's occurrent state reflects (some constituents of) the content and phenomenological character of the target experience (or what he takes that experience to be), and (c) the subject regards his reflective states as referring to and informing him of the other's experience (Vignemont & Singer, 2006: 435).

This last feature (c) registers that attunement constitutes a first-person conception of the target affective/motivational states as belonging to another subject of experience; the agent regards his conception as representing the content and character of the other's inner life. Attunement is thus essentially referential. Where the referent states are aversive ones such as fear, sadness, or other kinds of distress, attunement presents the agent with a motive for two further responses: empathic distress or empathic concern.

Empathic distress names a familiar development of empathic attunement. (Batson terms it “personal distress”) (Batson, 2011). When empathic attunement is persistent and intense, the empathizer can become “empathically over-aroused” (Hoffman, 2008): his focus of attention and his dominant motivation is then to relieve his own distress. In empathic distress, a subject (a) encounters another’s aversive state, typically by directly perceiving or imaginatively engaging with him, (b) empathically attunes to that aversive state, recognizing the other as its source and referent, and (c) incurs a *self-focused* motivation to remove the aversive stimulus (the target subject’s distress) from his perceptual and/or cognitive environment – for instance, to abandon the victim or to pursue attentional diversions (Hoffman, 2008). Empathic distress is thus an “egoistic” motivational state in Batson’s sense of that term, which sometimes conflicts with our moral convictions – as when we guiltily bin the charity circular with its images of starving children, or change the television channel to avoid scenes of desperate refugees.

Empathic concern. When attunement is manifested as empathic distress, it is *negatively* correlated with moral motivation – the opposite of the pro-social influence with which empathy is typically associated. Attunement must develop via a different transformation, as empathic concern, if it is to be recruited into the service of morality. Empathic concern is closely allied with Hume’s notion of benevolence – a non-instrumental desire to promote the welfare of another. A benevolent desire may, of course, arise by way of various causal trajectories, and not all are empathic; I will discuss one alternative shortly (Nichols, 2004). As I (stipulatively) use “empathic concern” here, it names a species of the genus of concern, viz., concern that is a development from and conceptual elaboration of (empathic, affective) attunement: the former occurs contiguously or concurrently with the latter, and its content is informed by it. Empathic concern is thus distinguished from other modes of concerned attention by having resonance and attunement as *constituents* as well as causal conditions. Resonance and attunement do not just precede empathic concern, but contribute to its content and felt character, in part determining its valence, intensity, attentional focus, and motivational force. If John responds to Sally’s painful toothache with empathic concern, he then is *already* in an internal state that refers to Sally, is aversive and negatively valenced, relatively intense, and motivates a desire to help her.

Empathic and non-empathic concern. Benevolence or concern of some kind is analytically necessary to (psychological) altruistic motivation. But must that be specifically empathic concern? Shaun Nichols proposes a different account of altruistic motivation. On Nichols’s view, helping behavior is best explained by a “Concern Mechanism” – a dedicated, independent mechanism motivating us to act in ways that will relieve or reduce others’ distress. The role of this mechanism is both epistemic and motivational: it alerts the agents to the other’s distress, identifying it *as* the other’s distress, and it “triggers” an independent motivation to act altruistically (Nichols, 2001: 444). As Nichols describes the process, “altruistic motivation depends on a mechanism that takes as input representations that attribute distress, e.g., *John is experiencing painful shock*, and produces as output affect that *inter alia* motivates altruistic behaviour” (Nichols, 2001: 446).

Nichols’s Concern Mechanism does not rely on sophisticated perspective-taking skills, such as the ability to imaginatively elaborate the detail of the other’s experience, or to grasp its causes and consequences for someone in his position. His evidence for this derives from three sources. First, as a matter of chronology, very young children exhibit altruistic behavior (at between twelve to eighteen months) before they have developed sophisticated perspective-taking/mindreading abilities – for instance, the ability to pass False Belief tests and to make relatively fine-grained predictions of beliefs, desires, intentions, and actions. These do not emerge until thirty-two to forty-eight months (Nichols, 2001: 447). Secondly, autistics also have restricted mindreading abilities and yet

exhibit spontaneous altruistic behaviors (Nichols, 2001: 449). Finally, psychopaths provide some negative evidence: they are (bar some noteworthy lacunae) skilled mindreaders, but exhibit significant deficits in their abilities to feel empathic concern and to behave altruistically towards others (Nichols, 2001: 449).

