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*The epistemic and moral value of  
empathy*

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## Abstract.

In this thesis I present and defend an account of empathy and then use this account to evaluate the epistemic and moral worth of empathy. I understand empathy as the activity of recreating in one's imagination another's experience, a recreation which does not necessarily imply an isomorphism between the states of empathiser and target. I understand empathy as a tool which one can become skilled at using.

I then go on to argue that empathy so construed has epistemic value. I argue that recreating in one's imagination certain aspects of another's experience allows one to learn about other, unknown, aspects of the other's experience. Then I argue that empathy also has epistemic value for learning about evaluative features of objects; it is like testimony without the middle man.

I am also concerned with the moral value of empathy. I argue that empathy is a morally neutral tool that can be used to moral advantage. I present and assess the existent criticisms of empathy's moral worth, as well as put forward a criticism of my own. Apart from discussing criticisms, I also make a positive case by arguing that empathy has moral value in three ways: it allows us to make better informed decisions, it increases our motivation to bring about the good to others, and it brings about a valuable kind of togetherness.

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# Introduction.

The purpose of this thesis is to argue that empathy has both epistemic and moral value.

Empathy has been the subject of much attention from philosophers over the past couple of decades. The predominant focus of discussions of empathy has been in two areas: about the way we make sense of other minds (also known as ‘mindreading’) and about morality.

My aim in this thesis is to argue that empathy has both epistemic as well as moral value. Definitions of empathy vary considerably but what I am in particular interested in, and what I understand empathy to be, is the activity of recreating in one’s imagination the experience of another. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the value of this activity. The thesis is motivated by the simple question of whether and to what extent it is desirable for one to empathise with others. Given that empathy is something I, as an individual, could engage in, is there any worth in doing so on any particular occasion, and in doing so on a regular basis?

Part of what I take to be distinctive about the present work is that it puts much emphasis on empathy’s epistemic worth. By contrast, most of the present discussion of empathy focuses on its moral value. The fact that there has not been more discussion targeting specifically empathy’s epistemic value I find a little puzzling, given how plausible it is (as I hope to demonstrate) to suppose that it is precisely empathy’s epistemic value which grounds some of its much more discussed moral value: one of the things often pointed out about empathy is that empathy aids us in making moral decisions since it allows us to understand how these decisions are going to affect others. I think that empathy’s epistemic role is significant, and I aim to assess it in Chapter 3.

Another way in which I take my discussion of empathy to be distinctive, is that I am interested in whether there are any *prudential* reasons for empathy to be encouraged. A lot of the existing discussion that aims to show that

empathy is desirable focuses almost exclusively on empathy's altruistic side – the claim has been that empathy should be encouraged because it tends to result in good for people *other* than the empathiser themselves. I do speak about empathy's altruistic side. However, I am also interested in the question of whether empathy is desirable for the individual who empathises. What reasons do *I* have, as an individual, to empathise with others? Part of these reasons would come from my desire to bring about the good for others; but not all would. Independently of whether I want to be moral or not, empathising would yield epistemic goods and is therefore something I have reason to do. Also, as I attempt to show in Chapter 5, empathy brings about a valuable kind of togetherness between two people that I, as empathiser, might want to bring about independently of my concern for the well-being of others.

All this suggests that empathy could aid us in being moral, only if we had independent motivation to want to be such. But there is a twist. I argue, in Chapter 5, that when I engage in empathising with you, that activity in itself makes me more likely to care for your well-being than if I had not empathised. Thus, even though I think that empathy is a morally neutral activity, and no panacea for our moral problems, I argue that, all other things being equal, it does tend to make us care about others that little bit more.

This thesis ultimately argues that empathy should be encouraged because it has both epistemic and moral value. Individuals have reasons to empathise with others - and not just moral reasons, but also prudential reasons. It is therefore desirable to cultivate empathy: to learn to empathise regularly and to become good at doing so.

The structure of the thesis is as follows.

In Chapter 1, I set the background for the discussion. I argue that there are some desiderata that the account of empathy I will develop should satisfy. In particular, the account should see empathy as an experience, since I am interested in empathy as an activity undertaken by the individual, and also the account should not include a veridical condition.

In Chapter 2, I put forward an account of empathy. I am interested in the activity of recreating in one's imagination the experience of another. I provide an account of how this exercise of experiential imagination works. I think of empathy as a tool, which one can become skilled at using, and I also discuss what being skilled at empathy implies. It is in this chapter as well that I also distinguish empathy from sympathy and from emotional contagion.

In Chapter 3, I argue that empathy has epistemic value. I provide a model of how empathy brings about epistemic goods, and what sort of goods these are. I argue that empathy provides us with three kinds of epistemic goods: understanding of others, understanding of evaluative properties of objects, and an understanding of oneself.

In Chapter 4, I discuss many of the criticisms that empathy has received, as well as an additional, original criticism of my own. None of these criticisms aims to show that empathy is undesirable and should have no role to play in our lives. Rather, they aim to show either that empathy should not be overused, or that it should have no role at all in particular contexts. My aim in this chapter is to assess these claims and as such I am not always arguing against the general claims the criticisms make. Still, I argue that in most cases, the criticisms levelled at empathy have been too harsh and have not properly acknowledged the very real possibility of putting empathy to a better use than what the criticism suggests. My conclusion from this discussion is that whereas empathy, as any other tool, has its own limitations, these do not render it worrisome enough to conclude that empathy should not be encouraged. On the contrary, I argue that a cultivated form of empathy is not going to be subject to as severe limitations as the criticisms suggest.

In Chapter 5, I argue that empathy has moral value. I point out that empathy's epistemic value creates moral value because the epistemic goods empathy provide allow us to make choices of moral worth. I then try to show that, all other things being equal, empathy tends to motivate us to bring about the well-being of others. Finally, I argue that empathy can bring about a special, valuable kind of togetherness between individuals.



# 1. Review of Empathy Research.

This thesis is about empathy which is understood as the activity of re-creating in one's imagination the experience of another person. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the epistemic and moral value of this activity.

In the second chapter I will provide an account of what empathy is. Before I do that, in this chapter I will provide an overview of some existing philosophical work on empathy. Empathy is a complex phenomenon and the accounts that have been given of it have been many and varied.

In what follows, I will first discuss the history of the term 'empathy' and will point to some historical interest in the phenomenon. Then I will provide a quick review of what current research on empathy is focused on, and I will draw attention to a specific kind of account of empathy, namely, what I will call 'experiential' accounts. I will argue that adopting an experiential account would be best suited for the purposes of the present thesis, before going on to provide such an account in [Chapter 2](#).

## 1.1. Historical interest in empathy.

Currently empathy is a topic of interest to philosophers both with regards to questions in moral philosophy, as well as the question of how we understand other minds.<sup>1</sup> In this section I will provide an overview of some of what has been said about empathy before the current debates were initiated.

It might seem reasonable to suppose that philosophical interest in empathy is ancient. For many people<sup>2</sup> perhaps the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about imagining what it is like to be another, is what is often referred to as the 'Golden Rule' of morality – 'Do to others what you would have them

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<sup>1</sup> Stueber, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Present author included.

do to you'. The Golden Rule is ancient, if anything is, with first known mention of it being found in the *Story of Ahiqar*, a story dating from at least 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, about Ahiqar who served under the Assyrian king Sennacherib (705–681 BCE).<sup>3</sup> Mentions of the Rule are found in other ancient traditions as well, including Confucian, Buddhist, and Judaic traditions, among others, as well as early testimonials of European culture.<sup>4</sup> Those are some of the most ancient preserved references to the Rule, and it is likely that the Rule was much older than that given it has an intuitive appeal, an 'elementarity' both in the sense of simplicity as well as fundamentality, which could also explain how it is that various thinkers from different civilizations have formulated it in almost identical ways.<sup>5</sup>

Given all this, one would be forgiven to think that among philosophers discussion of the Golden Rule has been abundant, and therefore also discussion of empathy, since the Golden Rule seems to presuppose a kind of imaginary exchange of place with the other person.<sup>6</sup> However, just as the current tradition of moral philosophy seems to have 'barely taken notice'<sup>7</sup> of the Rule, so empathy has not dominated the recent philosophical scene as an object of analysis itself until the last few decades.

Still, over the past decades interest in empathy has been quite big in philosophical, scientific, political, and lay discourse<sup>8</sup>, with the word 'empathy' becoming something of a buzzword, appearing in popular press, political campaigns, studies on autism, neuroscience, ethics, art, and others.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Guseinov, 2013, p.40.

<sup>4</sup> For a historical review see Guseinov, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Guseinov, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> More specifically, it seems that in order to apply the Golden Rule one has to imagine oneself in the other's situation, and treat them accordingly – this is in order to know what it is that 'you would have them do to you'. Of course a more 'passive' application of the Golden Rule is also possible – one where one merely knows how *one* would like to be treated in a similar situation. Even though in this second way of applying the rule it seems that one does not specifically need to imagine what the other person is undergoing, the intuition that motivate the rule, it seems to me, is a kind of realisation that the other's experience is just like one's own and that the other person could have been oneself.

<sup>7</sup> Singer, 1963; Puka, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Coplan and Goldie, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Coplan, 2011, p.3.



Its recent popularity notwithstanding, it does not seem that empathy had received similar levels of attention before. In the next two sections I will look at the history of the word ‘empathy’ first, and then at historical interest in the phenomenon of empathy from before the current debate.

### 1.1.1. History of the word ‘empathy’.

If one is to check the scholarship on the activity of imagining what it is like to be another, one is not going to get very far back in time if one’s strategy is to search for the word ‘empathy’. The word ‘empathy’ itself is quite new, and even in its short life-span, it did not always denote what it does now.

The word ‘empathy’ was introduced into English as an adaptation of the German term *Einfühlung* (from *ein* "in" + *Fühlung* "feeling") in the writings of Lipps. Lipps in turn adopted the concept of *Einfühlung* from the writings of Vischer<sup>10</sup> who in his 1873 essay ‘On the Optical Sense of Form’ contributed to a then raging debate in German Aesthetics. The question that Vischer gives an answer to in this essay is how it is possible that we come to be emotionally affected by pure form (such as a geometric shape) which does not have any ‘content’. Vischer’s answer is that content is something the observer cannot help but to infuse the form with: ‘We have the wonderful ability to project and incorporate our own physical form into an objective form’.<sup>11</sup> According to Vischer, the ‘in-feeling’ [*Einfühlung*] is reached when we project ourselves to the interior of the observed phenomenon: ‘Thus I project my own life into the lifeless form, just as I quite justifiably do with another living form. Only ostensibly do I keep my own identity although the object remains distinct’.<sup>12</sup> The empathic ability Vischer calls a ‘strange knack of confusing our own feeling with that of nature’<sup>13</sup> as for example when looking at the curves and undulations

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<sup>10</sup> Wispé, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Vischer, 1994. P. 104.

<sup>12</sup> Vischer, 1994. P. 104.

<sup>13</sup> Vischer, 1994. P. 107.

in a road, the road suddenly ‘seems to hesitate and run impatiently along its course’.<sup>14</sup>

Vischer’s *Einfühlung* was adopted and expanded by Lipps, and from Lipps’ writings it was translated as ‘empathy’ into English, a translation for which usually Titchener is credited<sup>15</sup> although it has recently been brought up that the word ‘empathy’ was also introduced by Ward.<sup>16</sup> What is according to Gustav the first mention of the word was in a book by Titchener on experimental psychology<sup>17</sup>:

Not only do I see gravity and modesty and pride and courtesy and stateliness, but I feel or act them in the mind’s muscles. This is, I suppose, a simple case of empathy, if we may coin that term as a rendering of *Einfühlung*; there is nothing curious or idiosyncratic about it; but it is a fact that must be mentioned.<sup>18</sup>

Titchener recognised that the concept can be useful not only in the description of the aesthetic encounter between an observer and a work of art, but in the context of a psychological encounter too. For example, Titchener used ‘empathy’ to denote the action where one projects oneself into the mental states of others<sup>19</sup>, since just as one can project oneself into works of art or objects of aesthetic contemplation, one can similarly project oneself into other people.<sup>20</sup>

Since the English translation of *Einfühlung* as ‘empathy’ the word has come to live a life of its own, no longer restricted to the domain of aesthetics. According to Matravers the word largely disappears from philosophical discussion until the 1980s<sup>21</sup> when it came to populate the debates about how we come to know the contents of another’s mind and about the role of empathy in morality.

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<sup>14</sup> Vischer, 1994. P. 107.

<sup>15</sup> Jahoda Gustav, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Lanzoni, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Jahoda Gustav, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Titchener, 1973, pp.21–22.

<sup>19</sup> Carroll, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Matravers, 2017b.

### 1.1.2. Some interest in empathy before 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The short life of the word ‘empathy’ notwithstanding, one might reasonably expect that the activity of imagining what it is like to be another has been itself the object of analysis of philosophers even before it was called ‘empathy’.

For example, it has become common to note that in 17<sup>th</sup> century the word ‘sympathy’ was sometimes used to refer to something similar to what empathy refers to today, and sympathy has notably been the object of attention of moral sentimentalists like David Hume and Adam Smith. But there are important differences between empathy and 17<sup>th</sup> century sympathy.

One less commonly observed difference is that in seventeenth-century Europe sympathy carried its own metaphysical burden: it was believed that various parts of the world are connected to one another via some mysterious power, an occult force. For example, it was widely held that what happens in one place can affect what happens in another via ‘sympathetic’ magic and that in the Universe there is a ‘hidden affinity’ that draws things together resulting in a ‘universal sympathy’ of all things.<sup>22</sup> Even if the middle decades of the seventeenth century witnessed a general rethinking of the vital powers in nature including a shift toward the natural interpretations of the ‘sympathetic’ or ‘friendly’ powers of nature still ‘sympathy’ carried its metaphysical connotations<sup>23</sup> which left a trace in the German Idealist tradition, and in nineteenth-century Aesthetics. According to the Romantic tradition if I see, for example, a willow tree and experience it as sad, this is because there really is some sense in which the experience of the willow tree *is* sad: ‘my aesthetic feeling not only is objective but is referentially the same feeling that exists in the object. The feeling is literally shared’.<sup>24</sup> This understanding was eventually

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<sup>22</sup> For example at the start of the seventeenth century and continuing for several decades, there was a big debate centred on the medical phenomenon ‘the power of sympathy’ - a phenomenon in which putting powder on an object stained with blood from a wound (such as the sword having caused the wound) would help heal the wound; for more details see Mercer.

<sup>23</sup> Mercer, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Depew, 2005, p.103.

challenged by the ‘expressivist turn’ in aesthetics according to which forms – e.g., the shape of the willow tree – are merely an expression of content that is *not* inherent in them – there is nothing ‘really’ sad about the experience of the willow tree.<sup>25</sup>

Vischer in 1873 introduced the notion of *Einfühlung* precisely in order to explain how it is that we perceive content in forms (how can I perceive the willow tree as sad) since it was no longer tenable to hold that there is any sense in which there ‘really’ is sadness in the tree. Vischer’s solution to this question is emotional projection: the observer projects their own emotions on the form.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the original notion of empathy was related to the expressive account in aesthetics, according to which ‘we press out our feelings onto external objects’ rather than external objects ‘pressing their feelings into us’.<sup>27</sup> The notion of empathy arrived on the scene in order to explain a phenomenon – our emotional affectivity by works of art – which sympathy with its too heavy a metaphysical burden could no longer do.

Today the word ‘sympathy’ no longer carries any metaphysical connotations of this kind. ‘Sympathy’ denotes a third-personal response and if any word out there can be used to denote my feeling of what another person feels, it would be ‘empathy’ rather than ‘sympathy’. I will have more to say on the distinction between empathy and sympathy below, in [Section 2.2.1](#) but Depew summarizes the point well:

Curiously enough, then, empathy’s current work closely resembles the work that sympathy was supposed to do in the heyday of romantic idealism, but no longer does. Empathy is to bind us together ... in ways that *Einfühlung* originally was intended to dowse in a little cold water.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Depew, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Harrison et al., 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Depew, 2005, p.104.

<sup>28</sup> Depew, 2005, p.105.

Thus, the metaphysical connotations of ‘sympathy’ are one important reason why we cannot just say that ‘sympathy’ used to mean what ‘empathy’ does today.

Another reason in support of this point it is to observe that ‘sympathy’ was a word broader in scope than ‘empathy’. It used to refer to a few different phenomena, and not *just* to the activity of imagining another’s experience. For example both Hume and Smith, in their discussions of sympathy, seem to have used the same word to denote what in this thesis will be distinguished as three separate things: empathy, sympathy, and emotional contagion (I will discuss the distinction between the three phenomena in [Section 2.2](#)). And they might have meant more things still; for example, Hume in his *Treatise* understands sympathy as ‘a principle of communication that is fundamental to human nature’<sup>29</sup> – a process which is fast and automatic:

No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathise with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own.<sup>30</sup>

In the *Inquiry*, Hume argued that imagining oneself into another’s place would tend to evoke the same feelings in oneself as in the other person because of the similarity between people.<sup>31</sup> But he did not understand sympathy itself as being the imagining oneself into another’s place; for Hume sympathy was an automatic awareness of others’ emotions. By contrast, Smith thought of sympathy as a more involved process, involving the imagination<sup>32</sup>:

Whatever is the passion which arises from any object in the person principally concerned, an analogous emotion springs up, *at the thought of his situation*, in the breast of every attentive spectator.<sup>33</sup> (italics mine)

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<sup>29</sup> Coplan and Goldie, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Hume, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Hoffman, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Coplan and Goldie, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, 2002.

In other words Smith saw sympathy as a more engaged activity. For Smith coming to experience others' emotions involved imaginative perspective-taking<sup>34</sup>:

By the imagination we place ourselves in the other's situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, enter, as it were, into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him and thence form some idea of the sensations and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.<sup>35</sup>

This comes much closer to the account of empathy which will be developed in this thesis. Smith considered 'changing places in fancy with the sufferer' to be the source of 'our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever'.<sup>36</sup>

### 1.1.3. Historical overview: a conclusion.

In conclusion, whereas empathy has been of some interest to philosophers before that, it is only in the second half of last century that philosophers start to get more directly interested in the question of whether there is any moral worth in imagining what it is like to be another. In the next section I will provide a brief overview of some of the more recent scholarship on the topic.

## 1.2. Current interest in empathy.

Above I introduced some of the historical interest in empathy. In this section I will provide an outline of what accounts of empathy have been given in the recent literature.

There is little agreement in the literature about what empathy is and many different accounts of empathy have been proposed.<sup>37</sup> The accounts differ along various dimensions: on whether empathy is voluntary or automatic; on whether it essentially involves the emotions, or not; on whether it is a psychological, or

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<sup>34</sup> Coplan and Goldie, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> Goldman, 2011, p.31; Cuff et al., 2016; Smith, 2017.

an epistemic phenomenon; on whether it essentially involves concern, care, or other pro-social attitude, or not; on whether it is a process, or a state<sup>38</sup>; whether it is a specific phenomenon, or an umbrella term for several different phenomena<sup>39</sup>; and others.

For the purposes of this thesis, I am interested in the role and significance, benefits and drawbacks, of empathising in an individual's life. I am hence focused on a more agential perspective on the process of empathising. Therefore it makes sense to think of empathy as a *lived experience*. In the lived life, our criterion about whether something counts as empathy is at the experiential, felt, and thought level. I am interested in that phenomenon which one is able to access upon honest introspection, and which is at least to a large degree within one's control. Therefore what I will be primarily interested in here is the experience of empathy more so than, say, the particular sub-personal mechanisms responsible for this experience. I will understand empathy as a specific kind of activity that an individual can undertake, and what makes something count as empathy will be primarily the kind of thing the individual does (e.g. imagine what it is like to be someone else) as opposed to, for example, the kind of sub-personal psychological mechanisms that are involved in the process (e.g. the triggering of mirror neurons). In this sense, I adopt an account of empathy that sees it as an epistemic, rather than a psychological, phenomenon.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Most accounts see empathy as a process; for a state view see Smith, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Preston and de Waal describe empathising as a process, which makes empathy 'a superordinate category that includes all subclasses of phenomena that share the same mechanism. This includes emotional contagion, sympathy, cognitive empathy, helping behaviour, and so on'. Preston and de Waal, 2002.

<sup>40</sup> I borrow this distinction from Smith: '[empathy] is fundamentally an epistemological, not a psychological, phenomenon. That is, empathy cannot be identified with any one psychological state or process, but is more accurately described in epistemic terms, terms that themselves leave it as an open question which psychological states and processes might, in any given case, be recruited into empathy's service'. Smith, 2015.

### 1.2.1. Experiential accounts of empathy.

Many accounts of empathy do not see it primarily as a lived experience. These accounts are speaking about something different from that which will be the main concern of this thesis. Examples include accounts in which empathy is identified not with the activity of empathising, but instead with a drive, an ability, a tendency, or a capacity. Often empathy is seen in this way in social psychology research, where it is supposed to capture certain characteristics of subjects. Examples of such definitions of empathy include: ‘the tendency to vicariously experience other individuals’ emotional states’<sup>41</sup>, ‘the capacity to understand and enter into another person’s feelings and emotions or to experience something from the other person’s point of view’<sup>42</sup>, ‘the ability to experience and understand what others feel’<sup>43</sup>, ‘the ability to perceive another person’s point-of-view, experience the emotions of another and behave compassionately’<sup>44</sup>, and many others. None of these accounts *defines* empathy as a lived experience, however, features of what the corresponding lived experience is like are apparent from the definitions: the lived experience seems to be about vicariously experiencing the emotions of others, entering into their point of view, and understanding them.<sup>45</sup>

As stated above, I will be providing a particular kind of account of empathy, one which is primarily interested in empathy as a lived experience. I will refer to this kind of account as ‘experiential’: what makes an account of empathy experiential is that it focuses mostly on the lived, experiential side of empathy.

Examples of accounts in the literature that unambiguously fall within the experiential domain are seeing empathy as ‘a sense of similarity between the feelings one experiences and those expressed by others’<sup>46</sup> or as ‘the experience

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<sup>41</sup> Albiro et al., 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Colman, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Decety and Lamm, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Geer et al., 2000.

<sup>45</sup> Here I assume that there is something that it is experientially like to understand another person; the person who reaches an understanding of another can be aware of having reached this understanding, in the sense that there is a certain experience associated with things ‘clicking into place’ as it were.

<sup>46</sup> Decety and Jackson, 2004.



of sympathetic emotions and concern for another person in distress'.<sup>47</sup> Other accounts which can arguably be categorised as experiential are: 'the attempt by one self-aware self to comprehend unjudgmentally the positive and negative experiences of another self'<sup>48</sup>; 'the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person'<sup>49</sup>; some of the standard dictionary definitions of empathy, such as 'the psychological identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another'<sup>50</sup>; the folk understanding of empathy as putting oneself in another's shoes; and also a recent account by Walton to which I will return below: 'using some aspect of one's current mental state as a sample to understand another person, in the way I have described, i.e., judging or experiencing the target person to be feeling "like this"'.<sup>51</sup>

The distinction between experiential and non-experiential accounts, cannot be always, or even often, neatly drawn. I will not be aiming to provide a precise delineation between various accounts, nor to provide precise necessary and sufficient conditions which will make it possible to draw a line between the existing accounts of empathy. Rather, I aim to point attention to a loose cluster of accounts which see empathy primarily as a kind of activity or experience which an agent undergoes, in contrast to some other accounts, like the ones mentioned at the start of this section, which see empathy as a tendency, or a neural mechanism, or something else.

Many accounts are in this broad sense experiential – they see empathy primarily as a lived experience. Yet many of these accounts also stipulate that empathy only takes place if certain conditions external to one's experience are satisfied.

Take for example Deonna's account. Deonna argues that two conditions are necessary and sufficient for empathy: (1) awareness of the other's emotions, and (2) feeling 'in tune' with the other.<sup>52</sup> These two conditions seem to clearly place

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<sup>47</sup> Pavey et al., 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Wispé, 1986.

<sup>49</sup> Barker, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> As found in Dictionary.com, [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com), accessed 18 September 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Walton, 2015, pp.9–10.

<sup>52</sup> Deonna, 2007.