This evidence is compatible with the relatively minimalist account I have given of empathic concern. However, while that construct inherits its motivational efficacy from the valence, intensity, and direction inherent in empathic attunement, Nichols's Concern Mechanism can operate directly, both in signaling to the agent that another is in distress and motivating his altruistic response (Nichols, 2001: 245). As Nichols puts it, it is possible "that the representation of the other's distress produces a distinctive emotion of sympathy or concern for the other person and this emotion is *not homologous to the emotion of the person in need*" (Nichols, 2001: 444, emphasis added). The idea is not a new one: Darwin, for instance, maintained that sympathy constituted a "separate and distinct emotion" (Darwin, 1871: 215). More recent evidence in its favor derives from studies associating altruistic behavior with a distinctive facial expression (Roberts & Strayer, 1996: 456; Miller et al., 1996: 213).

All of this matters to the prospects of the EMH. If it can be demonstrated that benevolent concern is regularly yielded by an empathy-independent mechanism and realized by a distinctive state at the neurophysiological level, this would largely put paid to the idea that affective empathy is necessary for altruistic motivation. At most, empathy might play a modest epistemic role, providing detail of the distress "inputs," with a functionally and neurophysiologically discrete concern mechanism producing the altruistic "outputs." How plausible is this proposal?

While the jury will be out for some time to come, I believe that we should regard Nichols's proposal with skepticism, for three reasons. First, evolution rarely replicates functions to no point, and empathic attunement is *already* inherently motivating, with the same attentional focus (the other subject) and part of the same motivational direction (aversion to his/her distress or attraction to his/her well-being). Why render attunement redundant with a functionally independent system? It would be more efficient for empathic concern to develop out of and exploit both the information and the motivation inherent in resonance and attunement, perhaps modulated by certain cognitive skills (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Second, the chronology of developmental histories of resonance, attunement, and concern tells against their independence. Ontogenetically, resonance is followed by attunement, which is in turn followed by concern (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Phylogenetically, too, the neurological states realizing resonance and attunement (such as the amygdala, anterior insula, and anterior cingulate cortex) antedate those associated with concern (the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and lateral orbitofrontal cortex) (Decety & Cowell, 2014).

Finally, the separate chronology of the ontogenetic development of cognitive skills required by concern recommends that resonance is modulated and recruited into higher-level thought as these make available the requisite conceptual repertoire – for instance, a self-other distinction, awareness of one's powers as a discrete agent, and recognition of others as independent loci of malleable affective experience (Hoffman, 2008; Decety & Svetlova, 2012). If we think that concern matters to morality, we do best to look to its *first* appearance in the dynamics of empathy.

3 The synchronic Empathic Motivation Hypothesis: is occurrent empathy necessary for moral motivation?

The synchronic version of the EMH claims that, necessarily, when an agent is moved to act on a token others-welfare judgment, occurrent empathy contributes to that motivation. Is the synchronic EMH true?

Let us consider the positive case first. Batson's initial experiments showed that subjects who are primed to empathize with victims are more strongly motivated to help them; "high empathy" subjects are altruistically motivated even when helping comes at a significant cost to personal interests (Batson, 2011). In later studies using the same basic design, Batson found further that empathy priming led subjects to act more altruistically even when (a) the helping was anonymous and offered no personal credit (thus challenging reward incentives), (b) there were good reasons to avoid helping, making helping demanding and not helping justified (challenging anticipated guilt incentives), (c) subjects were advised that they would receive no feedback on their assistance (challenging incentives of praise/victim's gratitude), and (d) when refusing to help promises a positive experience on par with that of helping (challenging anticipated pleasure incentives) (Batson, 2011, Appendices B, C, D, F, G). These results are not conclusive, but they strongly suggest that empathy can promote attitudes and behavior that are *better explained* by altruistic rather than egoistic motivation, at least in a context of heightened, targeted empathy induction. This is encouraging news for the friend of the synchronic EMH.