Deonna's account in the experiential cluster. Still, there is one important thing to note: what Deonna means by the second condition is not merely that one feels in tune with another, but that one *actually is* in tune with them, in the sense that if one merely feels in tune with another, but actually that other person has different feelings from what one has guessed them to have, then empathy has not taken place. This is an instance of an often encountered veridical condition in empathy accounts, which I will discuss shortly in [section 1.3](#). For now the point to take is that on Deonna's account there is a certain condition (the condition of one's *actually* being in tune with another) that needs to be satisfied for empathy to take place, and this condition is such that, whether or not it is satisfied is a fact that the empathiser cannot themselves access through their own experience. I will shorten this by saying that on Deonna's account there is a condition on empathy 'external to one's experience'.<sup>53</sup>

The same holds for many accounts of empathy: empathy seems to be understood as a lived experience, yet empathy only takes place if certain conditions external to one's experience are satisfied. This is not necessarily incoherent. Compare with the following example: let us say I want to provide an account of seeing red. If I want an experiential account of seeing red, I will say that this is like seeing a ruby, a rose, or a ripe tomato; I will not bring any external to experience conditions into the picture. But if I do not insist on my theory being restricted only to one's experience of seeing red, I might as well say that seeing red also means that certain colour receptors in the retina are active. If there is good reason to think that these colour receptors are always active when seeing a ruby, a rose, or a ripe tomato, then there is no necessarily internal inconsistency in providing the following account: seeing red is when I have experience similar to that of seeing a ruby, a rose, and a tomato, *and* when the corresponding colour receptors are active. Of course the second theory

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<sup>53</sup> I use the phrase 'external to one's experience' to denote a thing which one cannot determine by oneself alone. It might be possible for me to ask you to describe how you feel and thus determine if I am really 'in tune' with you but I have no *direct* access to your experience (I cannot be aware of it in the same way in which I can be aware of the fact that I *feel* in tune with you).

seems like it will be more involved, complex, and harder to defend than the first theory, because apart from claiming the things about the experience of seeing red that the first theory claims, it has the added burden of producing evidence in favour of colour receptors and how the activation of colour receptors corresponds with the experience of seeing red. Still, this by itself is not a point against the second theory; it just means that this theory is more ambitious and harder to defend.

It is the same with empathy: I might provide an account of empathy that sees empathy as a lived experience; yet I might also want to put in somewhere in the definition of empathy a condition about a particular psychological mechanism that I believe is active during empathy. This would not mean that I want to *identify* empathy with the psychological mechanism itself; I might still identify empathy with the lived experience, and in this sense my account would still be an experiential one. It would just be an account that is more complex in the sense of it making more claims that are in need of a robust defence as compared to an account that does not add that extra condition on empathy.

### 1.2.2. Purely experiential accounts.

The account that I will provide will not involve any external to experience conditions on empathy. This I do simply for the reason that my main focus is the empathic *experience* as opposed to anything else. In this sense if I am able to speak about empathy without putting an external to experience condition on what counts as empathy and what does not, it would make most sense for me to do that. I will call the kind of account I provide – one which does not involve external to experience conditions on empathy – a ‘purely experiential’ account.

Let me emphasise that I do not consider it to be the case that a purely experiential account is in general preferable to a (non-purely) experiential account. Depending on the sort of purpose that one’s account serves, one might be better off incorporating an external to experience condition on empathy. For example, if one is interested in the question of how we make sense of other

minds, and if one thinks it plausible that we do this partly on a sub-personal level, one might as well speak of empathy as involving a kind of (low-level) simulation. However, I do take issue with a *certain* kind of non-purely experiential account. I will explain this now.

### 1.2.3. The issue with some non-purely experiential accounts.

I take it that a certain kind of non-purely experiential account encounters a difficulty which I will present now. In particular I take issue with experiential accounts of empathy according to which it is possible for there to be two scenarios where I experience exactly the same thing in both of them, and yet only one of them counts as empathy, and the other does not.

Let me explain. Let us have two scenarios, A and B, in both of which I am imagining what it is like to be you. Let us further say that A and B are experientially indistinguishable for the person who imagines what it is like to be another: in both A and B I will be having the exact same experience. Yet, since the account of empathy is a non-purely experiential one, in order for empathy to take place, there will be a certain condition C external to my experience, which will have to be satisfied. Let us say that C is satisfied in scenario A but not in scenario B. Therefore, on this account of empathy, in scenario A empathy will have happened, and in B it will not have happened. Yet both A and B will be indistinguishable from my perspective.

To make this set-up more concrete, let us fill it in with an example of a non-purely experiential account. Let's take Goldman's account as an example: according to this account the external to experience condition C is that there is an interpersonal mental isomorphism between the states of empathiser and target.<sup>54</sup> In other words, in order for empathy to take place my mental states have to match onto yours. Filling the setup above with Goldman's account would mean that in A I would imagine what it is like to be you, and more

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<sup>54</sup> Alvin Goldman, 'Two Routes to Empathy', in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford University Press, 2011).

specifically, I would imagine X, and I would achieve a state of mind isomorphic to yours. And in B I would imagine what it is like to be you, and more specifically, I would imagine X, however, I would not reach a state of mind isomorphic to yours because, say, unknown to me, you are actually experiencing something different from what I thought you were experiencing. According to Goldman's account I have empathised with you in A, but not in B. But the two scenarios are indistinguishable from my perspective since in both cases I have imagined X.

Therefore, it seems that there is a difference between two kinds of accounts of empathy: accounts according to which there is empathy in both cases A and B, and accounts according to which there is empathy in A only, but not in B. Purely experiential accounts would fall within the former category, since according to them the internal to experience factor is of sole importance in deciding whether in a particular instance empathy has occurred or not. Some non-purely experiential accounts would fall within the latter category – those according to which there is a certain external to experience condition C that is satisfied in case A but not in B.

Not *all* non-purely experiential accounts would fall within the latter category. All non-purely experiential accounts have a certain external to experience condition C that needs to be satisfied in order for empathy to take place. However not all non-purely experiential accounts would hold that scenarios A and B are both *possible*; maybe scenario B is not a possibility on such an account. If on a particular non-purely experiential account it is not actually possible to have the two scenarios A, and B, above, then the theoretically inelegant conclusion (that on such an account it is possible to have two experientially indistinguishable scenarios in only one of which empathy occurs) would not follow. For example, if we consider an account where the external to experience condition C is a condition about the triggering of particular patterns of brain activity, then on such an account it might be incoherent to hold that scenario B is a physical possibility since according to this account it is not possible to have empathy without this particular brain activation pattern. If B

is not a possibility, then it would not be the case that on this account it is possible to have two experientially indistinguishable scenarios in only one of which empathy occurs. I take no issue with non-purely experiential accounts of this sort – namely, accounts where one of the scenarios is not possible in the first place.

However, for those accounts according to which both scenarios A and B are a possibility, I consider there to be an issue. I consider it theoretically inelegant to choose to refer to a kind of *experience* as ‘empathy’ only if certain external to my experience conditions have been satisfied. If it is a possibility to have the experience occurring without this condition being satisfied, then the moment I adopt such a condition I cease to be interested primarily in the experience as such and choose to refer to as ‘empathy’ something which is a combination of experience and something occurring independently from that experience; i.e. I choose to refer to as ‘empathy’ something which cannot be a natural kind. Therefore I take any non-purely experiential account which accommodates for the possibility of two experientially indistinguishable situations only one of which would count as empathy to be a theoretically inelegant one and hence problematic. In this thesis I will be interested in developing an account of empathy that does not suffer from this weakness. I will choose to stay loyal to my decision to investigate the *experience* of empathy, and hence I will develop a purely experiential account of empathy.

Below, in [Chapter 2](#) I will develop my own account of empathy. Before I proceed to doing this, in the following [section 1.3](#) I will discuss one important external to experience condition that is common to many accounts of empathy. Adopting such a condition would make an account of empathy non-purely experiential and inelegant in the way discussed here. However, due to how common this condition is, I will dedicate special attention to it. The discussion above will be instrumental to showing one weakness of accounts of empathy that involve this condition. I will argue against this condition at length in the following section.

#### 1.2.4. Conclusion.

In this section I articulated the kind of account of empathy that this thesis will provide. This will be an account that sees empathy primarily as a particular kind of experience. I showed that many non-purely experiential accounts are theoretically inelegant since on these accounts it is possible to have two experientially indistinguishable scenarios in only one of which empathy occurs. In contrast, according to the kind of account I will be developing – what I called a ‘purely experiential’ account – one is always able, based solely upon one’s honest introspection, to determine whether one is on a particular occasion empathising with someone, or not.

### 1.3. Why empathy does not involve a veridical condition.

Above I argued that I will be interested in developing a particular, ‘experiential’ kind of account of empathy – one which is interested in empathy primarily as a lived experience. I also argued that a certain subset of these accounts – some of the ‘non-purely experiential’ accounts of empathy which involve external to experience conditions on empathy – suffer from a theoretical inelegance which I find undesirable and do not want to have in my account. This I take as a justification for my own choice to develop a ‘purely experiential’ account of empathy – one which does not involve external to experience conditions on empathy and so does not risk inheriting this theoretical inelegance.

Most of the existing accounts of empathy are not *purely* experiential, as they involve some condition, external to experience, on empathy. In particular, many of them involve one or another kind of a veridical condition on empathy. I will explain what this condition is below in [section 1.3.1](#). Then, in [section 1.3.2](#) I will present my reason to resist adopting such a veridical condition in my account. Adopting such a condition would make my account theoretically inelegant in the way discussed above in [section 1.2.3](#) and also, using an analogy with reading a book which I borrow from Baker, I will argue that it would be incoherent to put a veridical condition on the kind of phenomenon I am willing

to capture. However, since the prevalence of the veridical condition in existing experiential accounts of empathy is so large, in [section 1.3.3](#) I will suggest two possible reasons why a veridical condition might be desirable, and will conclude that neither of the two reasons is sufficiently pressing to conclude that an account that does not feature such a condition is lacking in fundamental ways. Finally, I will seek to make my case stronger by presenting in [section 1.3.4](#) three merits that an account of empathy automatically inherits by virtue of not adopting a veridical condition.

### 1.3.1. What is a veridical condition?

A common feature of the majority of accounts of empathy is that they have built in a veridical condition. To hold that empathy involves a veridical condition is to hold that if the veridical condition is not met, then no empathy has taken place; the veridical condition is in this sense a necessary condition on empathy.

I use the phrase ‘veridical condition’ as an umbrella term to refer to any of several conditions found in empathy accounts, such as: empathy involving imagining what another person is *actually* experiencing; empathy involving a *match* between the affective states of the empathiser and target; empathy involving understanding *accurately* what another person is undergoing, and others. According to a veridical condition empathy only takes place in case of an actual correspondence between the state of the (supposed) empathiser and that of the target. Sometimes this correspondence is fleshed out as one between my representation of your mental states, and your real states; sometimes it is about me reaching an accurate understanding of what it is like to be you; sometimes it is about my affective states being similar to your affective states – this is the affective matching condition which is prevalent among recent accounts of empathy.<sup>55</sup>

A prime example of a veridical condition is the requirement that one person be in a state (e.g., a state of mind or an affective state) which is *isomorphic* to the

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<sup>55</sup> Baker, 2016.



state of another person. This is the ‘minimal sense of empathy’ account provided by Goldman who, following Vignemont & Singer’s definition<sup>56</sup>, takes empathic states to be affective states which are isomorphic to another’s affective state and which are elicited by the observation or imagining of that other’s affective state.<sup>57</sup> In Goldman’s account a decisive criterion for whether something is an instance of empathy is whether there *actually* is some form of isomorphism in the mental states of empathiser and target; empathy is achieved if and only if this isomorphism has been brought about.

### 1.3.2. The prime reason to not adopt a veridical condition.

I will not adopt a veridical condition in my account because I am interested in empathy as an epistemic phenomenon.

I already argued above ([section 1.2.3](#)) that there is something theoretically inelegant about accounts of empathy that are: (1) identifying empathy with something that can be experienced, while at the same time (2) willing to say that empathy has happened in only one of two experientially indistinguishable possible scenarios, and (3) believing these two scenarios to be both possible to happen.

Adopting a veridical condition would make an experiential (satisfying condition (1) above) account of empathy fall within this unsatisfactory category of accounts. Having a veridical condition built into them is exactly my issue with many otherwise perfectly and even admirably neat accounts of empathy. Take for example Walton: he suggests that we ‘count as instances of empathy cases in which a person *experiences* a target as feeling “like this” or is under the *impression* that she does’ (italics in the original) and immediately qualifies this statement by saying that the empathy is ‘merely apparent’, ‘if the supposed

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<sup>56</sup> de Vignemont and Singer, 2006. According to Vignemont & Singer ‘There is empathy if: (i) one is in an affective state; (ii) this state is isomorphic to another person’s affective state; (iii) this state is elicited by the observation or imagination of another person’s affective state; (iv) one knows that the other person is the source of one’s own affective state.’

<sup>57</sup> Goldman, 2011.

empathiser's impression is mistaken'.<sup>58</sup> I do take issue with this last move; if empathy is centrally about the experience or impression of the (supposed) empathiser, it makes little sense to suggest that empathy has failed just because the (supposed) empathiser happens to be wrong about the state of the target. To reiterate, in reality it is perfectly possible that one have two cases which are experientially indistinguishable from the perspective of the (supposed) empathiser: one case which brings about true understanding of the target, and another case which does not. It makes little sense, if one is interested centrally in the experiential side of empathy, to say that empathy is real in one case and merely apparent in the other.

Baker has recently made a similar point by using an analogy with reading a book.<sup>59</sup> If I read a book by a reputable author that happens to have false claims in it, I will not have gained knowledge. However, this would not mean that I have failed to read the book.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, if I empathise with you and end up failing to understand your actual state, this would not mean that I have failed to empathise. In this sense empathy is analogous to reading; it is merely an epistemic method. If I fail to get an accurate understanding out of empathising, this is not going to make the empathy merely apparent any more than my failure to gain knowledge from reading a book makes my reading of the book merely apparent.

In this sense I take it that when thinking of empathy as an experience, it makes most sense to consider empathy to have failed to take place not when the beliefs it produces have failed to be accurate, but rather when something essential to the *experience* of empathising has failed to take place.

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<sup>58</sup> Walton, 2015, p.9.

<sup>59</sup> Baker is here discussing affective matching, but what he says applies just as well to the slightly broader category of a veridical condition.

<sup>60</sup> Baker, 2016, p.17.

### 1.3.3. Why a veridical condition might be nevertheless desirable?

I hope that the above discussion has provided a strong enough justification for not adopting a veridical condition in the presently developed account of empathy. However, the veridical condition has been so prevalent among experiential accounts of empathy, that one might reasonably wonder if the adopting of such a condition does not bring its own explanatory advantages that would make adding such a condition to the present account valuable despite what was already said. Even Baker who is, to the best of my knowledge, the only person who has explicitly produced an argument against a kind of veridical condition (namely, affective matching) seems later in the same writing to endorse a kind of affective matching.<sup>61</sup>

Therefore, I consider it important to give the veridical condition a go and see whether there are certain desirable features which it might bring with itself in an empathy account. The accounts which I am familiar with and which endorse a veridical condition have not produced any arguments in justification of endorsing such a condition<sup>62</sup>; this condition is usually merely stated or assumed without being made explicit. Therefore I thought of any possible reasons why a veridical condition in an empathy account might be indeed desirable, and came up with two reasons which I will present now.

#### 1.3.3.1. In defence of a veridical condition 1: empathy's value.

One might believe that a veridical condition captures something essential about the way we think of empathy's value. One of the main reasons we tend to consider empathy valuable, one might argue, is its epistemological role in helping us understand other people's experiences. If empathy did not involve the veridical condition, then it would not *necessarily* involve *actually* understanding other people's experiences. It would be at best no more than a

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<sup>61</sup> Baker, 2016, p.45. suggests that affective matching is a necessary part of empathy and that it is 'one of several proto-empathies; that is, imaginative projects which need to be undertaken in order to provide sufficient grounding for an empathic ascription.' I find the necessity claim to be at odds with his earlier argument against affective matching.

<sup>62</sup> E.g.: Feagin, 1988; Deonna, 2007; Walton, 2015; Smith, 2017.

curious exercise of the imagination. But if so, then empathy could not be possibly seen as intrinsically valuable. It would at most be seen as instrumentally valuable. And if we normally understand empathy as intrinsically valuable, then this seems problematic.

I would deny that empathy would not be valuable if it did not necessarily imply veridically imagining another's experience. For one thing, the fact that empathy does not *necessarily* involve understanding other people's actual experiences does not preclude the possibility that it is going to result in this understanding often enough. In the following chapter I will develop an account of empathy that does not involve a veridical condition, and in the later chapters of this thesis I will be arguing that this empathy is valuable in various ways, both morally and epistemically. Hence I will ultimately be in a position to deny the claim that since empathy does not *necessarily* involve producing an accurate understanding of other people's experiences therefore empathy is not valuable.

If this means that empathy's value is instrumental rather than intrinsic, I am happy to accept this claim. I cannot think of any argument as to why empathy should have an intrinsic as opposed to an instrumental value in this sense, except for the claim that this is how we usually speak about empathy. However, I do not think that this particular point about labels is significant enough to trump the considerations for not adopting a veridical condition already spelled out in [section 1.3.2](#).

#### 1.3.3.2. In defence of a veridical condition 2: awkward use of term.

Another argument in favour of a veridical condition of empathy is to hold that our usual usage of the word 'empathy' is incompatible with a non-veridical account of empathy. This is a point about labels; the claim is that in reality we use the term 'empathy' to pick out cases that are different from the ones that will be picked out if we accepted an account of empathy which did not involve a veridical condition. In particular, the non-veridical account of empathy will refer to as 'empathy' cases in which I completely fail to accurately represent

your actual experience and it does seem plausible that we would not want to refer to these cases as 'empathy'.

The objection can be put in a slightly more formal way like this:

P1: There are cases which do not count as empathy on veridical condition accounts, but do count as empathy on accounts that do not involve a veridical condition.

P2: In quotidian discourse the term 'empathy' does not refer to these cases.

P3: A satisfactory account of empathy should respect quotidian discourse.

C: Therefore, an account of empathy that does not involve a veridical condition is an unsatisfactory one.

The first premise is true and cannot be argued against, as the following example shows. I am trying to imagine what it is like to be you. I arrive at a certain idea in my mind about what it is like to be you; e.g. I come to believe that you are upset about a certain matter. This however is wrong – you are not, in fact, upset about that matter – in fact, you have not noticed the matter at all. I have put in effort and tried really hard to imagine what it is like to be you, and I am convinced that I have empathised with you. According to a purely experiential account of empathy (which is a kind of account of empathy that does not involve a veridical condition) I have, in fact, empathised with you. According to a veridical condition account of empathy, however, I could not have possibly empathised with you on this occasion since what I have ended up believing about you is wrong. Therefore premise P1 is true.

The only way to deny the conclusion of the valid argument presented above is by denying either P2 or P3. Denying the second premise P2 would involve arguing that scenarios like the example above can actually be classified as empathy according to the common usage of the term 'empathy'. This does not seem a promising strategy.

The best strategy is to deny P<sub>3</sub>. This amounts to a reply that consists in pointing out that this objection is all about labels. Perhaps it is true that many of us, when we think of empathy, think about this thing which implies veridically imagining another's experiences. In this case maybe I can just bite the bullet and instead call what I am interested in with a different name, e.g. 'empathic attitude' or 'empathic experience'. What I will be interested in is not necessarily 'empathy' as standardly understood, but rather the experience of empathising. This thesis will be arguing that there is a certain value in the experience of empathising, even if these experiences do not lead us to an accurate picture of another's experience.

This reply should not be seen as too problematic. After all, there is no obligation for a philosophical account to follow the lay usage of words and examples abound where a term's meaning in colloquial speech differs from one in philosophical usage. The fact that a definition of a word in a philosophical account does not fully cohere with the colloquial usage of that word is not necessarily a weakness of the account. In philosophy discourse words are very rigidly defined and this is not the case in common parlance, where one and the same word is often used to mean slightly different things. So if one tries to capture in a single term (e.g. 'empathy\*') all the phenomena that are meant by all and any applications of a given word ('empathy') in everyday speech that might not even be possible, and in any case it is probably not desirable. Therefore providing an account of empathy which does not exactly correspond to the quotidian discourse is not necessarily problematic.

Further, I think it needs pointing out that labelling of what someone might prefer to call 'empathic attitude' as 'empathy' is not necessarily leading to all that different a use of language. On the one hand, most cases where empathy has happened according to a veridical condition account of empathy, empathy according to a purely experiential account would also have happened. If I imagine what it is like to be you, and figure out, correctly, that you are not actually upset about that thing about which it seemed initially you are upset about, I would have empathised, according to a veridical condition account of

empathy. I would also have empathised, according to a purely experiential account of empathy, because I have actually imagined what it is like to be you. On the other hand, in many cases where empathy has happened according to a purely experiential account of empathy, empathy according to a veridical condition account would also have happened. If I imagine what it is like to be you, I have a high chance of figuring out what this actually is like. This is because the imagining I am interested in, and calling ‘empathy’ in this thesis, is not some whimsical picturing of another’s situation, but rather a wilful effort to understand what another is experiencing. The success rate of such imagining would not be so low as to make my use of the word ‘empathy’ completely out of place.

#### 1.3.3.3. Conclusion.

In this section I presented two possible reasons to think that introducing a veridical condition in an account of empathy might be a desirable thing. One is that it would make empathy intrinsically, as opposed to instrumentally valuable, and the other is that it would be closer to lay usage of the word ‘empathy’. However, I argued that neither of these two points presents a sufficiently strong case in favour of overriding the reasoning for not adopting a veridical condition spelled out above in [section 1.3.2](#).

#### 1.3.4. Some virtues of a non-veridical-condition account of empathy.

Above I argued that a veridical condition is not a necessary feature of a satisfactory account of empathy. In this section I will point to three features that any non-veridical-condition account of empathy has, which might be desirable in their own right. These features will be inherited by my own account of empathy which I will develop below.

#### 1.3.4.1. Empathy with fictional characters.

I will argue that an account of empathy that does not involve a veridical condition makes it less puzzling as to how we empathise with fictional characters.

I would argue that if empathy involves a veridical condition, empathy with fictional characters becomes less straightforward to account for. Since in this case we can only be said to empathise with someone if we understand what they actually experience, and since it is not obvious what the equivalent of a fictional character's 'actual' experience is (in the case of a real person there is a real fact of the matter as to what the person is experiencing, but one might argue that it is not clear what the equivalent to this would be in the fictional case) we would need a special way to account for our ability to empathise with fictions.

This problem is by no means a knock-down argument against empathy accounts that include a veridical condition; there are at least a couple of ways in which someone who considers empathy to involve a veridical condition can reply to this.

One line of reply is to argue that we do not in fact empathise with fictional characters. Indeed, there is no consensus on the question of what the relation is between a person engaging with fiction (e.g. a reader of a novel) and the fictional characters.<sup>63</sup> One might hold that empathy for fictions might be explained away by a kind of error theory, and that the common view that we empathise with characters of fiction is wrong. For example Carroll has argued that empathy is not central to our engagement with fictions and that we do not typically empathise with fictional characters.<sup>64</sup>

Still, even Carroll would not deny that we do sometimes empathise with fictional characters. He concedes that we do *sometimes* empathise with fictions when he discusses that sometimes in our engagement with fictions we simulate the states of characters.<sup>65</sup> It seems to me that to deny that empathy with

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<sup>63</sup> Coplan, 2004.

<sup>64</sup> Carroll, 1998.

<sup>65</sup> Carroll, 1998.



fictional characters *ever* occurs is a very strong claim, and I am not aware of a convincing argument to that effect. On the contrary it seems that we do at least sometimes empathise with fictions; we sometimes imagine what it is like to be a certain character in a fiction. This is also evidenced from artists' first-person accounts<sup>66</sup> as well as from cognitive science research.<sup>67</sup> Further, one might hold that there is little reason to suggest that we use a different cognitive capacity to deal with fictions from the one we use to deal with our own lives.<sup>68</sup> All this seems to suggest that the weight of the argument lies with the side holding that we do not empathise with fictions, as opposed to it lying with the side holding that we do.

A better line of response is to argue that there is a fact of the matter as to what a fictional character is actually experiencing: these are states the characters fictionally have. The protagonist in the story is afraid; even if there is no real person who is afraid, there might be a real fact of the matter as to what, fictionally, is the case. Empathising with the protagonist would then involve matching one's imagined states with the states that the protagonist fictionally has. For example, we are happy to say that readers who are not careful *miss*, and that other characters in the same fiction might be *misguided* about what a character is actually experiencing. In this sense then a veridical condition does not seem difficult to apply to fictions as well; we empathise with characters in fiction only if what we imagine matches what they are fictionally experiencing.

The second response is probably neater, but in any case there is no shortage of ways in which someone who holds empathy to involve a veridical condition can account for our empathising with fictions. My point in bringing up the issue of empathising with fictions was to draw attention to one relative merit of any account of empathy that does not involve a veridical condition. The merit here consists simply in these accounts being able to more neatly accommodate the fiction case. The fiction case on these accounts would not be in any way problematic to begin with, and no special attention will need to be given in

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<sup>66</sup> Smith, 2011.

<sup>67</sup> Coplan, 2004.

<sup>68</sup> Lopes holds this view. Lopes, 2003.

order to explain how we come to empathise with fictional characters. I consider this relative simplicity to be a merit of non-veridical condition accounts of empathy.

#### 1.3.4.2. Empathy with objects.

Another potential virtue of an account of empathy that does not involve a veridical condition is that it would make it possible to account for empathy with objects. This would not be straightforward on an account of empathy that involves a veridical condition; on such an account in order to empathise with my notebook, say, I have to be able to experience in my imagination what my notebook *really* experiences, but this does not seem obviously like something that even makes sense. By contrast, if there is no veridical condition involved, this difficulty does not necessarily arise.

But is there any reason to think that we might want to speak about empathy with objects in the first place at all? I think that there is, since the notion of empathy with objects would make it possible to accommodate for cases like the following. A child loves a teddy bear and treats the teddy bear as if it were really alive. If something happens to the teddy bear, e.g., its hand is torn, the child cries. Presumably, the cry is not only for the fact that a favourite object has been ruined. At least part of the cry is feeling sad for the teddy bear itself, for its losing its arm.

Presumably the child does not really believe that the teddy bear itself actually feels bad about its arm being torn. Still, my point is that there is no reason to suppose that what the child experiences is qualitatively different from what the child would experience at witnessing say another child being in pain. The child's sadness at witnessing the teddy bear's plight is spontaneous and real – even if not coupled with the belief that the bear is actually undergoing pain – but the sadness is there *as if* it was the bear's sadness itself that made the child sad. If a child reacts to the plight of a teddy bear much in the same way in which the child would react to the plight of a fellow human, and if we are happy to say

that empathy was involved in the latter, it would not seem like a stretch to say that empathy was involved in the former as well.

One might think that the case of empathy with objects reduces to the fiction case which I already discussed above. Perhaps each time I empathise with an object, what happens is that I empathise with a fiction of this object. Perhaps it is possible to think of empathy with objects in this way; certainly it seems plausible to think of it in the teddy bear example above, since favourite toys can be seen as similar to characters in fiction. However, I would argue that empathy with objects can happen spontaneously, even with objects we had never encountered before. If I come to my office and see that someone has brought in a book, a book that seems in a serious way mistreated – with dog-ears, torn pages, writings all over – I could feel bad in a way in which I experience this badness on behalf of the book. It seems like it will be a burden of theory if it wants to accommodate this case by saying that I empathise with a fiction; a make-believe world in which the book has a certain experience; an experience which is make-believedly of a certain kind, e.g. a negative experience. It seems far neater to be able to directly say that I just empathised with the book – I imagined what it is like to be the book with torn pages, without worrying about whether there is such a thing as to what a book really experiences, or worrying about treating the book like the fiction case.

In this sense even if an account of empathy that involves a veridical condition can accommodate empathy with objects by treating it just like empathy with fiction, an account of empathy that does not involve a veridical condition just seems to make accounting for empathy with objects a bit easier.

#### 1.3.4.3. Empathy with difficult cases.

Another virtue of not incorporating a veridical condition into an account of empathy is related to an observation Ratcliffe makes that sometimes empathy happens in cases when one is not actually able to well imagine what another is experiencing. Ratcliffe, a practicing clinician, argues that sometimes sufficient

for empathy is a kind of acknowledgement that one *cannot* well imagine what the other is undergoing. He points out that sometimes there are enormous differences between the ways two people experience the world – differences that are so big as to be unbridgeable, meaning that if I try to imagine what it is like to be you I will fail. In such cases, Ratcliffe holds, it is still possible for me to empathise with you – what is needed, is for me to acknowledge the existence of these differences.

Ratcliffe uses the example of trying to imagine what the world is like for someone with depression<sup>69</sup> and argues that there is something in the experience of the one suffering from depression that is radically different from the experience of those who do not suffer. For example, the depressed person feels 'cut off' from the world and other people in it, the metaphor of being put under a glass jar being one frequently used to describe the experience. Also approaching other people does not seem like a real possibility for the one suffering from depression. Further, something common to many depression experiences is that people with depression feel that their experience 'cannot be successfully conveyed to others' and that 'other people are unable to understand the experience or just do not care' – this is what Ratcliffe calls the 'indescribability complaint'.<sup>70</sup> Ratcliffe's proposal is that this complaint is due to a 'broad kind of phenomenological change'<sup>71</sup> common to many cases of diagnosis. This change consists in 'alteration of an aspect of experience that is seldom reflected upon or discussed'<sup>72</sup> because it is an aspect of experience 'that is so pervasive and deeply engrained that it is seldom noticed and even more rarely discussed'.<sup>73</sup> For example, I might have never doubted the fact that other people are, in general, things I can approach and talk to; but in order to imagine what it is like to be a particular person who suffers from chronic depression I might need to imagine that the possibility of approaching other people to talk

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<sup>69</sup> Ratcliffe, 2014. Ratcliffe informs us: "The label "depression" encompasses a range of diagnoses, but the kinds of experience I will address are all consistent with diagnosis of a major depressive episode or major depressive disorder." P.271.

<sup>70</sup> Ratcliffe, 2014, p.271.

<sup>71</sup> Ratcliffe, 2014, p.271.

<sup>72</sup> Ratcliffe, 2014, p.271.

<sup>73</sup> Ratcliffe, 2014, p.272.

is somehow closed to me. Some of us, even if explicitly instructed to do so, will still struggle to imagine what it is like to experience people in this way, just because it is so different from the way we are used to experiencing them.

If we want to go with Ratcliffe and label as 'empathy' these cases where a veridical imagining of your experience has not occurred, then it would seem that not adopting a veridical condition in an account of empathy would make this easier. Let's say I am imagining what it is that I think you are experiencing, but I figure out that there is something radically different in the way you experience the world, a kind of experience which I cannot accurately imagine. Just because I have engaged in the activity of imagining, even if I was ultimately not able to produce a good picture of what your experience actually is like, I will still be said to have empathised with you. This example I hope shows that a non-veridical condition account of empathy is not so far from our lay usage of the term 'empathy' intuitions as it might initially seem.

Of course a veridical condition account of empathy can arguably accommodate this case by pointing out that my realisation that there is something radically different in the way you experience the world is itself sufficient to satisfy the veridical condition. The defender of a veridical condition account can say that in this case I have empathised because I have been able to realise that your experience is *actually* very different from mine, so different that it is hard for me to imagine what it is exactly. However, I would argue that the veridical condition can survive this example only in a very weakened form. If what is sufficient for the veridical condition to be satisfied is for me to have a true representation of just one feature of your experience and a feature which is quite vague – namely, the realisation that a certain aspect of your experience is radically different from mine – this would mean that the veridical condition would be a very weak one. However, such a weak condition is not the sort of condition that most accounts of empathy which have built in a veridical condition have in mind. As noted earlier, a veridical condition is about more than just successful tracking of one broad feature of your experience; rather it is about a kind of matching, or an isomorphism, between your states and mine.

This, stronger version of the condition is what I mean to attack in this section; and this stronger version of the condition would not survive the example about radical phenomenological differences that was just discussed. By contrast, an account of empathy that does not involve such a condition has a far easier time accommodating these cases.

#### 1.3.4.4. Conclusion.

In this section I considered some virtues of a non-veridical condition account of empathy. I hope to have done two things: 1) show that adopting such an account might be a desirable thing; and 2) point to some characteristics of a non-veridical condition account of empathy, which by extension will also be features of the experiential account of empathy (since this will be a non-veridical condition one) that I will develop in [Chapter 2](#).

### 1.4. Conclusion.

I started this chapter by introducing some of the historical interest in empathy. Then I provided an outline of some of the recent accounts of empathy, and pointed to the kind of account I will develop in this thesis – what I called an ‘experiential’ account of empathy.

Then I described a feature common to many existing accounts of empathy – the veridical condition. I argued that there is a reason to not adopt a veridical condition in the account of empathy which I will be developing in this thesis. Borrowing an analogy from Baker, I argued that since I am interested in empathy as a lived experience and as a particular kind of activity, to say that empathy without veridical condition is not empathy would be analogous to saying that reading a book full of false claims is not reading.

Nevertheless, since the veridical condition is so prevalent among empathy accounts, I considered some benefits of introducing this condition, but concluded that these benefits are not important enough to override the

consideration about theoretical inelegance presented above. Finally, I argued that not introducing a veridical condition in an account of empathy leads to three benefits of its own – making it easier to account for empathy with fictional characters and with objects, and also making it easier to account for our willingness to say that empathy occurs even in cases where it does not result in the empathiser forming a good picture of what the other is undergoing. With this I hope to have justified my decision to not introduce a veridical condition in the experiential account of empathy I will now proceed to develop in [Chapter 2](#).

## 2. An Account of Empathy.

In the first chapter I introduced some of the philosophical interest in empathy and I argued in favour of adopting an account of empathy that does not involve a veridical condition. In this chapter I will provide an account of empathy. The chapter is structured as follows. First I define empathy as the activity of *re-creating another's experience in one's imagination* and then I examine some of the features of this activity. Then I carefully distinguish between empathy and two related phenomena: sympathy and emotional contagion. Finally, in the third section of this chapter, I speak of empathy as a skill.

### 2.1. Defining empathy in positive terms.

I define empathy as the activity of *re-creating another's experience in one's imagination*. (I will use this interchangeably with the phrase 'imagining what it is like to be another'.) Here I will examine some features of the activity of empathy. First I will specify what I take a person's experience to involve. Then I will say more about what I take the imagining of a person's experience to involve. Finally, I will specify what the activity of empathy involves in some more detail.

#### 2.1.1. What does a person's experience consist in?

A person's experience at any point includes various of what I will refer to as 'dimensions', among which: one's kinaesthetic state, somatic state, occurrent thoughts, beliefs, desires, intentions, emotions, affective states which are not emotions, and others. At any point of time each of the dimensions of experience has a certain 'value'. For example, yesterday at 6 pm, I was relaxed with no tension in my body, I felt tranquil, thought about little to nothing in particular, desired to sleep, and so on. This is to say that the value of the emotion dimension was tranquillity; the value of the desire dimension was the desire to



sleep; the value of the thought dimension was to think about nothing in particular, and so on.

Sometimes philosophers speak of ‘modalities’ in order to capture a similar idea, for example when speaking about sensory modalities<sup>74</sup> but I will refer to the aspects of experience as ‘dimensions’ in order to avoid any theoretical baggage that might come with using the term ‘modality’. There are many dimensions, for example perception in each of the five senses (vision, audition, touch, taste, olfaction), proprioception (the sense of how one’s body is situated in space), one’s affective states, somatic states, one’s occurrent thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions, one’s emotions, one’s feeling of pain (if any), and others. Also there are arguably dimensions encompassing some ‘less obvious’ aspects of experience, such as the ‘sense of agency’ or ‘sense of control’<sup>75</sup>, the way one experiences the passage of time, and so on. All this is a non-exhaustive list describing part of the incredibly rich complex which is a person’s experience at any moment in time.

It is an open question whether or not particular dimensions of experience can or cannot be dissociated into simpler ones: for example Pacherie has argued that the sense of agency is a compound of the more basic senses of initiation, of control, and the experience of intentional causation.<sup>76</sup> Whether or not some of the dimensions I have mentioned are or are not reducible to others is beyond the scope of the present writing. I am concerned not with producing a taxonomy of the dimensions of experience, but merely with pointing out the fact that experience is multi-dimensional: there are lots of different aspects to it.

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<sup>74</sup> Dokic and Arcangeli, 2014. They use the word ‘modalities’ to refer to the various dimensions of perception: ‘we can count at least the five senses (vision, audition, touch, taste, and olfaction) as sensory modalities’.

<sup>75</sup> For a recent discussion on what the sense of agency involves, see Gallagher, 2012b.

<sup>76</sup> Pacherie, 2006.

### 2.1.1.1. Dimensions are connected.

One important premise in my thesis is that the different dimensions of experience are related to one another. Dimensions obey their own inner ‘logic’, as it were. There are certain combinations of various dimensions that suggest themselves as more plausible than others. One would, as a rule, not be feeling in a certain way and be walking with a certain gait, unless one is also thinking about a certain thought, etc. The dimensions affect one another, and one’s experience cannot inhabit all and any random set of dimension coordinates. In other words, the space of states a person can be in is to an extent limited by certain dependencies among the different dimensions of experience. For example, if one aspect of my present experience is having a particular thought, then my emotional state and my somatic state would tend to inhabit particular coordinates which are compatible with this thought. If I am feeling nausea, I would have certain depressing thoughts, and I would feel anxiety, I would have no appetite and I would want to throw up. If I am in a great distress, my body probably will not feel relaxed, but tense, and on the contrary, if I am in a happy mood, it makes little sense to expect my body to feel tense.

This is to say that the dimensions of experience would *tend* to come together in certain ways, even if the dependency is not very strict. A person’s state at any moment has values across all dimensions; if we know what the value of many of these dimensions are, we have a reasonably good chance of predicting what the value of the dimensions we do not know about, will be.

A point here which is hopefully not surprising, but still worth emphasising, is that the sets of coordinates corresponding to what we could roughly call ‘cognitive’ dimensions (e.g. one’s occurrent thoughts) and ‘affective’ dimensions (e.g. one’s emotions) are also very much interrelated. Of course, they are in principle dissociable – it is not *impossible* to have certain thoughts without the ‘corresponding’ feelings and vice versa – however, in general they do tend to affect one another.

The relations between the dimensions of experience are very complex, and each one of them can influence the others. For example, it seems uncontroversial

that particular belief states can cause in us certain emotions. If I find out that a friend has betrayed me, I might feel anger, or sadness, or some combination of both, depending on the more specific circumstances of the situation. However, it also seems hard to deny that emotions can make particular cognitive states salient in us. Maybe I believe that you do not like me; if I am in a bad mood, this belief becomes especially salient in my mind, whereas if I am in a good mood, this belief is not occurrent. If I am sad, the cognitive states salient in my mind would be depressive thoughts. I will think that doing philosophy research is pointless because no one outside of a small number of academics will ever be interested in this research. If I am happy, I will instead think that I am doing something interesting that few people have had the chance to do. Having different emotions makes some cognitive states more salient than others. Once this point has been made, it hopefully seems fairly obvious.

#### 2.1.1.2. Does experience imply awareness?

One point to note is that I take it that one's experience involves all these dimensions<sup>77</sup> even if one is not at a particular moment aware of them. I might be all tensed up but unaware of my somatic or kinaesthetic state, since (say) I am preoccupied by and only aware of the troubling thought in my mind. In this case my kinaesthetic states will still be a part of my experience, even if I am not aware of them.

Perhaps the choice of the word 'experience' is a bit unfortunate here. Often philosophers speak about experience in a way that seems to presuppose awareness of the subject of experience.<sup>78</sup> And it is not only philosophers; in daily

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<sup>77</sup> The dimensions have a certain value at any time, even if this value is nil. For example, let's say I have lost my sense of agency during a particular interval of time; this does not mean that my experience lacks the sense of agency *dimension* – rather, it means that the *value* of this dimension is empty; the dimension itself does not go anywhere. It is always there and available to take on a certain value. The fact that the value of the sense of agency dimension is 'none' is still a characteristic of that experience, it does not fail to convey information about it.

<sup>78</sup> E.g. Dokic and Arcangeli in a footnote assume that 'experiences are conscious mental states'.

life it would seem at the very least strange to say, for example, that one experiences anything while sleeping (except one's dreams).

In this sense one might wonder whether another label would have been better suited here: a term that would without an issue capture dimensions of (what I call) experience which we are not aware of. For example 'being' might be a better term. However, 'being' seems too broad to me, and I will stick to 'experience' in order to capture an important link with awareness: I am interested in what (in the awareness-implying sense of 'experience') can be called the 'experienceable'. I am explaining: if awareness of it is not necessary for something to be a part of my experience, one might wonder what it is that makes certain things parts of experience, and others not. For there are many things which can presumably be considered parts of being, yet I would not think of them as parts of experience: for example one's metabolic processes or the colour of one's eyes. The reason some things are not part of experience is that we *cannot* be aware of them (or cannot experience them in the more conventional sense of 'experience'). Hence by 'experience' I capture that which I *can* be aware of, even if I happen not to be aware of it at the particular moment. This is not the same as saying that by experience I mean that which is in principle accessible by introspection, as philosophical accounts of introspection are often restricted to being about mental events and do not include, for example, proprioceptive knowledge.<sup>79</sup>

My motivation for focusing on things beyond a person's present awareness is that I am interested in empathy, which is imagining (in a relevant sense to be discussed below in [section 2.1.2](#)) being another person; and I want my use of 'experience' to capture the aspects of a person's being which can be thus imagined. Say I am empathising with you, i.e., imagining what it is like to be you, who happen to be preoccupied with a certain troubling thought, and who are pacing anxiously in the room, body tense up, fists clenched. Perhaps what you are aware of (and hence what you experience in a more conventional use of 'experience') is only the troubling thought in your mind; it troubles you so

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<sup>79</sup> Schwitzgebel, 2016.

much, you cannot be aware of anything else. What I want to claim is that my empathising with you, that is, my imagining being you, is *not* thereby exhausted by imagining the troubling thought only. Even if your own awareness is only occupied by a single thought, it does not mean that in my empathy with you, my awareness should only be occupied by that thought; no, I would imagine what it is like to be preoccupied only with a single troubling thought, but I would also imagine what it is like to have the fists clenched, the body tense, to be anxious in a way that possibly clouds my judgment, and so on. In other words: it is important for me that the imaginative activity of empathy be able to capture things which the *other* person is not necessarily aware of, and since empathy is re-creating in one's imagination of another's *experience*, I am including under the label of 'experience' things which one is not necessarily aware of.

### 2.1.2. Imagining an experience.

I have defined empathy as the activity of re-creating another's experience in one's imagination. Above I discussed what I take a person's experience to consist in. Now I will say more about the way imagination is put to use in this activity.

Imagination is heterogeneous: there are many different kinds and types of imagination. This has led some to doubt that there is such a thing as a single phenomenon of imagination; for example, Kind has recently argued that 'no single mental activity can do all the explanatory work that has been assigned to imagining'<sup>80</sup>, a work that involves explaining, among other things: mindreading, pretence, engagement with fiction, and modal epistemology. However, I will still think of imagination as a single thing, even if I will adopt quite a broad definition, one used by Dokic and Arcangeli: 'imagination is the

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<sup>80</sup> Kind, 2013.

general capacity to produce *sui generis* occurrent mental states, which we call “imaginings”.<sup>81</sup>

Imaginings can come in various kinds, for example they can be vision-like, belief-like, desire-like, sensation-like, and many others.<sup>82</sup> Attempts to produce at least a partial taxonomy of imagination have resulted in the drawing of various distinctions, such as the ones between subjective and objective imagining<sup>83</sup>; between active and passive imagining<sup>84</sup>; and one that I will be concerned with now: between experiential and cognitive imagining.

I take it that re-creating another’s experience in one’s imagination involves an experiential kind of imagining rather than propositional imagining. Propositional imagining is imagining *that* something is the case. I can propositionally-imagine your experience – this would amount to my imagining *that* you are undergoing a certain experience; I imagine the proposition ‘you are undergoing X’ as being true.

What I take it that empathy involves is a different, experiential kind of imagining. This is not just imagining *that* you are in a certain state, but imagining *what it is like* for you to be in that state; I am imagining *having* the experience. The difference is that in the former case, but not in the latter, the imagining can be quite abstract and detached. By contrast, in the latter case the imagining involves a particular phenomenology, it has a particular experiential quality. Empathy I defined as *recreating in one’s imagination the experience of another*. The ‘recreating’ phrase is supposed to capture precisely this feature of the activity – that I am, in my imagination, undergoing a certain experience. I am not just imagining *that* I am playing a sonata; I have imaginings which are vision-like, audition-like, and proprioception-like – I *recreate* in my imagination the experience of playing a sonata.

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<sup>81</sup> Dokic and Arcangeli, 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Kind, 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Dokic and Arcangeli, 2014.

<sup>84</sup> Active when we deliberately imagine something, and passive when we do not, for example in cases of mind wandering.

With this I hope to have made the distinction between experiential and cognitive imaginings clear enough. Experiential imaginings are imaginings of *having an experience*. Therefore the taxonomy of imaginings will be parasitic upon that of actual experiences. In speaking about imagination I will borrow a move from Dokic and Arcangeli:

we are going to use phrases of the form “X-like imagination”, or “re-creating X” in imagination, where X is a type of non-imaginative state (as in “vision-like imagination”, or “re-creating a proprioceptive experience”).<sup>85</sup>

In this way I am not committing myself to a particular account of imaginings (Dokic and Arcangeli are using the hyphenated ‘re-creating’ in order to avoid using the term ‘recreating’ already used by Currie and Ravenscroft<sup>86</sup>) and neither am I committed to a particular taxonomy of imaginings that requires an already existing account of imaginings. The taxonomy I will have is as theoretically thin as possible: what makes an instance of experiential imagining be of a particular kind (‘X-like’) is that *the corresponding non-imaginative state* that is imagined is itself of a particular kind.

There are also other features of the kind of imagining that I take empathy to consist in. One is that I take this imagining to be an involved activity. It is difficult to articulate what this ‘involvement’ consists in. It does seem to make the imagining I am interested in different from ‘mere’ supposing, for example. Whereas on some accounts there is no sharp distinction between supposition and imagination<sup>87</sup> it is possible also to see imagination as by definition being more involved, Gendler being an example of such a view: ‘imagination requires a sort of participation that mere hypothetical reasoning does not’.<sup>88</sup> Irrespective

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<sup>85</sup> Dokic and Arcangeli, 2014. Their aim in this essay is to draw a distinction between what they call ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ imaginings.

<sup>86</sup> This is what Currie and Ravenscroft (2002) call the recreative imagination: ‘Let us call the imaginative capacity, whatever it is, that underpins perspective-shifting the *recreative imagination*’. Currie and Ravenscroft, 2002, p.9.

<sup>87</sup> Kind has argued that simulationist treatments of imagination (such as those by Goldman and by Currie and Ravenscroft) are of this kind.

<sup>88</sup> Gendler, 2000, p.80.

of whether it is possible to have imagining that is not involved at all, it is clear that either way, imaginings vary on a scale from being more involved to less involved.

I take it that *one* thing that would make an imagining more involved would be imagining more rather than fewer dimensions of experience. If I imagine playing the piano, if my imagining is not very involved, I might just have a visual imagining of my fingers on the keyboard. If my imagining is more involved, I might also have an auditory imagining of a particular piece I am playing, together with a proprioceptive imagining of the position of my fingers in space, and an action imagining of myself executing the action of playing the piano, and others. Since there are many dimensions to one's experience, there are correspondingly many dimensions to one's experiential imagination. Every dimension of experience, when experientially imagined, will correspond to a dimension of experiential imagination. This means that when I imagine having a certain experience, I can choose to imagine it more partially or more fully. In other words, I might choose to imagine only certain dimensions and not others, or alternatively I might choose to engage in a more involved imaginative project and try to imagine as many dimensions of experience as I can. An example of a less involved imagining is me just shifting my perspective in order to imagine what you, sat opposite me, are seeing at this moment. An example of a very involved imagining would be an actor who is entering a role and imagining as many things as possible about the character they are about to play.