Beyond Batson, numerous other studies have found strong correlations between empathy and other-regarding actions and attitudes. Konrath and Grynberg's extensive survey of the literature identifies a number of results supporting the claim that empathy promotes pro-social motivation. To mention only a few:

- For both attunement and empathic concern, and regardless of how these were measured (i.e., observer-reports, self-reports, self-reported vicarious emotion, or targeted situational induction), empathy is positively associated with pro-social behaviors towards strangers (sharing, assisting, giving) (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987).
- Empathy induction increases interpersonal cooperation, even in Prisoner's Dilemma games in which the subjects know that their game partner has defected. In one study, situational empathy induction increased cooperation rates from 5% (control) to 45% in a one-time play (Batson & Ahmed, 2001).
- Empathy induction has been shown to improve outcomes in negotiations between parties with competing goals, producing better outcomes on both sides relative to controls (Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008).
- Parents who rank high in empathy (on both self-reports and observer reports) have more positive and effective interactions with their children. As Konrath and Grynberg note, this is unsurprising if, as the aforementioned studies suggest, "empathizing makes people kinder and more cooperative" (Konrath & Grynberg, 2013: 2).

These are just a few examples of a large body of evidence indicating that *some* dimension of empathy is causally efficacious in motivating our other-regarding judgments. Hoffman confidently asserts that there is "overwhelming evidence that people who feel empathically distressed at another's misfortune are more motivated to help, that empathic distress makes people help more quickly, and that people who are empathically responsive to another's distress feel better when they help than when they don't" (Hoffman, 2008: 441). What more could the friend of the EMH require?

The answer is "a great deal." First, many of the associations noted are merely correlational, and do not establish that empathy is the horse rather than the cart. This is not, in fact, a serious worry in every case: sometimes other considerations, such as the order in which stimuli are presented (as in Batson's studies), make the causal claims compelling. But there are other methodological worries as well, including inconsistencies in how "empathy" is conceptualized. Some conceptualizations, for instance, include personal distress as an indicator of empathy, whereas

others exclude it; again, some take perspective-taking or cognitive mindreading as constituents of empathy and others do not. Measurement procedures are also inconsistent. Some studies rely solely on self-report, which is notoriously unreliable for subjects who are independently invested in an empathic self-conception. Others use observer reports, and still others assess autonomic, physiological correlates of affective arousal. Why should we suppose that all of these are measuring the same conditions? To further complicate matters, some studies target dispositional or trait empathy, while others assess empathy as aroused in a particular situation (situational empathy). Finally, and most problematic of all for the synchronic EMH, even very high positive correlations between empathy and pro-social attitudes and behaviors can only show, at best, that empathy facilitates moral motivation, not that it is an indispensable condition of it.

For these and other reasons, several philosophers, including Peter Goldie, Heidi Maibom, and Jesse Prinz, have argued that, the experimental evidence notwithstanding, the synchronic EMH is a non-starter (Goldie, 2011; Maibom, 2014; Prinz, 2011a, 2011b). Prinz has been perhaps its most vociferous critic. He holds that empathy makes no indispensable (or even desirable) contribution to moral experience, arguing that it is neither constitutively, causally, epistemically, developmentally, nor motivationally necessary. Let us consider some of his arguments against its role in moral motivation.

A first objection echoes §1's observation that many norms fail even to be candidates for empathic motivation. Sometimes empathic concern even directly recommends against them. Empathy – *pace* our usual norms and intuitions – would likely recommend, for instance, that we steal from the rich to give to the poor, and that we refuse to punish transgressors. Recognized moral norms suggest otherwise. The objection is well taken so far as it goes, but it does not go very far if the EMH is indexed only to *others-welfare* moral judgments directly justified by persons' interests, and manifesting natural virtues such as kindness, generosity, compassion, pity, fidelity, and forgivingness. Could we ever be moved by these judgments without some kind of empathic responsiveness to others' wants and needs?

Prinz insists that we could. His second argument is that empathic concern fails to provide the *best explanation* of moral motivation, even in this restricted class. The argument relies on his particular meta-ethical commitments, which are both internalist and sentimentalist. In brief, Prinz holds that moral judgments are intrinsically motivating because they have an emotional basis or “contain” emotions, as he sometimes puts it. The emotions they contain may be negatively valenced (disapprobative) responses such as anger, disgust, guilt, and shame, or positively valenced (approbative) ones such as gratitude, admiration, or pride. A token moral *judgment* is in part *constituted* by such emotions, and that is why it is intrinsically motivating (Prinz, 2011a: 219). This account of moral motivation, Prinz argues, already delivers everything we need to explain moral motivation; empathy is simply surplus to requirements. There is no explanatory gap in the motivational story for it to fill.