### 2.1.3. Empathy.

Above I discussed the multi-dimensionality of a person's experience. I explained what I mean by experience, and I assumed what will be an important premise in my argument – that the various dimensions of experience are connected, in the sense that they roughly obey the mechanics of a loose kind of relations between them. Then I also spoke a little about the imagination, arguing that central to empathy is a kind of experiential imagination.



In this section I will bring the pieces of the puzzle together, and speak more specifically about the activity of recreating another's experience in one's imagination. I will say what it involves, discussing the relation between empathy and the emotions, and proposing a model of how empathy works.

### 2.1.3.1. Empathy and phenomenal concepts.

Above I discussed the kind of imaginings I take empathy to consist in – these are *experiential* imaginings, or imaginings *what it is like* to have a certain experience. The assumption is that *there is something that it is like* to have a certain experience, and the imaginative recreation reproduces this what-its-likeness. This what-its-likeness is also referred to as the phenomenological aspect of the experience. Most dimensions of experience clearly have an associated phenomenology – emotions, affective states, proprioception, the sense of control, and so on. It is debatable but less clear that other dimensions of experience – such as thoughts and beliefs – have an associated phenomenology too.<sup>89</sup>

Empathy involves the making of a demonstrative ascription to the person we are empathising with – that the other's experience feels 'like *this*'.<sup>90</sup> In this sense the judgments resulting from empathy involve phenomenal concepts. Walton in his recent and theoretically neat account of empathy identifies empathy with using an aspect of either one's current mental state, or the content of one's imaginings, as a sample for understanding what another person is experiencing.<sup>91</sup> There are important differences between Walton's account and mine. One is that empathy is on my account not a success term, something for which I already argued in [Chapter 1](#). Another is that Walton argues that empathy does not always require imagination. What this means is that specifically recreating another's experience in one's imagination is not

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<sup>89</sup> Recently philosophers have started to explore the view that 'purely cognitive' states have an associated phenomenology. For work on this see the recent volume by Bayne and Montague: Bayne and Montague, 2011.

<sup>90</sup> This is what Baker has recently referred to as the 'complex theory' of empathy. Baker, 2016, p.44.

<sup>91</sup> Walton, 2015, p.14.

necessary for empathy; what is sometimes sufficient is something slightly less demanding – just using an aspect of one’s current mental state as a sample to apprehending that the other feels like *this*. In fact, Walton considers as the primary sense of empathy the case when one uses an aspect of one’s *current* mental state as a sample to understand the other, rather than when one uses the content of one’s imaginings, but on my account really empathy is primarily about using the content of one’s imaginings as a sample.

### 2.1.3.2. Empathy and the emotions.

Some accounts of empathy stipulate a special connection between empathy and the emotions. For example according to some accounts I am not empathising with you unless I feel (a tuned-down version of) the emotion you are experiencing. This is what Matravers takes to be what he calls ‘narrow empathy’:

Narrow empathy occurs when an empathiser experiences an emotion E as a result of imagining what it is like for the target, where this involves some information about the situation of the target and some information about the character of the target, and E is either the same as, or akin to, the emotion felt by the target.<sup>92</sup>

I would argue, however, that this view is problematic in that it does not clearly differentiate between *owning* an emotion and just experientially imagining having an emotion. On my account empathy involves the latter, whereas the former – coming to have an emotion as a result of imagining another’s experience – would be usually a case of emotional contagion. I will discuss the distinction between empathy and emotional contagion shortly in [section 2.2.2](#). But on my view empathy is an activity limited to a certain interval of time; while we are empathising we might have emotion-like imaginings, and as a result be able to tell that the target feels like *this*. However, it is not necessary that *I* should feel like *this* *after* I finish empathising.

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<sup>92</sup> Matravers, 2017a, p.80.

Of course I can always modify the account of narrow empathy in such a way as to reflect the point that empathy refers to the empathiser *imagining having* a certain emotion; and I could also modify it in such a way as to not include a veridical condition. In this case I would come up with what I could call ‘narrow\* emotional empathy’:

Narrow\* emotional empathy occurs when an empathiser experientially imagines an emotion E as a result of imagining what it is like for the target, where this involves some information about the situation of the target and some information about the character of the target, and E is what the empathiser believes to be either the same as, or sufficiently akin to, the emotion felt by the target.

What is not clear is why single out emotions, of all the dimensions of experience, as being the sole domain of empathy. Emotions are just one dimension of experience, and what is said about emotions above applies just as well to any of the other dimensions of experience. We just have to substitute ‘emotion E’ for any other dimension of experience. Narrow\* emotional empathy has no more claim to being any more special than, say, narrow\* cognition empathy, or narrow\* proprioception empathy, and so on. Maybe narrow\* emotional empathy would be more *important* since emotions play such a huge part in our lives which some other dimensions like, say, proprioception for most intents and purposes do not. But this is merely accidental; there is no *conceptual* argument to say that narrow\* empathy is in any way primary empathy, or a different kind of activity, or even worse, the only thing that deserves the label ‘empathy’ altogether.

Not everyone thinks that feeling a particular emotion is a necessary feature of empathising. Sometimes people distinguish between ‘affective’ and ‘cognitive’ empathy; the way the distinction is usually drawn is that affective empathy involves recreating your ‘purely affective’ states, and cognitive empathy is when

I recreate your ‘purely cognitive’ states.<sup>93</sup> I do think, however, that instead of thinking that there are two separate distinct activities – that of cognitive empathy and that of affective empathy – it makes more sense to think of cognitive empathy as the cases of empathy where I recreate only the ‘cognitive’ dimensions of your experience; and of affective empathy as the cases of empathy where I recreate only the ‘affective’ dimensions of your experience. It is easy to see, once we have put things in this way, that both purely cognitive and purely affective empathy would by definition be more limited, less-involved instances of empathy. For example, any empathy that does not involve the affective dimensions at all would be from the start a very restricted form of empathy. By contrast, any more involved act of empathising would involve recreating *both* some cognitive and some affective dimensions of experience.

In conclusion, on my account there is no special connection between empathy and the emotions. However, *most* instances of empathy will involve recreating another’s emotions just because of how important emotions are in most cases of daily life. If I want to recreate your experience, i.e. imagine what it is like to be you, it seems that my recreation will be severely limited if I do not try to recreate your emotional state; but perhaps, on most occasions at least, it would be less limited if I do not recreate, say, your proprioceptive state. Thus, even if on my account there is no special connection between empathy and the emotions, the majority of cases of empathy would involve recreating the other’s emotions.

### 2.1.3.3. How empathy works: a model.

When I recreate your experience in my imagination, the produced recreation can be more or less complete in the sense that it can involve more or fewer dimensions of your experience. For example, in a certain case I might empathise with you by focusing on your current thoughts and beliefs; other times I might

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<sup>93</sup> The divide between ‘cognitive states’ and ‘affective states’ seems questionable at best, not the least because emotions according to many accounts involve judgments, but I will let it pass.

only focus on your affective states; and yet other times I might be trying to empathise as completely as possible, recreating as many dimensions of your experience as I can take on board.

When I empathise with you I take on certain dimensions of your experience that I am aware of and I imagine what it is like to be experiencing them. When I recreate the dimensions of your experience whose value I know, I will turn my awareness to other dimensions of experience whose value is unknown to me. My claim is that these unknown values will have been 'automatically' as it were, filled in, by my embodied intelligence. They would not just feel blank to me, but rather, when I turn my awareness to these dimensions of experience, I would be inclined to think that they are one way rather than another; I would be able to have a certain guess about their value; certain guesses about their value would seem more 'natural', or more 'likely' to me, than others. This is so because just as various dimensions of experience go together in certain ways, obeying their own loose 'logic' as it were, so too would various dimensions of experiential imagination go together, mimicking these relations.

The assumption here is that imagination and reality work similarly, but this assumption does not seem hard to grant. Such an assumption seems to dominate discourses on empathy, for example Matravers recently assumed that 'the patterns of causation are preserved when we move from online to offline'.<sup>94</sup> Similar hypotheses exist in the philosophy of imagination, for example the 'single code' hypothesis according to which beliefs and imaginings are represented similarly, and processed similarly.<sup>95</sup> In a similar vein, I assume that experientially imagined dimensions of experience bear the same causal relations to other experientially imagined dimensions, as do the non-imagined dimensions of experience to other non-imagined dimensions of experience.

Hence when I am empathising, I am recreating via experiential imagination certain dimensions of your experience. I experientially imagine being in a state in which these dimensions of experience have the values that I know of. Now

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<sup>94</sup> Matravers, 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Davies and Bicknell, 2017.

that I have recreated a particular experience in my imagination, I can turn my awareness to other features of this experience which I am, in my imagination, undergoing. Hence I can discover what the values of some other dimensions of this imagined experience are. For example, say that I know you have strong feelings toward X, and I wonder how you feel when you see a photo where X is with someone else. If I recreate in my imagination having strong feelings towards X, and seeing this picture of X, if I turn my awareness to other dimensions of this recreation, I will figure out that my heart has dropped in my chest, and from here would be able to tell that this is what, very likely, you are actually experiencing when seeing this picture.

Of course, I might be able to infer *that* your heart has dropped in your chest via reasoning alone, and without recreating your experience. This is true especially in trivial examples like the one above. Reasoning does certainly get me a long way in developing an awareness of the experience you are undergoing. But what is happening in empathy can get me *even* further than reasoning *alone*, which is already quite far. When I empathise with you I am using my reasoning, but I am *also* using my embodied intelligence in order to become aware of aspects of your experience which I was not aware of. Because I am imagining *what it is like to have* a certain experience, rather than merely imagining *that* something is the case, I have a *stronger computational power* at my disposal – I do not only use my pure reasoning, but also my entire bodily intelligence in order to develop an awareness of what it is that you are experiencing. To compare: if I know that you are experiencing a certain emotion, in imagining what it is like to experience this emotion, I do not merely infer from my body of knowledge what kind of aspects of experience this emotion is likely to be associated with; rather my affective states feel in a certain way, and my body tenses in a certain way too. And in this way, for example, I might be able to become aware that you are experiencing a certain kind of emotion or somatic state, or cognitive state. My instruments in the endeavour of figuring out what you experience are not limited to drawing relations between propositions. I draw from more, and more varied, resources, in the case of recreation. In fact I draw from as many resources as I possibly could – I involve my whole bodily intelligence. Thus we

are more likely to be able to ‘solve’ how another person feels/thinks/etc. in any particular moment, just because we draw from everything we have at our disposal.

I take it that my model here resembles what is usually seen as a virtue of simulation theory in the debate about how we make sense of other minds.<sup>96</sup> What makes simulation theory elegant is that it does not need to postulate an additional mechanism for how we come to be able to understand other people – we use our own selves for that. If I want to predict what you are going to do next, I do not need to have an (implicit) theory for how people in your situation tend to react. I merely need to imagine *being* in your situation, and see what ‘I’ would do next. What I take from this discussion is that predicting others’ behaviour can be very similar to predicting one’s own immediate behaviour, and in this case what does the job is not only inferential reasoning. It seems that rather it is our entire selves that produces the predictive ‘output’ which we can often just ‘feel’ without actually inferring it. The elegance of simulation theory is that according to it we use our own selves as ‘devices’ on which to ‘run’ a ‘simulation’ of another’s experience. Since our own selves are already ‘devices’ on which we ‘run’ our own experiences, and since we are similar to other people in important ways, this ‘simulation’ is likely to give reliable results.

One hidden premise in this model is the assumption that people are wired similarly in important ways. But I think that this assumption is easy to grant. The fact that fictions work, for example, that people tend to understand characters in fiction, and to experience similar emotions towards similar things, show that really, despite subtle differences between individuals, there are important senses in which the way dimensions of experience are related in the case of one individual would be similar to the way they are related in the case of another individual. Of course, sometimes differences in, say, the psychology of two individuals would be so big that empathy could fail to produce accurate results. However, this does not mean that the accurate results are *in principle*

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<sup>96</sup> For an overview of the simulation theory versus theory theory, see Barlassina and Gordon, 2017.

not achievable by empathy. It is just that, in this case, I will perhaps need a much more detailed input in order to recreate your experience accurately.

In this section I provided a model of how empathy works. According to it, empathy does not just consist in recreating dimensions of experience whose value I know to begin with (the 'input'); rather, empathy can also provide me with a better awareness of other dimensions of your experience that I was not aware to begin with.

#### 2.1.3.4. Can imagination surprise us?

One possibly controversial assumption in the model outlined above is that it is possible that I am not aware of everything going on in my imaginative recreation; rather I just become aware of things which I am already recreating, but I was not aware of before. I described the way in which I turn my attention to various dimensions of the recreated experience and 'find' what some of the values that have been 'automatically' assigned to these dimensions were. But one might be sceptical of this; one might suggest that it is not possible to recreate something without being aware of it.

I hope to assuage this worry with an example. If you are an actor entering a character you might discover things about your character after you have entered the role, from the way you have yourself acted that character. This is due to the fact that the various dimensions of experience are interrelated, and with them, the various dimensions of imagining an experience. Thus, when I imagine feeling, say, grief, and if I act out – in my mind, or in reality – that grief it will manifest itself with my walking in a certain way, holding my hands in a certain way, and so on. Some of this will, of course, be initiated by my conscious directing myself. However, some of it will also come 'naturally', as it were, 'intuitively' in such a way as I might not be aware that I am, say, positioning my hands in a certain way which is consistent with the emotion of grief; perhaps I am consciously attending to other dimensions of the character's experience, such as the thoughts which I imagine the character to be having right now, or



the phenomenological feel of the emotion of grief. I need not be explicitly aware of *all* the dimensions of experience; some of them might be merely on the verge of my awareness, since they have created themselves ‘naturally’ from everything else that I am imagining; and as such, dimensions which are clearly a result of the imaginative project, yet not necessarily part of my awareness and not necessarily initiated intentionally by me.

Presumably it is more likely that this happens in a more involved, full-fledged imagining rather than in a non-involved or more superficial imagining. If I have only a couple of dimensions of experience as inputs, they will be compatible with so many values along the other dimensions, it would be harder for my simulated experience to be able to ‘automatically’ choose just one value among all the possibilities. If all I know about you is that you are sitting in a neutral position, talking with an even voice, since this is compatible with you undergoing a range of experiences, maybe I have little chance of inferring via empathy what the other dimensions of your experience might be like. In this case the data I am presented with as an input is compatible with too many other possibilities. However, once I start having a more solid body of input, then the possibilities for the other dimensions of your experience will become fewer, and eventually a particular set of values for these dimensions might naturally suggest itself.

## 2.2. Defining empathy in negative terms.

Here I will define empathy in negative terms by contrasting it with two phenomena related to but distinct from empathy: sympathy and emotional contagion.<sup>97</sup> In the following two sections I will contrast empathy with sympathy and with emotional contagion in turn.

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<sup>97</sup> Vignemont and Jacob, 2012.

### 2.2.1. Empathy and sympathy.

Almost any contemporary account of empathy begins by drawing a distinction between empathy and sympathy.<sup>98</sup> This is not surprising given that as we saw above ‘sympathy’ was once used to refer to something similar to what ‘empathy’ refers to today. Also the word ‘sympathy’ comes from Greek *sympathes* ‘having a fellow feeling, affected by like feelings’<sup>99</sup> and if indeed one thinks that a fellow feeling is at the heart of sympathy, there is little wonder that the distinction between empathy and sympathy is not straightforward and in need of special attention. For example sometimes it is difficult to say whether something is an instance of sympathy or empathy. If I feel sad as a result of being told that you are suffering and in pain, have I experienced sympathy or empathy? It could be sympathy if I feel sad for your situation. It could also be empathy if my sadness is a result of attending to your experience of suffering. Perhaps I am both sympathising and empathising, but which is which?

It seems important to draw the distinction between empathy and sympathy carefully. As already discussed empathy is here understood as the activity of recreating another’s experience in one’s imagination. By contrast, I will understand sympathy as a particular type of emotion, akin to pity, usually felt at witnessing another’s suffering. This is in line with common usage of the word ‘sympathy’ today.<sup>100</sup> From this, as well as from definitions of sympathy in the literature, there emerge at least three dimensions along which sympathy and empathy differ.

First, sympathy, unlike empathy, is restricted to cases of misfortune.<sup>101</sup> You do not express sympathies with one’s happiness. The case of feeling for another’s good fortune is sometimes referred to as ‘sympathetic joy’ or ‘symhedonia’.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Cuff et al., 2016, p.145.

<sup>99</sup> As found in the Online Etymology Dictionary, [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com), accessed 18 September 2017.

<sup>100</sup> For example the Oxford Dictionary of English definition of ‘sympathy’ is: ‘Feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else’s misfortune’. Oxford Dictionaries English online, accessed 18 September 2017.

<sup>101</sup> Some want to extend the term ‘sympathy’ to include cases where the target is undergoing a positive experience, see e.g. Maibom, 2014.

<sup>102</sup> Royzman and Rozin, 2006.

By contrast, when I empathise with you, I am experiencing in my imagination an experience like yours and there are no restrictions about the nature of your experience; it can be a positive or a negative experience, and in either case I would be able to empathise with you.

Second, sympathy is characterised by an interpersonal distancing, a kind of separation between the sympathiser and the 'target' of sympathy.<sup>103</sup> This has led some philosophers to characterise sympathy as a third-personal response.<sup>104</sup> One way to succinctly capture the intuition here is to say that whereas empathy is feeling *with* another, sympathy is feeling *for* another. Related to this point, as I will argue later in [Chapter 5](#), empathy can provide us with what I call a feeling of 'togetherness' and in this sense sympathy is a third-personal response, whereas empathy is not.

Finally, in empathy one imagines what the other is feeling, whereas in sympathy one does not.<sup>105</sup> Therefore the difference between sympathy and empathy is sometimes spelled out by introducing something like what Vignemont and Jacob call the 'interpersonal similarity condition' which is the condition that 'the empathizer's affective state stands in some relevant similarity relation to her target's affective state'.<sup>106</sup> Only if this condition is met we can say that empathy has taken place. Whereas I agree with the intuition here, I would be wary of introducing an interpersonal similarity condition in the way in which Vignemont and Jacob propose. For it might be possible that when I sympathise with you I happen to have very similar affective states to yours, for example if I am sad about you, and you happen to feel sad about your own situation at the same time. But this would not be enough to make what I am doing empathy rather than sympathy.

Therefore I find that a better way to draw the distinction between empathy and sympathy is to focus on the fact that empathy is an imaginative activity which

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<sup>103</sup> Meyers, 2017.

<sup>104</sup> A proponent of this view is Goldie who stresses the separation in the cases of sympathy which is unlike cases of empathy, where there is 'identification' with the target of empathy. Goldie, 2002.

<sup>105</sup> Meyers, 2017.

<sup>106</sup> Vignemont and Jacob, p.305.

has a particular aim – to recreate another’s experience; sympathy, on the other hand, does not have an aim – it is an affective response. Even if the two might occasionally result in my having the same thoughts, feelings, and experiences, the ways I have arrived at these would be different in the two cases. For what I am doing in empathy is trying to imagine your experience and what I am doing in sympathy is feeling a particular way towards you which might or might not result from my having an experience like your experience. Also from this it is easy to see why it would be inappropriate to think of empathy as an emotion even if some philosophers speak of empathy as a ‘moral emotion’.<sup>107</sup> Sympathy, on the other hand, can be more plausibly described as an emotion.<sup>108</sup>

This way to differentiate between sympathy and empathy – observing that empathy, unlike sympathy, is a very specific kind of imaginative project – is one from which the other differences mentioned above can be inferred. For example if I see a beggar, sympathy would be my feeling sorry for them, whereas empathy would be to imagine what it is like to be them, which might or might not result in my feeling sorry for them.

Empathy might or might not bring sympathy about. Empathy can lead to sympathy, but it need not. After I empathise with you I might realise that you are in pain, and feel sympathy. Also sympathy can lead to empathy: I might be told you are in pain, feel sympathy, and this might prompt me to empathise. However, empathy and sympathy are independent: I might empathise without feeling sympathy and vice versa.

With this I hope that the delineation between empathy and sympathy has been made clear.

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<sup>107</sup> See for example, Gruen, 2015.

<sup>108</sup> For example Goldie is a proponent of the view that ‘sympathy is the quintessential moral emotion because it combines concern for the other with a disposition to help’. Meyers, 2017.

### 2.2.2. Empathy and emotional contagion.

Another phenomenon which is sometimes conflated with empathy or seen as a kind of empathy is emotional contagion. Emotional contagion occurs when I catch another's emotional state; it is called contagion since 'we catch the emotion of the other much like we can catch a contagious disease from the other'.<sup>109</sup> An example is being in the presence of someone who is in panic, and picking up that panic ourselves; or starting to feel cheerful just by virtue of being in cheerful company.

Emotional contagion typically happens without the knowledge of the subject.<sup>110</sup> It can happen to us without our awareness of the cause of the emotion, or even without our awareness of our being in a particular emotional state at all. Let us say I am in the company of certain people and start feeling anxious as a result of emotional contagion. I might be aware of my anxiety, but not be aware that I have picked up the anxiety from the people around me who are themselves anxious about something. Alternatively I might not become aware of my own anxiety at all. Finally, it is also possible that I am aware of my anxiety and correctly identify it as the result of emotional contagion from those around me. However, my awareness usually comes after the change of my emotional state as a result of contagion, instead of it guiding that change. In this sense, emotional contagion operates at the sub-personal level.<sup>111</sup>

As in the case of sympathy, a good way to differentiate between contagion and empathy is by virtue of the fact that empathy is an imaginative activity with a particular aim whereas contagion is not. We can say that contagion is simply that which happens to us whenever we take on another's emotion unintentionally; contagion is not an activity. If I deliberately decided to take on your emotion, and managed to do so via guiding myself in this process, we would not call that an instance of contagion. Contagion is not an imaginative project, whereas empathy is.

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<sup>109</sup> Hardy, 2017, p.896.

<sup>110</sup> Gallagher, 2012a, p.359.

<sup>111</sup> Matravers, 2017a, p.21.

Still, if we think of empathy as something that can occur at the sub-personal level too, emotional contagion would be similar to this kind of empathy, since both of them would involve taking on another's emotions without one's awareness. In this thesis empathy is understood as an involved, voluntary activity, but on some accounts empathy happens when a spontaneous and occurring without our awareness sharing of another's emotions takes place. In light of this it is not surprising that some consider contagion to be a basic form of empathy.<sup>112</sup>

But even in the cases of empathy accounts where empathy can be spontaneous and occurring at a sub-personal level, there is still a relevant distinction that can differentiate between this sub-personal empathy and emotional contagion. This is the important fact that in the case of emotional contagion, unlike in the case of empathy, I end up *owning* the emotion. Consider the example where you enter the room, beaming with happiness. There are two different things that might happen to my emotions as a result. One is that I might, as a result of emotional contagion, start feeling happy myself. In this case I will own the emotion of happiness. The other is that I might empathise with you and as a part of that imagine feeling happy. But this is not my own happiness, and after I am done empathising, I will not necessarily feel happy myself. My momentary experience of the emotion of happiness was merely part of the activity of empathising, and the happiness is not something I own, or that I can ascribe to myself. Therefore contagion and empathy can be clearly differentiated by the fact that in the case of contagion, unlike that of empathy, I always end up *owning* the emotion.

I take it that there is a clear distinction between experientially imagining being in an emotional state and owning that emotion. Aspects of existence and their imagined versions are sufficiently alike but also they are hard to confuse with one another. Imagining feeling sad is different from actually feeling sad. This is perhaps not uncontroversial. For example, Currie and Ravenscroft hold that emotions are 'transparent to imagination' and if I read them right, what they

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<sup>112</sup> See e.g. Gruen, Maibom, Prinz, Slote.

are saying is that imagining having a certain emotion can be the *same as* actually having that emotion. For example, they say: '[t]here is no imagining that has an amusement-like character; there is only being really amused'.<sup>113</sup>

However, I do not find this claim convincing. I think that emotions that I imagine are clearly to be distinguished from emotions that I own. Goldie already noted that Currie and Ravenscroft's view seems quite implausible for the case of at least certain emotions, e.g. fear.<sup>114</sup> I can imagine what it is like to be afraid, but this does not mean that I am actually afraid. However, one might think that Currie and Ravenscroft's point holds for other kinds of states, perhaps some of the other emotions, like their own example of amusement.

But I think that even in the case of amusement I can imagine being amused without actually being amused, e.g. I can imagine being amused at a joke which I actually find boring and predictable. I think Currie and Ravenscroft's suggestion might be partially right, in that there are perhaps certain *aspects* of emotion that might indeed be transparent to imagination. I am inclined to think that certain phenomenal features of emotions might carry over from the real emotion to the imagined emotion, and what I have in mind is certain affective states, perhaps best thought of as feelings or sensations. For example, I would suggest that the warm fuzzy feeling in one's chest which accompanies certain positive emotions like love or joy, might be present in equal measure in the imagined, as well as the real emotion. It seems to me plausible to suggest that experientially imagining these kinds of love or joy might involve creating this warm fuzzy sensation in one's chest which sensation itself might be indistinguishable from the sensation when one actually owns the emotions of love or joy. However, this occurrent feeling is just one feature of the emotion, and there seems to be little doubt that imagined love or joy are different from love or joy that one owns. Therefore I take it that even if certain aspects of emotions are transparent to imagination, there are still significant differences between owning an emotion and imagining having that emotion.

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<sup>113</sup> Currie and Ravenscroft, 2002, p.190.

<sup>114</sup> Goldie, 2004.

So I take it that for the case of emotions, there is a clear distinction between owning an emotion and imagining being in an emotional state. Therefore empathy and emotional contagion can be clearly distinguished on the basis of ownership of the emotion.

In fact, contagion might even co-occur with empathy, but the two things would still be distinct. Empathy might occasionally *result* in our owning the other's emotions for ourselves. Empathising can end up affecting one's own emotions in a way in which one is not necessarily aware of the change of one's own emotional state, resulting effectively in a kind of emotional contagion. For example, sometimes one can get so engrossed in recreating another's experience that one starts owning some of the recreated emotions for oneself. I will discuss this possibility further in [Chapter 4](#) where I discuss criticisms against empathy. But even in this case the activity of empathising is clearly distinguishable from emotional contagion which is merely one of the effects of this activity.

In conclusion, contagion and empathy are two distinct things that should not be confused.



## 2. 3. The skill of empathy.

In this section, I will discuss empathy as a skill. I will begin by outlining what a skill is. Then I will discuss what exactly it is that a skilled empathiser is skilled at, in other words, what the skill of empathy involves.

### 2.3.1. What is a skill?

Skill has received relatively little attention as the object of analysis within contemporary analytic philosophy.<sup>115</sup> Only recently skill has become of interest, and mostly with regards to the question of how skill relates to knowledge.<sup>116</sup> For example reductive virtue epistemologists have sought to define knowledge in terms of skill, an example being Sosa's account of knowledge as apt performance; to this contrasts the view that skill is definable in terms of knowledge, an example being Stanley and Williamson's claim that skill is a disposition to know.<sup>117</sup> Another question that has been asked of the relation between skill and knowledge concerns not whether one is definable in terms of the other, but whether one is prior to the other in the order of explanation, that is whether skill requires knowledge, or knowledge requires skill. Known as intellectualism is the view that knowledge is prior to skill, an example being Stanley's view that skilled action is guided by propositional knowledge.<sup>118</sup> The opposing view, which Dickie has termed 'anti-intellectualism', reverses the order of explanation and holds that skill comes before knowledge – the knowledge that the skill *manifests* is explainable only in terms of the skill and not in any other way.<sup>119</sup>

Even in this recent discussion little has been said about what skill *is*. A lot of what has been said about skill has been in terms of a negative definition, e.g., contrasting skill with propositional knowledge. Thus Ryle who arguably equates skill with knowing how, famously argues that knowing how cannot be

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<sup>115</sup> Stanley and Williamson, 2017.

<sup>116</sup> Pavese Carlotta, 2016.

<sup>117</sup> Stanley and Williamson, 2017.

<sup>118</sup> Stanley, 2011.

<sup>119</sup> Dickie Imogen, 2012.

defined in terms of knowing that. In an essay where he famously distinguishes between knowing that and knowing how, he seems to identify skilful actions with actions that manifest know how.<sup>120</sup> Since a skilful action is an action that manifests skill, Ryle appears to be using skill and know how interchangeably.<sup>121</sup>

In terms of a positive account of skill, little more has been said than that a skilled agent is one who non-accidentally does the action well. Thus, Ryle says that an agent who *knows how* to do something, is the agent that, when they do that thing, do it well:

What is involved in our descriptions of people as knowing how to make and appreciate jokes, to talk grammatically, to play chess, to fish, or to argue? Part of what is meant is that, when they perform these operations, they tend to perform them well, i.e. correctly or efficiently or successfully. Their performances come up to certain standards, or satisfy certain criteria.<sup>122</sup>

This is the commonsense observation that a skilled agent is one that performs or can, at will, perform the action they are skilled at well. More recently, Dickie provides a 'bare-bone' account of practical skill which is what she takes to be the 'uncontroversial fragment' every full account of practical skill will share.<sup>123</sup> According to this account, you are *a skilled agent* at X if your intention to X reliably generates a pattern of behaviour which, unless your situation is unlucky, will result in success.<sup>124</sup> A skilled *action* is just 'an action arising in an appropriate way from the skill of a skilled practitioner'.<sup>125</sup>

One feature of one's being a skilled agent is the reliability of the result of the action. Skill implies a certain degree of success. As Dickie phrases it, if you are skilled at X, you can reliably generate a pattern of behaviour that, unless you are unlucky, will result in a successful X.

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<sup>120</sup> Ryle, 2009.

<sup>121</sup> Pavese Carlotta, 2016.

<sup>122</sup> Ryle, 2009, p.17.

<sup>123</sup> Dickie Imogen, 2012, p.738.

<sup>124</sup> Dickie Imogen, 2012.

<sup>125</sup> Dickie Imogen, 2012, p.739.

There are other features commonly associated with skill. One of them is that skill is usually associated with a non-reflective character; for instance Stanley and Williamson hold that it involves knowledge states one can act on automatically.<sup>126</sup> The view that a skilful action is one executed automatically is not without controversy; there is debate as to whether this performance is truly automatic, or involves a degree of reflection.<sup>127</sup> But even the more intellectualist accounts of skill agree that skill involves and depends on some automatic non-knowledge based components. Also it seems uncontroversial that the skilled action is one executed relatively ‘effortlessly’ with less deliberation than its non-skilled counterpart. E.g. on Dreyfus’ view, the distinction between a merely proficient, and an expert performance, is that the latter is void of the agency; the expert does not need to deliberate what to do; they just ‘see’ it.<sup>128</sup>

Another feature of skill is that skilled actions are situation-specific, i.e. skill involves more than just repeating the same action over again. Skill entails being able to respond skilfully ‘in an infinite number of ways to the infinite number of possible situations’.<sup>129</sup> In particular it involves being able to respond to *novel* situations.<sup>130</sup>

Finally, even though the way skills are acquired is a matter of debate<sup>131</sup>, one thing which is definitely not questioned, is that skill is the paradigm of a thing which can be improved with practice.<sup>132</sup>

My account of skill is fairly minimalist. It embraces all of these features without committing to an intellectualist or anti-intellectualist picture of skill. I am not committed to the intellectualist claim that in order for an action to be skilful,

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<sup>126</sup> Stanley and Williamson, 2017.

<sup>127</sup> See e.g. Stanley and Krakauer (2013) for an argument for the view that skill involves reflection.

<sup>128</sup> Stanley and Krakauer, 2013.

<sup>129</sup> Toner, 2017, p.3.

<sup>130</sup> Stanley and Williamson, 2017.

<sup>131</sup> E.g., Stanley and Krakauer (2013) hold that skills require instruction or observation of someone else.

<sup>132</sup> Stanley and Williamson, 2017.

it has to be guided by knowledge. And I am not making a commitment to the anti-intellectualist picture either.

I will merely mean, by saying that one is skilled at X, that one is able to reliably do X well, where ‘well’ means effortlessly and successfully, in all kinds of possible, including novel, situations.

By extension, to say that one is skilled in empathy here means no more than that: if you try to empathise, you will reliably, unless unlucky, do this well (effortlessly and successfully), and you will be able to do this well in various, including novel, situations.

However, empathy is a complex process involving many things, and even though I have said what I mean by the claim that ‘you are a skilled agent’, there is the question to ask of what, more specifically, it means to be skilled *at empathy*? I will turn to this question now.

### 2.3.2. What it means to be skilled at empathy?

Separate from the question of what a skill is in general, there is the question of what *the skill of empathy* is, more specifically. I will address this question now.

Empathy is the recreation in one’s imagination of another’s experience. In the previous section I claimed that to say that one is skilled at X means that one reliably does X well (effortlessly and successfully) whenever one does X. But it is not clear what it means to say that one is skilled *at recreating another’s experience in one’s imagination*. To be skilled at empathy would mean that one reliably empathises *well*.

Given the model of empathy provided above in [section 2.1.3](#) there are a couple of things that can be said about empathising well; that is, there are a few factors that can distinguish between instances of relatively better empathy and of relatively worse empathy. First, better empathy would presumably involve the recreation of *more* rather than *fewer* dimensions of the other’s experience. One ability that would help with making this the case would be the ability to

perceive these dimensions in the first place, so that the input to one's empathising be more multi-dimensional; for example, if you tell me what you are going through, I could empathise by merely recreating the things that you tell me; but presumably my empathy would be even better if I also, independently, perceive certain aspects of your experience, e.g., the intonation of your voice, your posture, and other things can tell me more about what you are going through. Second, better empathy would involve some grasp of how the various dimensions of the other's experience go together; it would not be enough simply to recreate various dimensions of another's experience but presumably this recreation would be accompanied whenever possible by some kind of grasp of the connections between the dimensions. One way in which this grasp can be manifested is in the ability to fill in gaps in the other's experience – that is, to infer information about the dimensions of the other's experience that one does not have information about to begin with. Third, better empathy would involve relatively fine-grained distinctions between different values of the dimensions of experience. For example, whereas in a relatively worse instance of empathy, I can recreate your emotional dimension as having the value 'sadness', my empathy would be better if I recreate your emotional dimension in a more fine-grained way, having a more specific value, like 'misery', or 'depression', or 'melancholy'. This requires the ability to differentiate between the phenomenology of different experiential states even where the differences between states might be subtle.

From these three factors which can be used to distinguish better empathy from worse empathy we can infer a few empathy-specific abilities that would enable one to be a skilled empathiser. Since empathy is a complex process which involves many different things, to be skilled at empathy would mean that one is also skilled at some, or all, of these things. Here is a potentially inexhaustive list of abilities that enable one to empathise well:

1. The ability to detect experiences in others;
2. The ability to differentiate the phenomenology of different experiential states;

3. The ability to see connections between various aspects of a person's experience, manifest in the ability to figure out dimensions of another's experience where information about these dimensions was not available as an input.

Any of these three abilities enable one to empathise well.

#### 2.3.2.1. The ability to detect experiences in others.

It seems reasonable to suggest that in order to be able to recreate another's experience well, one should be able to reliably generate inputs to this recreation. For example, in a face-to-face interaction, it seems very important that one is able to 'read' another person well, to accurately infer their experiential state from e.g. body language, facial expressions, intonations, gestures, and so on. In general in order to recreate well another's experience, one has to be sensitive enough to have the right *input* to one's imaginative enterprise. And this ability to detect things which are not served on a plate, as it were, seems to be something we can become better at with practice, it can become spontaneous and effortless, and we can just come to just 'see', say, the emotion in another's face, or the discomfort in that twitch of the hand, and so on. Being better able to immediately 'see' the other's emotion, rather than needing to infer it in some process, seems like a good candidate for being an instance of perceptual learning – perhaps there is a skill of attentional weighting and or stimulus imprinting which is involved there. Perception can be learned, and the way we see and hear things can be modified.<sup>133</sup> Whether or not an instance of perceptual learning, or of a perception-based skill (the distinction is sometimes hard to draw<sup>134</sup>) the ability to pick up dimensions of others' experiences seems to enable one to empathise well.

This perceptiveness is sometimes a necessary *prerequisite* for good empathy. I cannot empathise if I do not have inputs hence the skill of obtaining inputs is important for empathy. However, I do not think that this skill is *essential* to empathy, since empathy is about recreation rather than detection of inputs,

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<sup>133</sup> Goldstone and Byrge, 2015.

<sup>134</sup> Connolly, 2017.

therefore the skill of empathy does not *essentially involve* the skilful detection of others' emotions. This is similar to the way in which an important prerequisite for skilful empathy might be that one is, say, an attentive person, or someone who has good powers of concentration; yet neither of these two is essentially a part of the skill of empathy as such. For example, I can *in principle* empathise well with you even if am terrible at reading faces, body language, and so on. If you had told me directly what you are going through in sufficient detail, say, in a written letter, I would still be able to empathise well. Therefore perceptiveness to *inputs* is not part of the *essence* of empathy.

Yet, the person skilled at empathy will be one good at detecting dimensions of the other's experience for themselves prior to empathising. This is so because the skilled empathiser is one who is able to empathise well in a range of circumstances, including in novel situations, and since the overwhelming majority of situations would be situations where the inputs to empathy would not be served on a plate to the empathiser, the ability to detect experiences in others will be crucial if one is to become a skilled empathiser. It is the empathiser rather than someone else, who is the person seeking out inputs to their recreation of the other's experience. Nor are these inputs limited to the *very beginning*, before one has started empathising. For example if I start empathising with you and as a result figure out that you are anxious, I will actively seek out features in your behaviour that might betray the level and kind of anxiety you are experiencing; these features might have escaped my notice had I not already figured out you are anxious in the first place. In this sense the importance for good empathy of the ability to detect experiences in others cannot be disregarded. It is an ability important not only *prior* to empathising but *during* empathising as well, and even if it is in principle possible to have an instance of *good* empathy where no detection of the other's experiences took place (and in this sense the detection of inputs for one's recreation is not *essential* to empathy), a *skilled* empathiser will have the ability to detect the other's experiences.

### 2.3.2.2. The ability to differentiate between different experiential states.

Skilled empathy involves being able to represent in one's imagination with a fine enough detail what another's experience feels like<sup>135</sup>. This involves being able to differentiate between (the phenomenology of) subtle nuances of feelings, between slightly different thoughts, and being aware of all kinds of bodily sensations, subtle changes in affection, differences between seemingly similar beliefs, and so on – that go hand in hand with this experience. This skill is important, since many emotions cannot be clearly distinguished between without the help of actually recreating the entire complex of affective and cognitive state. It is not just fear, it is a specific kind of fear, at a specific thing, experienced in a specific way. Therefore in order to be able to put one's finger on what another is actually feeling, it might be needed that one accurately represents inside the way another's state feels like.

The ability to make fine-grained distinctions between different experiential states has two merits. One is that my recreation of your experience would have the chance to better represent your experience, because I would represent it in a higher resolution, as it were. Say you are being positively excited about something. If I am empathising in low-resolution mode, which is a worse instance of empathy, I might just recreate a general emotion of happiness together with expectation. Alternatively, if I empathise better, I would empathise in higher resolution mode, and will recreate the *specific* kind of joy you are experiencing. I will be sensitive to the fact that while one kind of joy feels like *this*, another feels like *this*, and the two feelings, albeit similar, are actually distinct.

The second merit of this ability is that I would be able to interpret well the outputs of my own recreation. Again, I would be able to produce a high-resolution image of the unknowns of your experience. In a worse instance of empathy, the output of my recreation would be that you are experiencing a kind

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<sup>135</sup> Like Baker, I use 'feel' in a broad sense here: 'the "feeling" referred to in the empathic ascription is not intended to stand for merely the affective states or emotions of the target, but rather the indeterminately wide-ranging phenomenal character of what it is like to be the target.' Baker, 2016, p.44.



of negative affect. This is a fairly broad-brush suggestion of what you are going through. However, in an instance of better empathy, I would produce a higher-resolution image of what you are going through. If I am good at differentiating between the phenomenology of different experiences, I will be able to do that, since I will be able to be aware of the state in a finer detail – e.g. I will differentiate between different kinds of misery, melancholy, anguish, and so on.

### 2.3.2.3. The ability to see connections among various aspects of the human experience, manifest in the ability to fill in gaps about the other's experience.

Skilful empathy involves one's having a grasp of how various elements of the human experience interact with one another. For example, how one emotion is likely to impact another, what kind of emotion goes with what kind of judgment, what kind of thought generates what kind of bodily feeling, and so on. This grasp need not be anything more than an intuitive grasp of how different aspects of a person's experience fit together.

Even though skilful empathy might manifest such an understanding, I think it is hard to speak about 'the skill of understanding' as such. This is so because in the case of empathy (as opposed to, say, the case where one's goal is to build a theory about the human experience) it seems that this understanding is not manifested in any other way apart from one's being able to accurately portray another's experience, and to accurately 'fill in' any unknowns in another's experience. So even though it might be reasonable to suggest that skilful empathy is a manifestation of a deeper understanding, I think there is little that can be said about it apart from how it is manifested more concretely through the ability to fill in the unknown 'gaps' of the other's experience.

Empathy is the activity of recreating another's experience in one's imagination. As already argued, one's experience is multi-dimensional. Part of empathy is the recreation of dimensions of experience which are known to the empathiser at the start of the activity – they are the 'input' for empathy – but this does not exhaust the activity of recreation. An essential part of empathy is also the

recreation of dimensions of experience which are not initially available to the empathiser as an input. Essential to the skill of empathy is the ability to 'fill the unknowns' of what another person's experience is like.

The skill to figure out the 'extra' information which one did not have to begin with, follows from one's grasp of the complex ways in which different aspects of a person's experience can affect one another. Arguably, through practice one can come to have a kind of intuitive understanding of how the machinery of one's experiences holds together. One becomes better able to just imagine certain dimensions of another's experience and see what values along the other dimensions of experience would fit in the unknowns of the equation.

This skill is related to the ability to differentiate between different experiential states. In a skilled imaginative recreation the 'extra' information will somehow 'fall off' almost automatically, of itself, as it were. And what helps with that is one's being able to internally accurately imagine just how a particular experiential state feels like. The idea is that one does not use *only* one's knowledge-that in order to figure out what a particular, unknown, aspect of another's experience 'must be' like. One uses the intelligence of one's entire self, one's embodied intelligence. For example, if one begins by knowing particular dimensions of another's experience (e.g. that the other is undergoing a certain emotion) one then recreates these dimensions in one's imagination (I imagine having that emotion), and then turns one's awareness inward, to become aware of what the other dimensions of the state one has just recreated would be like (e.g. what sort of desire I, the person having that emotion, would have). Therefore the ability to differentiate between the phenomenology of different experiential states is an important part of the skill of 'filling in unknowns' in another's experience.

The kinds of 'unknowns' that empathy would aim at filling can be various. They can be any of the dimensions of experience. But also, temporally, these unknowns can be simultaneous with the known dimensions of experience, or, alternatively, they can be in the future or past to the known dimensions of experience. This would result in three different projects that empathy can help

us achieve. One, the primary one, is to fill in the unknowns in the present moment – I know about certain dimensions of your experience at a point in time  $t$ , and am figuring out what the other dimensions of your experience at the same point in time  $t$ , are.

However, empathy can also help us achieve any of two other projects – about the past or the future.

#### *2.3.2.4.1. Using empathy in order to predict the future.*

In one case I have information about your experience now, and am using my re-creation of your present experience in order to predict what experience you would have in the future. This would only be possible in so far as your future experience depends on your present one. Usually this would be the case when predicting the immediate future.

Of course, filling in gaps as regards the future is less reliable than filling in gaps as regards the present because at any moment in time a lot of factors might intervene and change one's state. The phone might ring, or one might suddenly have a thought that does not in any obvious way relate to anything one was experiencing up to this moment. However, this does not make prediction hopeless.

I would argue that when it comes to predicting the *immediate* future there is little distinction between predicting another's immediate action, and the already discussed filling in the gaps of another's *current* experience. In both cases we start with what we know and work our way toward filling the unknowns of another's experience with what seems intuitively the thing that will best 'fit' the model. The only difference is that in the case of prediction the unknowns are situated in the immediate future as opposed to being about the present moment. But in both cases the mechanism of inference is the same.

At least for some of the dimensions of experience, there is a sense in which one's immediate future actions are already somehow encoded in the present. As argued by Gordon declarations of our own immediate intentions are not products of inferences from premises; a rather more plausible explanation of

our success rate in predicting *our own* immediate behaviour is that our predictions are ‘causally tied to some actual precursor of behaviour’.<sup>136</sup> If we are able to predict our own immediate behaviour, it seems that if I recreate in my imagination *your* present state, I could be able to figure out what you are likely to do next. There is no disjunction, no ‘gap’ between the present moment and the immediate future, that we need to bridge in order to know what will happen next – the immediate future is somehow contained in the present. If in my recreation of your experience I have recreated the dimensions of your experience which would be a psychological spring of immediate action, I would be as well placed as you are, to predict what your next experience would be like.

Therefore, empathy seems like it could be useful for predicting the immediate future. The skilled empathiser would almost inevitably be someone who is able to do that well enough. Perhaps, in the case of certain particularly gripping experience, empathising with these experiences well might enable a skilled empathiser to predict another’s state even beyond the immediate future. However, this is beyond the scope of what the skill of empathy as such involves.

#### *2.3.2.4.1. Using empathy in order to reconstruct the past.*

In the other case I have information about your experience now, and am trying to figure out what your experience was in the past, preceding your present experience. Say you were very angry with someone today; can I use empathy in order to understand what it is that caused this anger? I think the answer is yes. In this case the use of empathy is more laborious than in the previous one; I run various possible scenarios of what your preceding experience could have been like, and see which of these would result in my having the same experience as you are having now.

In this sense using empathy in order to reconstruct the past is secondary to using it in order to predict the future. We only experience time passing forwards; so when I start with a recreation of your experience right now (being

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<sup>136</sup> Gordon, 1986, p.159.

angry at someone) it would be more natural for me to predict what you are going to experience next, as opposed to what you have experienced already.

In order to use empathy for reconstructing the past, I will need to empathise with a few different hypothetical versions of your past self. Each version will have an experience which I suspect you might have had. Then in each of these activities of recreation, I will try to predict whether 'I' am likely to end up having your current experience.

Matravers has recently made a similar distinction between two kinds of project. One is where we know the other person's situation and we want to figure out what they will decide to do, e.g. if we see a friend outside a restaurant window reading the menu, and we are trying to figure out if they will choose to walk in. The other is where we know the other's reaction and from it try to figure out what the other's experience was, e.g. a friend who turns around during a hike, and we are supposed to infer that they have seen a grizzly bear. In the former project (the 'process strategy') we imagine being our friend and try to see what they will decide, whereas in the latter project (what after Goldman he calls the 'generate and test strategy') we have the end-result of a state and are trying to figure out what triggered it.<sup>137</sup> The former case exemplifies what I would call the primary use of simulation, and the latter might involve running many simulations, and running the former project many times – I hypothesise what your initial state might be, and then use simulation to see whether it would lead to the behaviour I have actually observed.

Even if being skilled at empathy might result in us being good at action prediction (predicting the future or reconstructing the past), still prediction is not essential to what empathy is since prediction is not part of empathy. One might be a skilled empathiser and empathise well with another, yet fail to predict their next steps because this is not their goal, and also because sometimes one's subsequent experiences are not intimately connected with one's present one.

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<sup>137</sup> Matravers, 2017a, p.33.

## 2.4. Conclusion.

In this chapter, I provided an account of empathy as recreating another's experience in one's imagination. On this account empathy is experientially imagining having the experience of the other. I pointed to the fact that experience is multi-dimensional and I made the important assumption that various dimensions of experience affect one another in ways which obey their own inherent loose 'logic'. Therefore I argued that since experiential imaginings are parasitic on experiences, they are also going to be multi-dimensional, and they are going to mimic the loose logic in which various dimensions of experience affect one another. Hence I proposed the following model of how empathy works: when I empathise with you, I input in my imaginative recreation of your experience those dimensions of your experience about which I have information (i.e. whose value I know) and then, when I recreate in my imagination those dimensions of your experience, certain values of the other dimensions would suggest themselves, because the experientially imagined dimensions of experience would obey the loose logic which dimensions of experience obey.