Might not empathy nonetheless be our most effective and reliable source of motivation, even if it is not a necessary one? Against this suggestion, Prinz's third argument is that the emotions constitutive of moral judgments are also more powerful motivators than empathy: anger, disgust, happiness, and shame all, he claims, yield stronger effects than empathy (Prinz, 2011a: 218–20). For example, he cites one study as showing “no correlation in children between empathy and pro-social behaviour” (Underwood & Moore, 1982), another indicating only a modest correlation in adults between pro-social behavior and shared sadness (Eisenberg et al., 1989), and he claims that in studies using economic games, “empathy does not motivate moral behavior when there are significant costs” (Fehr & Gächter, 2002). This is puzzling data for the punter immersed in the experimental evidence adduced at the beginning of this section. What of Hoffman's “overwhelming evidence” for the very correlations Prinz denies?

The puzzle arises because Prinz conceptualizes empathy solely in terms of “shared” or “vicarious” affect (effectively, just resonance and attunement), excluding empathic *concern*. The handful of studies on which he relies accordingly attribute empathy only to subjects who directly evidence affect-sharing *independently* of concern. The Eisenberg study, for instance, distinguished displays of “concerned attention” (e.g., a child wrinkling her brow) from displays of “shared emotion” (direct mimicry of the target’s sadness); only the latter counts as manifesting empathy. This makes all the difference, for it assumes that subjects’ responses of sympathy or concern are *not* empathically driven. But this is almost to assume what Prinz aims to prove. Indeed, as Prinz judiciously acknowledges in a footnote, Batson’s “notion of empathic concern may be immune to many of the worries raised here” (Prinz, 2011a). Just so.

Even if Prinz’s best-explanation objection fails, however, the coast is hardly clear for the synchronic EMH, for it stands to be defeated if agents’ others-welfare/altruistic judgments are *ever* motivating in the absence of occurrent empathy. And in fact this often happens; there are many modes and manifestations of interpersonal concern apart from occurrent *empathic* concern. An overworked nurse suffering from compassion fatigue and long past empathic attunement can continue to be motivated by her commitment to caring for her patients; a dedicated humanist may serve the homeless, even when he ceases to be animated by empathy for them. In both cases, their (non-empathic) concern may even see them through occasional episodes of irritation or distaste or revulsion. That gives us no reason to deny that their ultimate goal is to relieve the plight of those in need.

Cases such as these and countless other everyday acts of benevolence testify that altruistic concern need not be underwritten by occurrent empathy. The motivational force of our token others-welfare judgments requires no here-and-now empathic input: while attention to and concern for others may be indispensable, these often motivate agents independently of any present empathic engagement. The synchronic EMH is false.

4 The diachronic Empathic Motivation Hypothesis: is empathy developmentally necessary for moral motivation?

Even if the synchronic EMH fails, empathy may yet connect with moral motivation in other ways. Indeed, it is difficult to believe that empathy plays *no* significant role in shaping the norms that govern our personal relationships, and moving us to act on them. As Maibom observes, “without the influence of empathy-related affect, morality might be unrecognizable to us” (Maibom, 2014: 38). This seems correct, and its correctness highlights how unilluminating is the conclusion that the synchronic EMH is false. Instead, empathy may be *diachronically* necessary for moral motivation, playing an indispensable role in the development of moral motivation, as a precondition for (a) concerned attention to others and (b) regulating (restraining or deferring) one’s concern for oneself, balancing others’ needs against our egocentric ends. Even if occurrent empathy has moved largely off-stage by the time mature moral judgment makes its entrance, it may have played a leading role earlier in the developmental drama. That is the possibility I will now consider.

One principal source of evidence for the diachronic EMH has been developmental psychopathology; another is attachment theory. These are not entirely independent sources, for dysfunctional attachment is strongly correlated with a range of moral disorders. For reasons of space, this section will focus on the arguments from psychopathology, mentioning in conclusion some prospects for further research within the framework of attachment theory.