In this chapter I also distinguished empathy from sympathy and from emotional contagion, and finally, I spoke of empathy as a skill. I argued that being skilled at empathy would involve being skilled in three things – detecting experiences in others, differentiating between different experiential states, and seeing connections among various dimensions of experience. The final skill manifests itself in the ability to figure out what certain dimensions of another's experience must be like, given what one already knows about other dimensions.

In the following chapter I will argue that empathy has epistemic value. I will argue that this activity of imaginative recreation allows us to attain some epistemic goods.

### 3. The epistemic value of empathy.

In this chapter I will argue that empathy is epistemically valuable in three ways: it is valuable as a source of information about (1) other people, (2) objects in the world that are independent of the experiences of other people, and (3) oneself.

As regards how these values relate to one another, the second kind of value is parasitic upon the first. It is in this sense a secondary value. Because of what empathy is – recreating in one’s imagination the experience of another – the ‘direct’ or primary epistemic value of empathy is related just to understanding what the other person is experiencing. Empathy as a tool for learning things about the world is valuable only by virtue of one’s *having already* understood how another person feels.

I will discuss the three different values of empathy in the three sections that follow.

#### 3.1. Empathy as a method for understanding others.

In this section I will argue that empathy is a valuable tool for understanding other people.

In daily life we seem able to understand each other 'on different levels, without always being able to explicate what it is that we understand, or why we feel a certain way for this or that person'.<sup>138</sup> In what follows I will try to capture certain aspects of this understanding.

What sorts of things about another person can we learn when we empathise? According to the model outlined in [Chapter 2](#), we start with a certain input about another’s experience, i.e. information about some of the dimensions of their experience, then we imaginatively recreate that person’s experience, and the output of the process is information about what some of the other

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<sup>138</sup> Straver, 2007, p.43.

dimensions of that person's experience are like. Via empathy we can learn that certain dimensions of the other's experience feel like *this*.

In what follows I will argue that empathy is a useful tool for understanding others since it is a powerful and user-friendly method of navigating the complexity of the human experience. First, I will argue that the epistemic goods obtained by empathy are better thought of as understanding rather than knowledge. Then I will argue that empathy is a user-friendly tool for attaining an understanding of others. Finally, I consider three challenges to empathy as a reliable method of attaining understanding of others.

### 3.1.1. The status of the epistemic goods we arrive at via empathy.

First I will discuss the epistemic status of whatever it is that we arrive at via empathising. I will here argue that these epistemic goods are better thought of as understanding rather than as knowledge.

A reductionist would disagree with this move since reductionism about understanding treats understanding as a species of knowledge.<sup>139</sup> An example of a reductionist position is a view common in philosophy of science, according to which understanding is seen as a knowledge of causes.<sup>140</sup>

There are other views apart from reductionism: for example many epistemologists deny that understanding is a species of knowledge at all.<sup>141</sup> For example Pritchard argues that understanding and knowledge of causes can come apart in both directions - one can have knowledge about the cause of *X*, without understanding *why X*, and vice versa.<sup>142</sup> He argues that understanding, unlike knowledge, is a cognitive achievement, and is harder to acquire than knowledge.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Sliwa, 2015.

<sup>140</sup> Pritchard, 2014.

<sup>141</sup> Grimm, 2006.

<sup>142</sup> Pritchard, 2014.

<sup>143</sup> Pritchard, 2014.



There are positions that sit somehow in between the two views of reductionism and non-reductionism. Grimm, on his ‘grasping account’ of understanding<sup>144</sup>, argues that understanding is essentially a knowledge of causes, but a non-propositional one. Because of the knowledge element in this account, one might be tempted to classify Grimm’s position as a reductionist one, however, according to Grimm, it is also the case that understanding requires ‘a distinctive excellence of the mind’ which is one different from ‘introspection or memory, or rational inference, or perception’ or anything which is required for knowledge as standardly understood.<sup>145</sup> Therefore I am more tempted to think that Grimm is really expanding the extension of the term ‘knowledge’ rather than arguing that understanding is something reducible to other, more familiar kinds of knowledge, such as the justified true belief model.

It is not my intention to partake in the debate between reductionism and non-reductionism about understanding. Rather, I merely want to claim that the nature of the epistemic goods obtained via empathy seems to be better captured by that which on several accounts counts as ‘understanding’ rather than ‘knowledge’. Whether or not this ‘really’ is, for example, just a special kind of non-propositional knowledge, is of little interest to me here. But it seems to me safer to adopt the term ‘understanding’ when speaking about the epistemic goods obtained via empathy, because the term ‘knowledge’ might carry connotations of something more specific, and because, as I will now show, at least a couple of accounts of understanding seem quite suitable candidates for capturing the nature of the epistemic goods obtained by empathy.

One of these accounts is Grimm’s account which I already mentioned. On this account understanding is seen as ‘grasping’ a ‘modal space’ around an event<sup>146</sup> – the essence of understanding lies in our ability to entertain possibilities of differences. This contrasts with knowledge, which could be more atomistic:

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<sup>144</sup> Pritchard, 2014.

<sup>145</sup> Grimm, forthcoming.

<sup>146</sup> Grimm, forthcoming.

Thus you might know that Trenton is the capital of New Jersey, or that you had eggs on toast for breakfast this morning, but it would sound odd to say you understand these things. It is also not obvious that if you bundled several items of knowledge together—at least, items of propositional knowledge—that this would magically yield understanding. Thus you might know a lot about the sport of cricket, or about helicopters, without really understanding cricket or helicopters. Understanding thus seems to require not just holding several related things before the mind, but in some way “seeing” or “grasping” or appreciating this relatedness.<sup>147</sup>

To use Grimm’s example, I understand why a helium balloon rises in the air if I am able to appreciate that it is the helium, rather than something else, that made the balloon rise. I am able to appreciate some relations of dependence that hold in the world: that if the balloon was filled in with a different gas, it would not have risen; that if the balloon was of a different colour, that would not have made a difference to its rising; and so on. It is in this sense that understanding is, according to Grimm, knowledge of causes: understanding is about appreciating ‘how changing the value of some variables will lead to changes in the focal event, while changing the value of other variables will not’.<sup>148</sup> I think that this captures something central to the epistemic goods which empathy yields. When I imagine what it is like to be you, what I gain, epistemically, is an appreciation of how certain dimensions of your experience affect others; of what certain dimensions of your experience *could* be like, given what I already know about the others. Since what I seem to grasp is some kind of relation of dependence, it seems proper to say that, on Grimm’s account, via empathy we ‘understand’ people, rather than that we ‘know’ them.

Another account of understanding which seems to capture something essential about that which empathy gives us access to, is that of Zagzebski. According to her, understanding, unlike knowledge, is not directed at a discrete proposition,

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<sup>147</sup> Grimm, forthcoming.

<sup>148</sup> Grimm, forthcoming.

but it is about seeing relations between various parts in a bigger scheme of things; it is about ‘seeing how the parts of that body of knowledge fit together’.<sup>149</sup> Grimm refers to Zagzebski’s account as ‘internalism’ about understanding – a view according to which understanding is ‘a matter of grasping or seeing connections among one’s beliefs’.<sup>150</sup> On this view, understanding lies in the relation of mental states, rather than in some actual correspondence between my mental states and the world outside of me. In other words, something is an understanding not in virtue of being an accurate representation of how things actually are in the world, but rather in virtue of fitting in with one’s own system of beliefs. In this sense on Zagzebski’s account understanding has ‘internalist conditions for success’.<sup>151</sup> According to her, understanding is not directed at a discrete proposition, but it is about seeing relations between various parts in a bigger scheme of things. This makes understanding a suitable candidate for what we obtain via empathy.

Given that Grimm’s and Zagzebski’s accounts both seem to capture features of the epistemic goods obtainable via empathy, from now on I will refer to the epistemic goods attained via empathy as ‘understanding’ rather than as ‘knowledge’.

### 3.1.2. Empathy as a user-friendly method of understanding another.

Here I will argue that empathy is a user-friendly method of understanding another’s experience. Empathy’s particular value lies in its allowing us with relative ease to navigate the complex landscape of human experience. In this regard I will now try to show that empathy compares favourably, as a means for obtaining understanding of another person, with the alternative means of merely reasoning about another’s experience.

Empathy is just one particular method for attaining understanding of another person, and in [Chapter 2](#) I already provided a model of how empathy works.

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<sup>149</sup> Zagzebski, 2001, p.244.

<sup>150</sup> Grimm, 2006, p.518.

<sup>151</sup> Zagzebski, 2001, p.246.

Briefly, according to this model, when I empathise with you, I ‘input’ information about certain dimensions of your experience, I recreate these dimensions of experience in my imagination, whereby I figure out that it feels like *this* to be you, where ‘this’ is not limited to the dimensions of your experience I already had information about at the start, and the ‘output’ of empathy is information about certain other dimensions of experience about which I did not know to begin with.

I already argued above in [section 2.1.1.1](#) that the different dimensions of experience influence one another in complex ways. In light of this complexity, it is not a straightforward task to figure out, from information about what certain dimensions of another’s experience are like, what *other* dimensions of another’s experience are like. I would argue that empathy is better suited for achieving this task than reasoning alone is.

The argument for this is that, given the complexity of the human experience, for any two dimensions of experience there is a low likelihood that I am able to help myself to a good theory about how certain dimensions influence others. Granted, there are cases where pure reasoning alone might be well suited and sufficient for me to be able to ‘fill in the gaps’ of your experience. Sometimes dimensions of experience are related to one another in ways of which we are well aware, and with which we are very familiar. For example, I do not need to empathise with you in order to know that your hunger would make you angry if you discover that someone has had your lunch. In certain cases reasoning alone seems to be a very good method of attaining a certain understanding of you.

However, I would argue that the use of reasoning is limited to a restricted range of scenarios. It is only in some cases that I will be able to reliably help myself to my reasoning in order to ‘fill in the gaps’ of your experience because we can only reason about scenarios about which we have certain theories about how different dimensions of experience go together. By contrast, in empathy I am making use of my own bodily intelligence, hence there is no restriction on the sort of situation I can empathise with, because all that is required is for me to

imagine having the same experience. No matter what the input dimensions are, and no matter what the output dimensions I am interested in learning about, empathy would in most cases result in me having at least *some* guess about what way your dimensions of experience may be like. In this sense empathy would be likely to give me an output, no matter what the initial conditions of the scenario are. The reason for this is that whenever I imaginatively recreate certain dimensions of experience, my recreation would always result in my having a certain guess about what the other dimensions of experience are. This is so because I *myself* am a being who has multi-dimensional experiences, and whenever I recreate certain of the dimensions of a possible experience, I will 'automatically' as it were fill the rest of the gaps. The human experience does not tolerate vacuum; as long as my recreation is a recreation of a real human experience, my imagination will fill in the gaps of all dimensions of experience. Hence empathy is particularly useful in attaining an understanding of others because it allows us to 'see' connections between dimensions of human experience *even* in cases where we have no relevant 'theory' about how the particular dimensions fit together.

One thing that could strengthen the case for empathy as an epistemic method of attaining understanding of others is the observation that human experience is so complex that for the most part, we are in no possession of a theory of how different dimensions of experience fit together. When I want to learn something about dimensions of your experience, it might be better for me to empathise with you rather than rely on reasoning alone just because reasoning alone might sometimes not yield much information and I might risk 'missing out on' some ways in which certain factors are relevant to how you experience things. What I have in mind here is something similar to one of the arguments put forward by simulation theorists. According to this argument, simulating the states of others is a more plausible candidate for making sense of them than theorising about these states, because there is no theory of relevance that we

can appeal to in order to figure out which of their thoughts are relevant at a particular moment.<sup>152</sup>

There is no theory which can tell us which of our vast web of beliefs might bear on our thoughts. That is, there is no theory of relevance. However, we have the remarkable ability to follow a train of thought and judge ‘from the inside’ whether or not a thought is relevant.<sup>153</sup>

The simulationists therefore believe that in order to figure out which of the other’s beliefs are relevant, we use ‘the same ability as we use to spot which of *our* innumerable beliefs are relevant’.<sup>154</sup> This ability does not consist in appeal to a theory. If it is plausible that there is no theory of relevance, one can argue in a vein similar to that of the simulationist argument, that theorising about another’s experience might not often help us make sense of how various dimensions of that experience go together. If so, empathy would seem particularly valuable for making sense of another’s experience.

Another value of empathy as a method of attaining understanding of another’s experience, is that it is ‘user-friendly’. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that I can help myself to a theory about how the various dimensions of your experience go together. In other words, let us assume that I would not ‘miss out on’ any possible connection between the different dimensions of your experience that I am interested in. In this way, I know from the start that empathy and pure reasoning are two routes that would take me to the exact same destination, where I would have, in the end, the exact same understanding of your experience (I will discuss in the following section why this is a controversial assumption to make, but I am making the case for empathy hard here for the sake of argument). My claim that empathy is more ‘user-friendly’ in this analogy amounts to the claim that one of the two routes is smoother, or easier to follow. In particular, what I have in mind, is that empathy makes use of the entire ‘machinery’ of myself. I am already this complex system – this

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<sup>152</sup> Matravers, 2017a, pp.30–31.

<sup>153</sup> Matravers, 2017a, p.31.

<sup>154</sup> Matravers, 2017a, p.31., italics mine.

being, which has multi-dimensional experience. Since I already have this 'machinery' for outputs at my disposal anyway, it seems a neater and more user-friendly tool for my producing information about your experience, than attaining and making use of a theory of human experience. This theory will be incredibly complex, if it is possible to produce at all, and it does not seem like the most 'efficient' way of making use of the tools that I already have at hand – my own complex of bodily intelligence, that I have. Instead, if I only use reasoning in order to attain an understanding of your experience, I will need to have produced a 'duplicate' mechanism in order to reply to the very same questions to which I could have replied by not producing such a theory in the first place.

In this sense there are two points here. One is that helping myself to such a theory would be needlessly burdensome, given that the theory will have to be very complex. If I want to make use of this theory in an efficient way, I will have to simplify it and hence run the risk of over-simplifying. The second point is that empathy is just 'easier' and more 'natural' to us, in a similar way in which, say, looking at a diagram explaining something might be 'easier' and more 'natural' to us than reading a couple of pages explaining the same thing.

The point that we can use our own selves, rather than a theory, in order to understand others, is one of the main strengths in the simulation theory versus theory theory debate about the way in which we 'mindread'. Part of the elegance and appeal of ST is precisely in the fact that it does not stipulate an additional body of knowledge – a theory – in order to make mindreading possible. All we need to have is all that we already have anyway – our own minds, equipped with the imagination which we use already anyway in order to make plans and/or predictions about our own selves. There is no need for analogical inferences since in the case of simulation we use 'the same intentional scheme that makes our endogenous responses intelligible to ourselves'.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Gordon, 2005, pp.105–106.

With this I hope to have shown that empathy is a more user-friendly means of attaining understanding of another person than pure reasoning is. I also hope to have shown that empathy is less epistemically risky than not empathising in attaining an understanding of another person. Of course, in practice this latter point does not amount to much. If I am interested in attaining an understanding of you, and if I have the time resources to empathise with you, I probably also have the resources to theorise about your experience – this is so, because theories we employ in reality are likely to be sufficiently simple anyhow.

This mode of apprehending is particularly ‘user-friendly’: according to Steinberg experience is ‘not the exclusive reservoir of certain kinds of facts, but rather is a particularly colourful and user-friendly mode of apprehension’.<sup>156</sup> On this account part of the epistemic value of empathy comes from its user-friendliness.

### 3.1.3. Does empathy give us extra understanding?

Above in [section 3.1.2](#) I argued that empathy is a user-friendly tool of attaining an understanding of others. I assumed that empathising with you is just one route of getting to an understanding of you, and understanding is in principle achievable via alternative routes as well.

In this section I will discuss the question of whether empathy actually generates a special kind of understanding which is not one usually achievable via alternative means. Following Steinberg I will refer to the view that empathy is the exclusive way for us to acquire a certain understanding of others, as ‘exclusivism’.<sup>157</sup>

There is one sense in which exclusivism might seem trivial to defend. After all, empathy gives us access to phenomenal facts, which are ‘facts that are uniquely tied to an experiential perspective, which cannot be captured from the third-

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<sup>156</sup> Steinberg, 2014, p.53.

<sup>157</sup> Steinberg, 2014, p.52.



person impersonal perspective'.<sup>158</sup> One feature of subjective experience is that certain states, such as seeing red, have the property that it is like something to be in them; typical examples of such states include 'perceptual experiences, bodily sensations, felt emotions, and felt moods'.<sup>159</sup> These states have phenomenal content, or 'what-its-likeness' which is arguably a property not reducible to other properties. Empathy involves recreating your experience in my imagination, and hence it involves an access to the what-its-likeness of your state; it involves my appreciation that your experience feels like *this*. If I am grasping your experience without trying to feel the 'what-its-likeness' of it, I am trivially missing an aspect of your experience. Unless I recreate the what-its-likeness of your experience in my imagination, and am able to make the demonstrative ascription that you feel like *this*, there will be something about your experience that I am not appreciating – namely, that you feel like *this*. I cannot get at this phenomenal content via mere theorising.

This much seems uncontroversial. Empathy involves entertaining phenomenal content in our imagination. In so far as having access to the what-its-likeness of your experience is seen as itself being epistemically valuable, then there can be little doubt that empathy has special epistemic value, since unlike alternative means of learning about your experience, it provides me with the epistemic good of having access to the what-its-likeness of your experience.

A different question is whether, leaving aside any potential epistemic value of having access to the what-its-likeness of your experience, empathising with you leaves me in any sense epistemologically better than merely having true beliefs about what it is like to be you. Does empathy aid me in gaining access to epistemic goods (beyond learning about the what-its-likeness of your experience) to which I would otherwise not have been likely to gain access?

At least for certain aspects of experience the answer to this question seems negative. Sometimes it seems that there is little if anything that I can learn from empathy over and above what I can already learn via theorising alone. This is

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<sup>158</sup> Steinberg, 2014, p.52.

<sup>159</sup> Sytsma and Machery, 2010, p.301.

so in particular when I am concerned with dimensions of experience of which we do not usually think as having an associated phenomenal character. For example, thoughts, beliefs, and certain desires are of this kind. Therefore I do not need to empathise with you in order to appreciate how your various thoughts and beliefs fit together. If I know that you like ice-cream and that you heard the ice-cream van parking outside, I will know that you want to go outside now. I do not need to recreate your experience in order to be able to tell this.

However, for other dimensions of experience it seems more plausible to suggest that empathy is especially valuable epistemically. It is best to consider the case of emotions here, both because they are so complex, and because they play such a crucial role in the human experience. We might reasonably wonder whether the recreation of the phenomenological aspect of an emotion is not epistemically better in order to learn about your experience, than merely theorising about this experience. I will now argue that yes, in general, this is the case.

The way an emotion ‘feels’ is an important feature of emotional experience. According to the largely rejected ‘dumb view’ of emotions, emotions just are dumb feelings, which are not related to any ‘content’.<sup>160</sup> Presumably, if we adopt such an account of emotion, as long as I am aware of the content of your emotion, I would gain nothing by imagining its phenomenological feel as well. However, this view is largely rejected; and on virtually any other account of emotion, the feel of an emotion is in some essential way tied to the content; it either makes us aware of this content, or carries this content itself. If something like this is correct, then it would be hard to deny that empathy, which involves my recreating having the emotion in my imagination – a task that involves imagining the phenomenal feel of an emotion, as opposed to just reasoning about its contents – would leave me in a better epistemic position than merely theorising about the emotion. If I do not empathise with you, I would just fail to grasp something essential about your emotional experience, and this will

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<sup>160</sup> Jaggard, 1989.

leave me with smaller chances of understanding how the various dimensions of your experience fit together.

However, even if one adopts a view according to which knowing about the content of an emotion is sufficient for me to understand the emotion fully, there is still a reason why recreating the feel of an emotion might be valuable. Recreating the feel of an emotion might help me understand your experience, since the feel of your emotion will likely play an important part in your experience, for example, it might affect other dimensions of your experience. Hence if my task is to understand you, it seems that taking on board the phenomenal feel of your experience could be of help in this understanding, by virtue of the simple fact that the 'feel' of certain dimensions of your experience would affect other dimensions of your experience. For example, if you are sad and depressed, you might not be able to eat for no other reason than that you are feeling nausea. The inability to eat is not part of the content of your sadness in any way. But the mere *feel* of nausea would stop you from eating. Hence, insofar as recreating the phenomenological feel of various dimensions of your experience is helpful in order to appreciate how various dimensions of your experience fit together, then recreation is epistemically valuable.

I take it that Matravers makes a similar point when he argues that in order to be able to predict another's actions, it is better to actually empathise than merely theorise about them, since 'the causal properties of a mental state depend on more than its propositional contents'.<sup>161</sup> Since the phenomenal feel of an emotion might have some causal properties, empathising is helpful if we want to replicate the causal role of an emotion.

Despite what I have just said, empathy still seems in many cases not necessary. For example, Matravers argues that, provided that I am already familiar with a given emotion then it could be the case that merely believing that you have the emotion is just as good, epistemically, as my undergoing it.<sup>162</sup> This is so because, presumably I am not going to learn anything new about the what-its-likeness

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<sup>161</sup> Matravers, 2011, p.30.

<sup>162</sup> Matravers, 2011.

of undergoing this emotion so I might be able to theorise about any of the relevant properties of the emotional experience without recreating in my imagination your having the experience. Maybe feeling the what-its-likeness of the emotional experience would not help me understand you better, in this way. Perhaps it is enough to have sufficiently specific descriptors of the experience instead; if the descriptor of the emotion is as specific as it needs to be in order to capture the particularity of the emotion<sup>163</sup> it seems that theorising about it would not 'lose' information relative to our recreating it in our imagination anew. For example imagine the situation where one talks to a close friend who is experiencing a similar emotional episode several times. Perhaps one does not need to empathise anew in each and every case; one already knows one's friend well enough, and let us say that one is familiar first-hand with a very similar emotion. Then, perhaps, merely talking with the friend and obtaining true beliefs about their emotional states might be just as good, epistemologically, as empathising and having the experience of their emotion. In this case I think that Matravers is right to suggest that, if the observer is already familiar with another's emotion, their undergoing it would not be placing them in an epistemologically better position than their having merely beliefs about it.

I think that it is true that recreating another's experience in many cases does not put one in an epistemically better position than had one not recreated this experience. However, this does not mean that as a general strategy, empathising is not less epistemically risky. After all, in most cases we are dealing with, there will be no way of knowing in advance whether the emotion the other is undergoing is something we are already familiar with. And in most cases our existent theories of how various dimensions of experience affect one another would not be precise enough. Thus, unless we empathise, there will be a risk of us missing out on attaining some understanding. Even if it turns out that in certain cases we could have had the same epistemological data had we merely entertained beliefs about the other's emotions, rather than empathised,

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<sup>163</sup> It is a whole different question of whether complex emotions can have sufficiently good descriptors, but let us assume that they do.

this is not something we could have known at the moment of deciding whether to empathise with them, or not. So, in a way, empathising is always a safer epistemic strategy, in the sense of there will be a lesser risk of missing out on understanding of others.

### 3.1.4. Does one need to adopt a distinctive methodology in order to make sense of human beings?

There is one other avenue one could explore if one wants to hold that empathy grants us exclusive access to a certain understanding of others. Namely, it is possible to hold the view that something in understanding *people* in particular essentially depends on our recreating their experiences rather than merely theorising about them. I will discuss this briefly now.

One can hold the view that understanding people requires a distinctive methodology from that required to understand other things in the world, such as natural phenomena, or how a bicycle works.<sup>164</sup> This refers to a sphere of understanding that Heal calls our ‘personal-level account of psychological understanding’<sup>165</sup> – in other words, understanding something about others at the personal level, as opposed to, say, the biological level. Grimm refers to the view that ‘there is something distinctive about understanding human beings’ as the ‘humanistic stance’.<sup>166</sup> This contrasts with the ‘naturalist stance’ – the view that there is nothing special about understanding people as opposed to understanding other things, as for example, how a bicycle works.

A reason to find this view appealing is that people have first-person perspectives; therefore, in order to get as full a picture of another as possible, one might need to ‘see’ from the perspective of that person’s point of view, instead of satisfying oneself with merely looking at them ‘from the outside’. In other words, one might need to empathise. If what I learn about you when I empathise is not reducible to what I learn about you via merely looking at you

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<sup>164</sup> See, e.g., Grimm, forthcoming.

<sup>165</sup> Heal, 1998; Barlassina and Gordon, 2017.

<sup>166</sup> Grimm, 2016, p.210.

‘from the outside’, understanding people via empathy seems to be a good candidate for a distinctive methodology suitable for understanding other people. In this sense empathy might have a special epistemic value; perhaps it is this activity that can uniquely give us access to a full-fledged understanding of others.

In a similar vein Gordon argues that there is a limit to a third-person, spectator approach to understanding human behaviour and there are certain facts that we only get to know via simulation as opposed to seeing someone from the outside.<sup>167</sup> He uses the following example: we notice that Sam runs on certain nights, and discover that those are the nights when there is a gibbous Moon. To spot the correlation between there being a gibbous moon and Sam running at night is not sufficient to understand *why* Sam is running on these nights. We will only understand why Sam is running on these nights when we gain access to that which is Sam’s *reason* for running on these nights. And being able to understand how something could be a reason for Sam requires us to be able to see it as a reason ourselves, if we were Sam. If we ask Sam why he runs on certain nights, and he just tells us that he runs because there is a gibbous Moon, we still would not be able to understand why he runs on these nights. In order to understand we have to be able to climb into Sam’s head, as it were, and understand how the connection between running and a gibbous Moon makes sense to him. I take it that it is in this sense that Gordon argues that simulation is necessary to represent other minds; arguably this is so since a necessary part of representing something as having a mind is to represent it as a subject of experience, or as a ‘generic “I”’. But:

To represent something as another “I” is to represent it as a possible target of self-projection: as something one might (with varying degrees of success) imaginatively put oneself in the place of.<sup>168</sup>

If it is indeed essential to our understanding of others as minded to see them ‘as another “I”’ this would necessitate the possibility to self-project into them.

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<sup>167</sup> Gordon, 2000.

<sup>168</sup> Barlassina and Gordon, 2017.

Thus, according to Gordon, simulation is essential to our seeing others ‘as another “I”’. Thus, one might wonder whether there is not something central about *being minded* that is somehow ‘missed’ by alternative means to understanding someone, means other than recreating them ‘from the inside’. However this might be, empathy as understood in this thesis certainly does not seem necessary in order to understand others as minded, since presumably, in order to empathise with someone, one already understands them as minded in the first place.

### 3.1.5. Understanding different people.

One of the challenges that has been levelled at empathy as a means of attaining an understanding of others is that it cannot account for differences between different people. The thought is that if my psychological make-up is very different from yours, my imagining what it is like to be you will not yield any understanding of you that accurately represents your experience. Matravers considers this to be one of two main challenges to empathy as a route to knowledge.<sup>169</sup> It is that the person we are empathising with might be very different from us: they might have an entirely different make-up, different character, and some of their properties might be properties we have no access to - as for example, their having undergone a trauma in their childhood which left them reacting to a particular situation in an idiosyncratic way. I will borrow Goldie’s notion of ‘characterisation’ in order to refer to this complex of psychological dispositions:

Aspects of characterisation go beyond the thin notion of rational agency, which includes not only traits of character and of personality, but also intellectual traits and abilities, such as open-mindedness and quick-wittedness, and emotional dispositions, such as being compassionate towards the homeless, or loving one’s spouse.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Matravers, 2011.

<sup>170</sup> Goldie, 2011, p.308.

Following Goldman, Matravers distinguishes between empathetic perspective-shifting and in-his-shoes perspective-shifting, and suggests that only the latter is epistemically reliable.<sup>171</sup> The distinction between empathetic perspective-shifting and in-his-shoes perspective-shifting captures the difference between two activities of imagination: one in which I am imagining *being you*, and the other in which I am imagining being *myself* in your situation. Empathetic perspective-shifting is of limited epistemic reliability because people differ in their characterisations. Characterisations influence people's experiences in ways in which they are not necessarily aware of; they act as a background to one's experience, and influence one in such ways that if someone else was in my exact same situation, they would experience things differently. For example if I am confident person, I might not consider speaking in public as something that I could be anxious about. This confidence is part of my characterisation that I might not be aware of. Hence if I try to empathise with someone who lacks this confidence, I might find it hard to tell that this person might be feeling anxious because of an upcoming speech they are to give. Hence differences in characterisation are in general an obstacle to empathic understanding.

One can read the claim that differences in characterisation are an obstacle to empathic understanding in a strong way, as meaning that this difference in characterisations between people leads to a *conceptual* limitation to what empathy can help us understand about others. This is because it seems that as an empathiser I will be aware of characteristics of which you are not aware of. To use an example Matravers gives: 'If we are timid, and the other is brave, we cannot simply re-enact their thinking, as their thinking will not include the thought of bravery, and ours will'.<sup>172</sup> The point is that if you are brave, you might not be, and are likely not, *aware* of the way your action is brave, whereas I, in recreating your experience, would necessarily be aware of that. Goldie has generalised the idea: 'A cannot, as part of a consciously willed project, keep B's

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<sup>171</sup> Matravers, 2017a.

<sup>172</sup> Matravers, 2017a, p.73.



characterisation in the non-conscious background in her imaginative exercise of wondering what B will decide to do in a certain situation'.<sup>173</sup>

I consider it to be a valid observation that differences between people will yield inaccuracies in empathic understanding, and that the greater the difference between you and me, the smaller the chance I have of understanding you accurately via empathising. However, I would argue that the claim about there being a conceptual limitation in understanding someone with a different characterisation is wrong. Empathy is better able to deal with differences in characterisation than it is given credit for.

This much is true. Of course, if I want to recreate you, I will make myself aware of some of your features which you are not thinking about at this particular moment. However, I do not think that this makes it impossible for me to recreate your thinking. Even if I keep your characterisation in mind while empathising, there seems to me no conceptual barriers to me still pretending to be you; I can keep the thought of your characterisation in the background of my thinking, but this would not mean that my recreated version of you is aware of this characterisation. It seems to me that it is possible to imagine what it is like to be someone who is not aware of something which one is actually aware of; similarly, I see no impossibility in imagining what it is like to be someone who has a particular characterisation without that person – the recreated version of you in my mind – being aware of that characterisation. What does the trick here is role-playing. Even if *I* the empathiser, am well aware of your characterisation, the character I enter – which is a different persona – might not be aware of this characterisation. I agree that one cannot be not conscious of certain things, in adopting another's characterisation. However, one can still keep these things in the background; one can imagine 'forgetting' them; this seems to me to be illustrated, say, by what actors are doing when they enter a character.

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<sup>173</sup> Goldie, 2011, p.309.

Therefore, I would say that there is no *conceptual* barrier that makes it impossible for me, a very different person than you, to understand your experience. Sure, this can be very difficult, and cognitively and emotionally tasking. However, the fact that it can be difficult does not make it unachievable. Good empathy can, I would argue, at least in principle allow us to recreate the thinking of another person – provided, of course, we have the right information about their characterisation.

Once the claim about there being a conceptual difficulty in using empathy to understand others has been put aside, one can still claim that there are barriers to empathy as a route to understanding others. Maybe this task, even if not in principle unachievable, is too demanding and in reality with a very low likelihood of success. For example, the reason Matravers thinks that the only epistemically reliable activity is in-his-shoes perspective-shifting is that 'we are good at thinking counterfactually about different possible states of affairs, but not so good at taking on other value systems, or in making ourselves sensitive to those things which would trigger our affective states'.<sup>174</sup> The thought would be that because we are not good at this, the imaginative recreation would not often enough yield accurate understanding of the other's experience to make the practice of empathy as a way of understanding others epistemically robust.

Heal seems to assume a similar thing to what Matravers holds in her discussion of simulation theory of mindreading: according to Heal simulation is good for simulating cognitive states but less good for affective states; she seems to infer this from the observation that we are better at thinking about cognitive than about affective states.<sup>175</sup>

The observation that we are better at thinking about cognitive than about affective states seems right to me. But I would draw from it precisely the opposite conclusion – that when it comes to understanding others' 'purely cognitive' dimensions of experience, it is then that we can dispense with empathy since we can successfully theorise about these experiences. On the

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<sup>174</sup> Matravers, 2011, p.23.

<sup>175</sup> Heal, 2003.

contrary, when understanding another's affective states it seems that recreating another's experience is much more valuable since it can allow us access to something that we are not so good at theorising about.

In other words, where I am concerned merely with dimensions of your experience that have no associated phenomenal feel to them, I do not need empathy in order to understand you. I take it that *this* happens because some of these dimensions are transparent to imagination – for example, there are no differences between my imagining what it is like to *be* thinking a thought, and *really* thinking it. This is the intuition on which Descartes' famous *cogito ergo sum* lies – if I am having a thought, I really *am* having it; my having of a thought cannot be in a relevant sense merely an illusion.<sup>176</sup>

But whereas I agree that we are better at thinking about cognitive states than about affective states, I do not think that this goes against empathy as a route to understanding others. On the contrary – it seems to me that recreating another person's experience is much more indispensable in the case of understanding their affective states, than it is in the case of understanding their cognitive states, just because we are not so good at reasoning about affective states, and we need all the help we can get, i.e. to recruit all our capacities as opposed to merely theories about them.

In fact I take it that one of the reasons that there is no conceptual barrier to recreating in my imagination the experience of someone very different from me, is that I take there to be no *conceptual* difference between in-his-shoes and empathetic imaginings. Both cases can be seen as lying on a spectrum; the empathetic imagining is just the imagining where we take on board more dimensions of experience. Empathy is useful and *especially* so when we have to take another's character on board. Character is just an added layer of complexity, it is more demanding empathy, but in essence it is still the same.

For simple imaginings it makes little difference who the 'I' is; the 'I' is a generic 'place-holder' as it were. Take for example the thought experiment with Mr.

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<sup>176</sup> Descartes, 2010.

Tees and Mr. Crane.<sup>177</sup> Both of them arrive late at the airport and miss their flights. However, on arrival at the airport, Mr. Tees hears that his flight has been delayed and his plane has taken off only 5 minutes ago, whereas Mr. Crane's plane took off one hour ago. The question is who would be more annoyed. If we put ourselves in the shoes of Mr. Tees, and of Mr. Crane, it would be easy for us to figure out that Mr. Tees is probably more annoyed about missing his plane than Mr. Crane is. True, one can arrive at the same conclusion in other ways, e.g. by observing that people in general tend to be more frustrated by missing things by a little bit than by a lot, but arriving at it via empathy seems an efficient and quick way to do it.

In this example, in which Mr. Tees and Mr. Crane are both 'place-holders' as it were<sup>178</sup>, there is no difference between in-his-shoes and empathetic imaginings, because we know so little about Mr. Tees and Mr. Crane anyway. They are no more than points of view. In this case the identity of the subject does not need to be built into the imagining. In this sense Dokic and Arcangeli's recent notion of subjective imagination can be very useful: 'That the action is my action, or someone else's, is an additional fact in the imaginary world. In other words, subjective imagination can be neutral as to the identity of the self that occupies the relevant internal perspective.'<sup>179</sup> Again, 'Subjectively imagining oneself swimming and subjectively imagining another person swimming both rest on the same type of imagining, i.e., the recreation of an internal experience of the action of swimming.'<sup>180</sup> In cases such as these it is enough to imagine *oneself* in a particular situation.

In more complex cases, where we are dealing with more 'fully drawn' characters, by contrast, where we have personalities and characterisations, there are more inputs we have to put into our imaginative recreation of a subjective experience. However, this does not make the act of imagining in any qualitative way different; and as such I do not think that only the latter case should count as

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<sup>177</sup> Kahneman et al., 1982.

<sup>178</sup> Yanal, 1999.

<sup>179</sup> Dokic and Arcangeli, 2014.

<sup>180</sup> Dokic and Arcangeli, 2014.

empathy, whereas the first should count as something else. On the contrary, it seems to me that empathy is about recreating a subjective experience in one's imagination, and whether this experience is one in which I have to *also* take another's characterisation on board would be an incidental fact. It would not drastically change the nature of the kind of task I am engaged in – recreating a subjective experience in my imagination.

In conclusion, empathy in cases where the other is very different from us will be complex, and there will be larger scope for misunderstanding, because I will need to consider the other's characterisation and more dimensions of experience, and I will need to take more things on board. Therefore, I am overall in general less likely to reliably predict what *you* are going to do than what *I* am going to do in certain circumstances. But there is no conceptual barrier here to empathy as a route to understanding others.

### 3.1.6. Similarity between imagination and experience.

There is another difficulty that Matravers identifies for empathy as a route to understanding others. It relates to the observation that there are properties of dealing face to face with a situation, which might not be something the empathiser has access to.<sup>181</sup> Matravers uses Ravenscroft's much discussed example of the rock climber here. Imagine you are witnessing a rock climber facing a difficult situation in which there is a high risk for their life. Many of us would probably think that if we empathise with this rock climber, we will feel morbid fear for one's life. However, many people when they are faced with a situation in which their own life is endangered, report being calm, concentrating all their efforts on figuring out how to save their life – in other words, it does not seem like they experience fear of the kind an empathiser might imagine. Hence Matravers observes that empathy cannot give us

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<sup>181</sup> Matravers, 2011.

adequate understanding of another, since the situation one is dealing with might have properties which the empathiser has no access to.<sup>182</sup>

But I do not think that the rock climber example goes anywhere near to showing that empathy cannot give us adequate understanding of another. It seems far more plausible to suggest that those who think that the rock climber would experience morbid fear are not empathising well enough. There is no reason to consider it impossible or in any way unlikely, that a good empathiser figures out that the person facing the perilous situation is perhaps too consumed by figuring out how to get out of it in order to spend their energies worrying about it. The only way to deny this is to claim that a situation has properties which are at the very least *extremely unlikely* to be accessed by a good empathiser, and this seems to me a very strong claim. On the contrary, it seems much more plausible that given a sufficiently good imaginative effort, one should be able to not miss the important elements in a situation.

Of course, imagining an experience would perhaps never be as phenomenally rich as actually undergoing the experience. But again it seems to me that there is no conceptual barrier that would pre-empt a skilled empathiser from picking out the most important features of an experience, and recreate those in their imagination.

### 3.1.7. The 'no new information' objection.

In this and the following section I will present two more arguments that challenge the epistemic reliability of empathy as a way of understanding others. One is that we cannot imagine things the likes of which we had not experienced before. I will deal with this challenge in this section. The second challenge is in a way precisely the opposite of the first one – namely, that imagination is not restricted to reality and we can imagine just about anything. I will deal with this challenge in the next section.

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<sup>182</sup> Matravers, 2011.

One might worry that imagination is limited to what we have experienced and therefore, via empathy we cannot gain an understanding of how certain experience feels if we had not experienced something similar before. This would make empathy's epistemic value limited as we would only be able to recreate features of another's experience the likes of which we have had before.

The first thing to note is that this challenge can be more worrying, or much less so, depending on how much similarity my past experience has to bear to your experience in order for it to be similar enough. If we allow a sufficiently broad notion of similarity to be at play here, then this challenge is not much of a worry at all, since it seems likely that any adult person would have a sufficiently big palette of experiences from which they can recreate almost any other experience. Thus, even though in a very basic sense it is uncontroversial that imagination is parasitic upon experience, this is not obviously diminishing the power of imaginative recreation. I will try to make the case now as strong as possible, for the claim that imagination is *too* restricted by what we have experienced before.

For some dimensions of experience, it seems a bit harder to claim that we cannot imagine what we have experienced before. For example, visual imaginings: we tend to be good at describing features of visual experiences, and hence have in general little trouble imagining things which we have not visually experienced before. The things that we experience visually have, for the most part, certain features, like colour, shape, and size. If I am told to imagine that a pink elephant is walking on my desk, I need to juxtapose the shape of the elephant, the colour pink, and to reduce the size; thus, even if I have not in reality visually experienced a pink elephant walking on my desk, I have experienced things with similar features – elephant, smallness, pinkness – and can juxtapose these features together; in this sense, I have had a similar experience. Since most visual experiences will have the same features – size, palette, and shape (and we are good at describing shapes) – I will in general be able to imagine almost any visual experience. Because we are good at describing shapes and sizes, and because our world today is saturated with all kinds of

colours to the extent that it does not seem wild to suggest that we have no trouble imagining almost any colour<sup>183</sup>, perhaps no visual experience is sufficiently dissimilar to any other we have not already experienced before.

However, the claim that we can only imagine things the likes of which we have experienced, seems more plausible if we are speaking about other dimensions of experience. For example, it does seem more plausible that we cannot imagine tastes or smells the likes of which we have not experienced before. How do I imagine the taste of Marmite when, as a European, I have not ever tasted anything quite like it (and quite as disgusting)? Would I be able to imagine nauseating if I had not experienced it before? The case of subtle emotions can be quite complex. Could I even actually imagine what jealousy is really until I am in love with a guy whom I suspect to be interested in someone else? Perhaps I would be able to imagine *some* kind of jealousy, but more likely than not its ravaging power would be lost to me.

Therefore, it does seem that there is certain sense in which we cannot imagine things which we have not experienced before. However, I would claim that this does not reduce the epistemic value of empathy by much. This is for two reasons. One is that what counts as 'similar enough' experience in this context is quite broad: just as the visual imagining example above shows, as long as we have the basic 'bricks' of experience (idea about basic shapes, colours, tastes, and feelings) we can reconstruct almost any experience. The second claim is it seems plausible that most human agents, at least adult ones, usually have a sufficiently varied collection of such basic 'bricks' of experience. In this sense no experience is too new or too different as to be inaccessible to someone who has had a decent range of experiences. For example, Matravers who in a discussion where he is interested particularly in the emotions, holds that empathy can give us knowledge of feelings the exact likes of which we have not previously experienced, since 'for an emotionally mature person there are no

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<sup>183</sup> But of course, if it wasn't the case that I had already seen a colour (for example, neon yellow) I would have most probably not been able to imagine what it is like to see it. One can compare this with the famous thought experiment by Jackson about Mary the colour scientist, who sees red for the first time. Jackson, 1982.



altogether novel feelings'.<sup>184</sup> Having a new experience is usually not analogous to Mary the colour scientist seeing red for the first time. Rather, it is comparable to building an entirely new structure out of the same Lego bricks that we already have.

Therefore, although some basic experiential repertoire seems necessary in order for empathy to be epistemically useful, overall even in cases where the experiential repertoire is limited, empathy could still be useful, even if not to the same extent.

### 3.1.8. The 'no restrictions to imagination' objection.

Another reason one might be sceptical of the epistemic reliability of empathy as a method of attaining understanding of others, is that imagination is in principle not tied to reality in the same way in which perception is. This is a challenge identified by Jackson as the 'up to us' challenge to the epistemic usefulness of imagination. It relies on the claim that since imaginings are under our voluntary control, therefore they cannot provide us with justification.<sup>185</sup> Presumably we can imagine just about anything we fancy, and it is exactly this fact about imagination that makes it hard to lend any epistemic authority to something we have imagined. Jackson compares the justification provided by imagination unfavourably with that provided by perception. Perception is tied to reality in a systematic way: unless something has gone wrong, my seeing a red apple in front of me tells me something about the structure of reality – that there really is a red apple in front of me. By contrast, my imagining a red apple in front of me does not tell me anything about reality, or about the way apples could be – maybe I can imagine a golden apple instead; but this does not mean that golden apples exist, and so on. Imagination, Jackson observes, is not tied to reality in a systematic way, and therefore what we imagine cannot have epistemic authority over the way things are.

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<sup>184</sup> Matravers, 2011, p.25.

<sup>185</sup> Balcerak Jackson, Forthcoming.

Since empathy is an activity of imagination, the up-to-us challenge can be applied to empathy too. One can worry that what I imagine about you is not tied to reality in any systematic way and that in this sense empathy cannot provide me with any epistemic justification. How can I be sure that when I empathise with you, and try to ‘fill in the gaps’ of your experience, that the output of my empathy has more of a claim to accurately represent your state than, say, my randomly imagining you having a certain experience? Thus one can hold that since the recreative imaginative endeavour of empathy is in a sense under our control, that is, it is ‘up to us’, therefore its output cannot possibly be epistemically justified.

Balcerak Jackson’s own response to the Up-to-us challenge is to put forward a reliabilist account of recreative imagination. She points to the fact that recreative imagination and perception have a lot in common; she thinks of imagination as a ‘recreative capacity that stands in a close relationship to our perceptual capacities’.<sup>186</sup> Imagination is, in the case of recreative imagination, mimicking reality in important ways. Part of ‘recreativism’ about imagination is the claim that ‘imaginings stand in a particularly close relation to specific other types of mental states; this relation is described as one of recreation, simulation, mimicry, or being a facsimile of’.<sup>187</sup> The aim of recreative imagination is ‘capturing the character of possible experiences’ and thus imagination mimics the structural regularities that govern perception.<sup>188</sup>

The crucial move in Balcerak Jackson’s response to the Up-to-use challenge is her distinction between a cognitive capacity and a method of inquiry that systematically exploits this capacity. It is true that imagination is a capacity to imagine whatever; however, when this capacity is exploited in a certain systemic way, as for example when we are recreating reality, this capacity will not result in just anything. Thus, if we are speaking about the systematic

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<sup>186</sup> Balcerak Jackson, Forthcoming.

<sup>187</sup> Balcerak Jackson, Forthcoming. According to Jackson, several philosophical accounts of imagination fall within the recreativist camp, such as Currie & Ravenscroft 2002, Goldman 2006, and also Williamson 2008 and Yablo 2002 (although the latter two are not recreativists explicitly).

<sup>188</sup> Balcerak Jackson, Forthcoming.

method of inquiry – recreative imagination, and in particular, empathy – then we can respond to this challenge by merely denying that an activity of recreative imagining would result in flights of fancy that are not in any systematic way tied to reality. Even though imagination is in general voluntary, up-to-us, when we are engaged in the specific project of recreating someone’s experience, there is a distinct sense in which things are not entirely up to us; if I want to recreate reality, I will not imagine a golden apple; imagining a golden apple would not be ‘up-to-me’ in this sense. The case is similar with empathy; what is up to me in empathy is the choice of which dimensions of your experience to draw my attention to, and which dimensions of your experience to use as ‘inputs’ in empathising. However, which ‘output’ would suggest itself – whether I will ‘figure out’ that you are sad, or happy, for example – would not be up to me. It would be something that suggests itself to me as a ‘fitting in’ answer to the question of what your experience is like, rather than something that I just construct out of sheer fancy.

### 3.2. Empathy is valuable for understanding the world beyond the person we are empathising with.

In the previous section I argued that empathy is a valuable tool for understanding other people. In this section I will argue that empathy can also be epistemically valuable for understanding things about the world which are independent of other people’s experiences.

In what follows, I will first explain how via empathising with you I can learn things about the world beyond your experiences. In the second section I will consider and reply to two worries one might have with the reliability of empathy as an epistemic tool in this sense.

### 3.2.1. A model: empathy as a tool for understanding objects.

Empathising with you gives me an insight into your experience. Since the way you evaluate a certain object<sup>189</sup> might form a part of your experience, empathy would allow me to understand how you evaluate this object, and thus indirectly provide me with an understanding of it myself. In what follows I will explain how this works.

Let us say that you are telling me about an episode of confrontation with one of your colleagues. If I empathise with you I will be able to form the judgment that you felt like *this* about them. What I have already learned, is that your colleague has the sort of features to which *you* would react in this way. From this, and from my knowledge of you, I might be also able to form a picture of what kind of features your colleague is likely to ‘objectively’ possess.