Empathic concern and moral psychopathology

Over the last two decades, several psychologists and philosophers have argued that psychopathic personality disorder provides evidence favoring some version of the diachronic EMH (Deigh 1995; Blair 2005; Soderstrom, 2003; Denham, 2000, 2011). It is widely believed that psychopaths exhibit deficits in affective empathy; indeed, 'lack of empathy' is among the disorder's diagnostic criteria. This is supported by behavioral observations as well as autonomic measures such as skin-conductance and startle-blink responses. EEG and fMRI data have further indicated that psychopaths are hypo-responsive to others' distress, and especially to fear and sadness (Blair, 1995; Blair et al., 2001; Patrick, 1994; Decety & Cowell, 2014). That psychopaths lack moral motivation is also built into the diagnostic criteria: they appear to understand the moral rules holding sway in their communities, but they systematically fail to be guided by them in their practical judgments – they know what morality requires, but are unmoved by it. Moreover, some studies (albeit not all) indicate that psychopaths are less sensitive than controls to the special authority of moral as opposed to conventional rules (Blair, 1995; Blair, 2006). These anomalies are unlikely to be owed to deficits in cognitive mindreading, for most psychopaths typically perform as well as neurotypicals in that respect (Blair, 1995).

These observations have suggested to many that the psychopath's failures of moral motivation are caused developmentally by a deficit in affective empathy. In normal moral development, affective empathy generates negative emotions in response to actions yielding distress in others (e.g., physical abuse) and positive emotions in response to actions promoting their well-being (e.g., helping, comforting). On one standard developmental narrative, these action types come to be regularly associated with the elicited emotions; stable patterns of response thus are acquired throughout childhood and early adolescence, and develop into settled dispositions to respond with disapproval to negative elicitors and approval to positive ones. Once this habituation has taken place, empathic responses are no longer required to motivate token moral judgments; our settled dispositions do the job. While affective empathy may continue to be activated on occasion, its motivational contribution to *moral* development is largely completed by late adolescence. In the case of the psychopath (the hypothesis goes), this process goes awry: because of his empathic deficits, he fails to lay down the requisite associations in the first place, and this explains his failure later to respond to moral transgressions/observances with appropriately valenced motivations.

Unfortunately, the hypothesis is underdetermined by the evidence. In particular, it ignores the possibility of a third *explanans* – a third condition which might independently explain both the psychopath's empathy deficits *and* his lack of moral motivation, yielding a mere correlation (Prinz, 2011a, 2011b; Maibom, 2014). Maibom, for instance, observes that psychopaths' general hypo-responsiveness to fear and high pain thresholds might fill that role. Owing to these deficits, "their understanding of, and ability to feel with and for people who are afraid, would also be impaired ... lack of fear may itself cause a number of the deficits associated with psychopathy, including the moral ones" (Maibom, 2014: 16). This is one candidate explanation. Is it the best one, or at least better than some version of diachronic EMH?

Perhaps not. The EMH finds further support from comparative data on autistics. Autistic subjects suffer significant mindreading deficits, as well as deficits in emotion recognition. However, their affective responsiveness – and particularly their responsiveness to others' distress – is largely intact: high-functioning autistics' affective empathy is often (if not always) on a par with that of neurotypicals, as assessed by a variety of measures including expression mimicry, autonomic arousal, and fMRI (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Blair, 1995; Vignemont, 2009). In view of this profile, the diachronic EMH would predict that autistics are not, on the whole, deficient in moral

motivation. This prediction is largely fulfilled: while autistics struggle with subtler rules of social interaction, and show developmental delay on false belief and other mindreading tasks (especially in early years), they are not systematically transgressive of other-regarding norms. Taking the evidence from psychopathy and autism together, then, seems to recommend some version of the diachronic EMH over “third condition” hypotheses. For the joint evidence suggests that while mindreading is neither necessary (being impaired in morally compliant autistics) nor sufficient (being intact in morally unmotivated psychopaths), affective empathy is indispensable for moral competence.

Unfortunately, consideration of the wider evidence delivers a less straightforward picture. For one thing, recent research focusing on the psychopath’s cognitive abilities has suggested that their deficits may not be specific to affective responsiveness as such, but to a failure to integrate affective and cognitive information (Decety, 2015). Several other cognitive deficits, too, have been identified, including impairments in semantic processing (Kiehl, 2004) and emotion recognition (Wilson, Juodis, & Porter, 2011). Secondly – and more fatally for the diachronic EMH – recent studies have challenged the pivotal claim that psychopaths have profound affective empathy deficits at all. An impressive body of recent experimental evidence has challenged this longstanding view, including one study indicating that psychopaths “resonate” with others’ distress at a sensorimotor level on par with controls (Maibom, 2014: 14–16; Domes et al., 2013; Lishner et al., 2012). Skepticism seems also to be justified by Decety’s important finding that the neural regions in which psychopaths differ from non-psychopaths are *not* those associated with affective resonance (amygdala and anterior insular cortex) but rather those associated with *concern* (ventromedial prefrontal cortex and lateral orbitofrontal cortex) (Decety, 2015). If Decety is correct, intact affective resonance can combine with an absence of other-regarding moral motivation, suggesting that the sort of concern altruism requires is not borne out of resonance/attunement-based empathic concern, but has some independent source. In that case, the psychopath’s particular toolbox of capacities may even offer evidence *against* the diachronic EMH. All considered, the evidence from psychopathology is mixed and inconclusive. The idea that empathy is a developmental precondition of other-regarding motivation will not be so easily vindicated.

Nonetheless, the diachronic EMH is hardly falsified by these findings, and experimental evidence in other arenas suggests that it merits further investigation. One promising direction is the psychological construct of *attachment*, especially as this figures in theories of early child development. In its wider sense, “attachment” refers to an enduring, intimate emotional bond that develops between two or more persons, normally through sustained personal contact, yielding a felt need for personal proximity and conditioning the attached person’s sense of security and safety. In the context of child development, “attachment” refers more particularly to this bond as it holds between an infant or toddler and his primary caregiver – a connection that is instrumental in the child’s cognitive, affective, and social development (Bowlby, 1969/2008; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Fonagy & Target, 1997). Securely attached children manifest behaviors consistent with a trusting, affectionate intimacy with their caregiver. Theorists dispute the details of how best to characterize the complex dynamics of this bond, but all delineate it in part in terms of interpersonal affective “synchrony,” or the harmonious and spontaneous sharing of affect, perceptual focus, and motivational direction – the hallmarks of joint empathic attunement. Longitudinal studies indicate that successful synchronization and secure attachment strongly predict mature empathic responsiveness (Kestenbaum, Farber, & Sroufe, 1989), with mother-infant synchrony measures in the first year of infancy being directly associated with empathy levels at ages six and sixteen (Feldman, 2007). Secure attachment is also a powerful predictor of optimal development in respect of a range of other morally relevant capacities,

including cooperativeness, self-regulation (including gratification deferral), and “mindedness” – the ability to reliably identify, predict, and harmonize with others’ cognitive and affective states (Fonagy & Target, 1997). These same capacities are, in turn, both causally and constitutively related to altruistic motivation, and pro-social motivation of other kinds as well. In one study directly examining the development of moral conscience it was found that the degree of mutually responsive orientation between an infant and caregiver, especially of positive affective states, was directly correlated *both* with higher empathic resonance at twenty-two months and greater guilt awareness at forty-five months (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992; Knafo et al., 2008).

In sum, while research on attachment is still in its early stages, it is now generally acknowledged to be a robust predictor of several capacities closely associated with mature, pro-social dispositions. A better understanding of the developmental role of attachment and its contributions to moral motivation may yet allow us to construct a clearer narrative of how and why affective empathy interacts with our ability to be concerned for and moved by others. From a developmental perspective, it could turn out that our earliest empathic engagements underwrite the distinctive regard we have for our human fellows, and the special claims that they make on us as moral agents.

Endnote: empathy in theory and experience

Wittgenstein mocked the idea that we understand others by analogically reasoning from our own experience. “Do you look into *yourself*,” he asked, “in order to recognize the fury in his face?” (Wittgenstein, 1980, §927). To see the fury, the pain, or the sorrow in another’s face we of course typically look at that person directly. Indeed, recognizing and responding to others’ inner lives is part of what it is to see them as persons at all, and this seems, *prima facie*, to require no special exercises of introspection. It does not follow, however, that our propensity to identify and respond to others as persons floats free of our affective attunement to them. My survey of the territory has assumed that it makes sense to speak of experiencing concern for and being moved by another, absent all empathic engagement. That assumption pervades most contemporary experimental and philosophical models of empathy, and it is unavoidable if one is to engage with those models on their own terms. It is not clear, however, that the assumption is fully intelligible. Perhaps to see another human being as a fellow subject of experience is *already* to interact with him as a locus of perception, emotion, and will – to regard him as a source of motivations in which we share, even when those motivations are contrary to our own. Although we may not need to “look within” ourselves to see someone animated by despair or delight, it does not follow that we could see him in these ways were we not already engaged with and imbued by the reality of his inner life. Perhaps it is our separateness and individuality that must be learned, not our common humanity. If so, human morality could not exist in its present shape or form without a natural foundation in empathy. It may yet turn out to best explain our recognition of the reality and value of others, and their ability to move us as they do.

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