Note that there are two steps to this inference. First, when I figure out, via imaginative recreation, that you feel like *this* towards an object X, then I would have also figured that X is the kind of object that incites *this* feeling in you. This is the first step. It is a further step from this to form a judgment about what kinds of features X might ‘objectively’ have, or at least what kinds of features *I* might perceive X as having. In order to do the latter I need to know enough about the extent to which you are likely to react to the relevant objects in a similar way as myself. Sometimes this might be a relatively ambitious task, as for example when X stands for certain features in a person’s character, or, even worse, when X stands for a whole person. If I form the judgment that you feel like *this* towards a person as a whole, unless I know *you* very well, I would not be able to infer reliably almost anything about X, because of the complex ways in which people’s characters react to one another. At other times, however, when X stands for a singular feature of a character, or, say, a physical object in the environment to which most people are likely to have similar responses, the possibility of inferring things reliably about X is not so far-fetched. For example, if you feel like *this*, and ‘this’ involves something like unease, about visiting a

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<sup>189</sup> I use ‘objects’ in the broadest possible sense: what counts as an object would involve physical objects, but also ideas, people, situations, and other things.

particular unknown to me, bar, perhaps I do not need to know you too well to be able to infer that I, too, am likely to feel like *this* about visiting that place, to also consider the place as dodgy, and so on.

With the above examples I hope to have given a rough picture of how empathy can contribute to my understanding things about objects in the world. In order to be a bit more specific, and to be able to see what is distinctive about empathy as a route to understanding here, I will now need to say more about what your evaluations of objects are.

The model I presented above is neutral with regards to what sort of account of evaluation one holds. Because of my broad account of experience, your experience would at any moment consist of various dimensions, including your beliefs and emotions, among others. Your evaluations, on any account of evaluation, *could* form part of your experience. Empathy, being a recreation of your experience, would, no matter what account of evaluation one holds, in *some* cases at least, involve a recreation of your evaluation, and as such would provide me access to your evaluation. Once I have this access to your evaluation of X, I will know that X is the sort of thing that would cause you to evaluate it in this way, and as such I will have learned something about X. I might also take the second step of inference, but right now this does not concern us. What is in need of explanation is my gaining access to your evaluations, and, of course, what evaluations are.

I take it here that an evaluation can be any of a range of things. For example, a certain belief can be an evaluation. Maybe you believe that swimming in the river is dangerous; your evaluation of the swimming in the river is that it is dangerous. These beliefs might have no associated phenomenal feel whatsoever. If such is the case, it is not clear what is, or could be, distinctively useful about empathy as a means to getting access to these evaluations. Perhaps it is much easier for me to just ask you what you think about swimming in the river; since the content of your evaluation could be captured in a propositional form, nothing from the content of your evaluation will be lost if you just told it to me.

The interesting case is when evaluations have a phenomenal feel to them. If part of your evaluation is that you feel like *this* about X, then via empathy I will be able to capture aspects of your evaluation which could be lost to me if I relied on alternative means of getting at them. A prime example of evaluations with a phenomenal feel to them is emotional evaluations.<sup>190</sup> Emotional evaluations carry information about some of the properties of the object they are directed to; for example, ‘the evaluation of a situation as desirable or dangerous ... [entails] that desire or fear is viewed generally as an appropriate response to the situation’.<sup>191</sup> These are evaluative properties; evaluative properties are properties ‘whose recognition merits a certain sort of response’.<sup>192</sup> For example, dangerousness is an evaluative property; the response merited by something dangerous is fear ‘with all that this emotional experience involves, including thought, feeling, and action’.<sup>193</sup> In this sense emotions provide the experiential basis for values.<sup>194</sup>

Emotions have intentionality; they are about objects, and represent the world as being in a certain way.<sup>195</sup> One’s emotions often reflect some kind of evaluation, or appraisal, one has of a certain object. In the most rough form possible: if I fear X then I believe that X is a kind of object that causes fear in me; if I trust Mr X, then I believe that (or judge that) Mr X is the kind of person that inspires trust in me, and so on. Virtually all accounts of emotions agree that emotions represent the world as being a certain way.<sup>196</sup>

An important aspect of emotional experience is its phenomenological feel. This is so on literally all accounts of emotion, excluding what Prinz calls ‘pure cognitive theories’.<sup>197</sup> Different accounts of emotion assign different role to this

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<sup>190</sup> I am neutral on the question of whether, apart from emotional evaluations, there are other kinds of evaluations of objects which have a distinctive phenomenological feel to them, or whether all such evaluations could be considered emotional evaluations.

<sup>191</sup> Jaggard, 1989, p.160.

<sup>192</sup> Goldie, 2002, p.30.

<sup>193</sup> Goldie, 2002, p.30.

<sup>194</sup> Jaggard, 1989, p.159.

<sup>195</sup> Scarantino and de Sousa, 2018.

<sup>196</sup> This is in contrast to the now largely rejected ‘dumb view’ on emotions, according to which emotions are just feelings. See, e.g. Jaggard, 1989.

<sup>197</sup> Prinz, 2006, p.10.

phenomenological feel in the emotional experience, and offer different answers to how this feel relates to one's evaluation. For example, according to Prinz's view emotions are embodied appraisals – they represent objects in the environment, and the phenomenal feel of an emotion is what can make us aware of this representation.<sup>198</sup> Emotions are not 'compounds of judgments and embodied appraisals', but instead are 'embodied appraisals that have been recalibrated by judgments to represent somewhat different relations to the environment'.<sup>199</sup>

Why this matters is that depending on the account of emotion one adopts, empathy would be more valuable or less so as a tool for understanding objects in the world. What is *distinctive* about empathy as a tool for understanding objects in the world, is that it is accompanied by a phenomenal *feel*; in empathy, unlike other methods of my attaining an understanding of objects in the world, I know that you feel like *this*. I have access to the phenomenal feel of an emotion, rather than merely to, say, its propositional content – the latter being something I can access via other methods too. Therefore, if one adopts a view of emotion according to which the phenomenal feel gives us information that is not codifiable in another way, it would seem that empathy would be even more valuable as a tool for understanding objects, since it would be the only way to attain certain information about objects; whereas, if one sees feelings as a convenient 'shortcut', as it were, then empathy would be still user-friendly, but perhaps it would not be worth, as an epistemic strategy, to engage in it.

In other words, the view we hold of emotions would influence just how valuable it is for me to recreate the phenomenal feel of your emotion, in particular, whether it would be any more valuable than, say, my thinking about the emotion you are undergoing without recreating it. If an emotion's representational content can be well captured merely by entertaining propositions, then empathy would not be of any special value if I want to learn about that object X which caused a particular emotion in you. If, by contrast,

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<sup>198</sup> Prinz, 2006.

<sup>199</sup> Prinz, 2006, p.99.

an emotion's feel can tell me about the representation over and above that which can be captured by considering the emotion in a third-person way, then empathy would be very valuable as a tool for understanding X.

To give a very crude example, let us say that you are feeling love towards X. On a very simplistic model, there are two aspects to the emotion of love: the feel of a warm fuzzy feeling in your chest and the belief that X is beautiful and smart. If I wanted to understand X, it is not obvious whether experientially recreating the phenomenal feel of love would have any epistemic value to me. If I am able to access the non-phenomenal aspect of the emotion, say, your belief that X is beautiful and smart, it is not clear that recreating the warm fuzzy feeling would add anything of epistemic value to me. I have, as far as I am concerned, learned everything about the way you see X, merely by entertaining the propositional content of the emotion. Would my recreation of the phenomenal feel of your emotion give me, at least usually, something of epistemic worth, to make empathy a worth-while endeavour?

In general it is largely agreed that bifurcating emotions in two aspects – what sometimes is referred as their ‘content’ and their ‘phenomenology’ or ‘feeling’ – is problematic.<sup>200</sup> This bifurcation is an example of what Prinz calls ‘the problem of plenty’ – the problem of figuring out how it is that all the different components in an emotional episode hang together in a coherent whole.<sup>201</sup> In particular, this bifurcation between the feeling aspect and the content of an emotion is problematic if it implies that the feeling of the emotion does not carry a content. This does not seem to do justice to the fact that we can say that feelings can be appropriate or inappropriate to a certain judgment; it is not clear how to make sense of that if the feeling aspect is not bearing any content itself.<sup>202</sup> Also, *global* emotions, such as *Angst*, existential nausea, general contentedness and others, seem hard to capture by such bifurcated views of emotion (which seem to be most cognitivist accounts of emotion).<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Matravers, 2017a, p.76.

<sup>201</sup> Prinz, 2006.

<sup>202</sup> Jaggar, 1989, p.156.

<sup>203</sup> Jaggar, 1989, p.155.



Therefore, on many accounts of emotion the feeling and the content are tied together. An example would be Goldie's view of 'feeling toward'. According to Goldie, emotions are not just reducible to two separate dimensions – the content and the feeling; it is a mistake to capture the intentionality of emotions only in terms of beliefs or desires. Instead, he suggests that there is a 'more fundamental to emotional experience' intentional element which 'involves feelings which are directed towards objects in the world, typically towards the object of the emotion'. Goldie refers to this element as 'feeling toward' which is 'thinking of with feeling'.<sup>204</sup> According to Goldie feelings have intentionality: 'No degree of bodily feeling can alone reveal to you what your emotion is about; [...] if you do not know what your thoughts and feelings are directed towards, you cannot find out merely through introspection of your bodily feelings'.<sup>205</sup> He takes it to be the case that, 'the content of the recognition in feeling towards is different from the content of the recognition where no emotion is involved'.<sup>206</sup>

If something like Goldie's picture is a good model of emotions, then it seems that it is important, in order to capture the content of an emotional evaluation well, to 'feel' it as well, rather than merely think about it without feeling. I am not arguing for the stronger claim that the evaluative properties of objects are *only* available via the feeling of an emotion and not accessible via other means<sup>207</sup>; even if they are in principle accessible via other means, it is still the case that the feeling of an emotion could provide us a user-friendly access to these properties.

What this means is that since empathy gives me access to the phenomenal feel of your emotional evaluation, it can make me understand your evaluations more fully than if I merely relied on your assertion.

What is distinct about empathy as a means of attaining understanding about things in the world, is that my route to attaining this understanding will be recreating in my imagination the experience you are undergoing. I recreate the

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<sup>204</sup> Goldie, 2002, p.19.

<sup>205</sup> Goldie, 2002, p.58.

<sup>206</sup> Goldie, 2002, p.36.

<sup>207</sup> An example of such a view is Johnston, 2001.

phenomenal feel of your experience, rather than merely theorising about it. I am able to infer not only *that* you evaluate X in a certain way; but that you feel like *this* about X. With my discussion of evaluations above I hope to have shown that having access to the phenomenal feel of evaluations of objects in the world has an epistemic value.

Importantly, what I can learn in this way is limited to evaluative aspects of objects. There are a lot of things that I cannot learn via empathy, as for example, physical facts about objects like the fact that the chair is green or that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. I cannot learn these things because they are not the sort of things that would normally evoke an evaluative response in you which has a distinctive phenomenal feel. They are not the sort of thing to which I could plausibly expect you to react in a certain way as to form a certain evaluation that would have a distinctive phenomenological feel to it. Therefore, recreating in my imagination your experience is unlikely to give me information about such things. I can only learn similar facts from you if you tell them to me explicitly. What I can learn via empathising with you concerns features of objects that would provoke an evaluative response in you with certain distinctive phenomenology, as for example, emotional response: I can learn that a certain work of art or a certain person's deed is admirable, that swimming in the river is fearsome, that a certain meal is disgusting, and so on.

In conclusion, when I empathise with you I can learn about evaluative features of objects. This is so because the phenomenal aspect of your evaluation is something I can recreate via empathising with you, and from this I can infer that the objects in question are the kinds of objects to which you would react in a certain way, which, barring any reason to suspect your evaluation is inappropriate or needs to be adjusted, I can use in order to learn about the objects.

### 3.2.2. Challenges to the model. Learning via empathy and learning via testimony.

As already mentioned, there are two steps in the process of learning about objects via empathy. The first step is using empathy to gain access to your evaluation of the object X. Once I have done that, I can already form the judgment that X is the kind of object that would elicit in you the evaluation in question. In so far as this amounts to a kind of learning about X, I do not need to take an extra step in order to have learned something about X. However, I could do that: the second step is inferring from the fact that you evaluate X in a certain way, some kind of judgment regarding X, or alternatively, deciding to adopt the evaluation of X for myself.

Above I discussed how the first step works, and I hope that there is little in that model that could be challenged. Therefore, the minimal claim that I hope to have already defended, and that cannot be argued against, is that empathy can be used as a tool to learn a certain kind of fact about objects: namely, that they are the kinds of objects that would elicit in you the kind of evaluation you are having of them.

Here I am going to discuss potential challenges to the second step in this process. One might wonder to what extent I could be justified to infer, from the fact that *you* evaluate an object X in a way E, that X *is* actually an appropriate object of such an evaluation. If the answer is that I cannot be justified to infer any kind of proper belief, or I cannot be justified in adopting (a modified version of) your evaluations as my own, at least most of the time, one might think that the epistemic practice of learning about objects via empathy is in this sense of little worth; after all, learning that X is an object that would cause in *you* a certain kind of evaluation is in most cases of little use to me, unless I am able to infer from this something about X, or about the way I should evaluate X.

In what follows I will seek to defend the value of empathy as a tool for learning about objects via comparing it to the practice of testimony: since we think of testimony as a potentially reliable epistemic practice, I will argue that we should think the same about empathy. Then I will consider and reply to two possible reasons why the testimony analogy might fail.

### 3.2.2.1. Empathy is like testimony without the middle man.

I would argue that using empathy as a tool for learning about objects is analogous to using testimony as a practice to learning about the world.<sup>208</sup> In the case of testimony, I rely on your evaluation of X, which you share with me via a speech act. In the case of empathy, I rely on your evaluation of X, which I access myself via re-creating your experience. In this sense empathy is like testimony without the middle man. In testimony I rely upon your assertion, your telling me a certain thing. In empathy you need not tell me anything – I rely upon my empathic feeling, my recreating of your experiences, in order to gain epistemic access to certain features of objects. And if we think that testimony is sufficiently often a reliable source of epistemic benefits, so we can think about empathy. Just as in testimony, the fact that I have not attained the knowledge first-hand is not itself sufficient to discredit empathic learning as a justified source of knowledge.

We rely on testimony a lot in our daily life. Testimony is ubiquitous source of knowledge and our dependence on it is far-reaching.<sup>209</sup> Since ‘we do typically or, more strongly, uniformly accept ordinary informative testimony’<sup>210</sup> testimony is a robust practice, and it is one of our sources of knowledge together with perception, memory, and reasoning. Normally, it is infeasible ‘for hearers to seriously check or confirm either the speaker’s reliability or sincerity within the normal constraints of testimonial transmission and exchange’.<sup>211</sup> There is a debate about when and under what conditions is testimony a justified source of knowledge. According to non-reductionists, what is required is only the absence of undefeated defeaters whereas according to reductionists more is required – some actual positive reasons to accept the testimony of speakers.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Thanks to Aaron Meskin for suggesting the comparison to testimony and the phrase ‘testimony without the middle man’.

<sup>209</sup> Lackey Jennifer, 2006; Adler, 2017.

<sup>210</sup> Adler, 2017.

<sup>211</sup> Adler, 2017.

<sup>212</sup> Lackey Jennifer, 2006.

However, everyone agrees that we can, and that we do, attain knowledge from what others tell us.

Thus, if it is undeniable that our practice of testimony is, as a matter of fact, epistemically robust, and if it is true that there is an analogy between empathy and testimony, then it would seem that our epistemic practice of arriving at epistemic benefits via empathy would be justified. The hope here is that whatever it is that justifies testimony as a source of knowledge, can justify why empathy too is a source of knowledge. Your evaluative knowledge of certain objects in the environment is transmitted to me – it is just that it happens without your explicit assertion.

However, one might wonder whether the analogy between testimony and empathy is justified. There are two reasons one might reject the analogy. I will consider these challenges now.

#### 3.2.2.2. Challenge 1 – testimony about evaluative properties is controversial.

The first reason is that there is an important disanalogy between the domain of things I can learn by empathy and the domain of things it is usually agreed that I can learn via testimony. For example, via testimony I can attain knowledge of facts – that water is H<sub>2</sub>O or that the museum is behind the corner. However, this is not the sort of thing I can learn via empathising. Via empathy I can only attain knowledge about evaluative aspects of objects.

Therefore, empathy is at best like *testimony about evaluative properties* only. And one might wonder about the extent to which evaluative testimony – unlike testimony for physical properties of mid-sized objects, directions in a city, or train times – can be a reliable and justified epistemic practice. If testimony cannot be seen as a reliable and justified source of epistemic goods in this sense, then one might be reasonably sceptical as to why empathy should be seen as one. Perhaps evaluative aspects of objects are just not the sort of thing about which we can rely on attaining knowledge about via either testimony or empathy.

One reason to hold this is if one thinks that there are essential dissimilarities between having beliefs and having evaluations. Perhaps evaluations are more 'subjective' and personal, and whereas I can take your word for statements such as 'the museum is behind the corner' and 'water is H<sub>2</sub>O', perhaps I cannot take your word for statements such as 'the picture is beautiful' and 'John is trustworthy' since these evaluations would have an important subjective element – in other words, they are the kind of things that it is possible that are true for you, but might not be true for me.

It seems to me that this is a valid point, and indeed evaluative knowledge is less straightforward to attain than knowledge of facts. However, it is a step from here to deny that we can learn about evaluative properties of objects via testimony. Granted, learning about evaluative properties might not be as straightforward as attaining knowledge of facts, where we can just adopt the belief that indeed, the museum is behind the corner. However, this does not mean that, after suitable adjustments, we cannot learn about evaluative properties of objects via testimony at all.

If it is indeed the case that the appropriateness of an evaluation is relative to the person who evaluates an object, I might still be able to adjust for differences between your taste and mine and infer what kind of evaluation *I* should be having of that object. For example, you might tell me that a coming Maths exam which you are worried about, is difficult. But this does not mean that I should either infer that the exam is an appropriate object of worry in general, or that it would be one for me, were I to take it. Perhaps it is just that you have not touched Maths in months and the exam would be easy for me. This is different from you telling me that, say, the chair is green. There does not seem any kind of 'adjustment' that I need to make in this case. But it is not clear whether there are good equivalents of this uncontroversial inference in the evaluative domain.

Again, from *your evaluating* an object in a certain way I cannot straightforwardly infer that I should evaluate it in this way because of the subjective element that you bring in with your evaluation. However, if I know you well enough, assessing what kind of evaluation I should have might still be

possible. I can accommodate the subjective element via taking into account your peculiarities, e.g., by taking into account differences between you and me. And taking these differences into account it does not seem unlikely I will be able to infer from evaluations *you* are having about certain objects, what evaluations *I* should be having about these objects.

Taking another's evaluation to reflect an object's features might not be as straightforward a matter as taking their beliefs concerning that object to reflect an object's features. And I concede that it is possible that in some cases people's emotions towards the same objects would differ very drastically in a way in which we would not normally expect their beliefs to differ.

So, the answer I gave is that I can at least in some cases adjust for differences between you and me. If I know sufficiently many things about you, I would know for example where you and I differ, and what adjustments I need to make to your evaluations in order for me to be able to accept them as epistemic evidence of certain evaluative aspects of objects. I might have independent reasons to discredit your evaluation. Say, for example, that you are terrified by a spider in the kitchen. If you have a phobia of spiders and I know you, I would know that you have a phobia, and I would not take your emotional evaluation as direct evidence of the scariness of that spider. The opposite can also be true – I might have independent reasons to allocate especially large epistemic credibility to your evaluation. If I know that you are a zoologist without phobias, and if you are particularly alarmed by a spider in the kitchen, I would infer that the spider in the kitchen is perhaps a poisonous one and I should beware it.

Perhaps the least controversial case of me learning about the world via empathy is the case where I know you particularly well. Say you are my best friend, my sibling, my partner, or someone else who is really close. If I know you sufficiently well it seems that it will be very easy for me to infer from your emotional evaluations whether or not certain features about the objects of these evaluations hold. Say you and I are very similar in our appraisals of people – we find particular features in people morally repugnant, we hold particular values

in high regard, and so on. If you react emotionally to a certain person I do not know in a particular way – say, with a kind of derision, or admiration – I will know that this person is more likely than not a person who I would consider an appropriate object of derision, or admiration. I doubt it that someone would deny that in *these* specific cases, where we empathise with people we know very well, we can learn something about the world from them.

The question now is to what extent this learning can happen in other cases. One might object that in order to do the appropriate adjustments reliably I need to know you well. However, whereas for more complex emotions it is likely that I indeed need to know you well in order to interpret your evaluation in a sensible way, for more basic emotions it seems a good bet to take on board your emotion even if I do not know you well. If you are very excited and looking forward to seeing a particular movie, I need not know you very well in order to infer that perhaps there is something of value in that movie. But even though I consider the criticism somehow unjustified – I believe that in some basic senses people are quite alike – I am happy to bite the bullet and accept that empathy works well as a source of epistemic goods about the world only in the limited cases of people we know well. I think this does not reduce its value since we interact with people we know well a lot of the time. My claim is a weak one – insofar as I have shown that learning about the world via empathy happens *sometimes*, I have shown what I was aiming to.

### 3.2.2.3. Challenge 2 – testimony does not work without the middle man.

There is a second reason to doubt that the analogy between testimony and empathy holds. One can hold that that which makes testimony a justified source of knowledge has fundamentally to do with the speech act of assertion itself. If this is so, then there is a crucial disanalogy between testimony and empathy – the difference between the two is not just an incidental, but an essential property of what makes testimony the epistemically robust practice that it is. Therefore, one would not be able to infer, from the fact that testimony is a justified epistemic practice, that empathy is one too.



How can one substantiate the view that what makes testimony a justified epistemic practice is the speech act? One might hold that it is the norms of the conversational practice, and something about assuming responsibility for what I have said to you, that makes testimony reliable:

To use Kant's example: If I start to pack my suitcase in front of you, but I have no plan to leave then I intentionally deceive you by giving you evidence that I plan to leave. But I do not invite you to notice or to understand what I am doing. By contrast, if I said to you either "I am leaving town" (a lie) or "Do not worry if you do not find me here tomorrow" (an intentionally misleading assertion), I do invite you to understand and believe me. Thereby, I assume responsibility for the truth and veracity of my assertion, though arguably less so for the implicature that "I am leaving town".<sup>213</sup>

Even if the speaker is a stranger to the hearer, assertion conforms to certain norms of conversational practice. There are sanctions if someone lies, and we remember unreliable testimony far more than reliable one, the reliable one goes unnoticed.

This is importantly unlike the case of catching on someone's emotions – I have no responsibility to you to show certain emotions, at least not in the way in which I might be assumed to have in the case of conversational practice. Unlike cases of testimony, empathy does not seem to dwell in a specific social practice. At least it is not obvious what the equivalent would be. I might feel whatever I want to feel. I will not be sanctioned in any way if I feel an inappropriate emotion towards something. After all, I have not taken the step of explicitly asserting something. In taking this step is where my responsibility lies. In taking this step is when I become part of this conversational social practice. Whereas the same is not true if I do not assert anything. Therefore, one might hold that I have not shown that sourcing information from others' emotional reactions, is a reliable source of epistemic goods.

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<sup>213</sup> Adler, 2017.

One line of reply might be to push the line that there is some kind of equivalent to the conversational practice in the case of empathy after all. For example, if I deliberately display a different emotion from the one I am actually experiencing, in order to deceive you, this is arguably just as bad as verbally lying to you. If you figure out that I have done this, you will be justified in not trusting me anymore. This can be supported by the idea that one reason we like and value spontaneous people is that spontaneity is one of the things that is hard to fake. We do value genuine emotional expressivity and perhaps – it is to be hoped – to a certain extent sanction people who fake their emotions. So one might think there is some kind of equivalent for empathy of the norms of conversational practice. We read each other's emotions all the time and to a certain extent we rely on others' expressions of emotion being genuine and this does make it likely that my empathising with your experience, which includes your emotions among other things, would be a reliable guide to what you really feel right now.

But I will not take *this* line of response any further. Even if there is an equivalent between expressing emotions and answering queries, it is not obvious. And, after all, empathy is ideally getting not only at what you express – even if you do not express it consciously – but at what you do not express. One might think it is required of a stranger to answer my request for directions in a way in which it is not required of him to show a certain emotion. And in the rare cases where we consider it is required for someone to 'show' certain emotion – we consider this a matter of etiquette and do not put so much value on it. This does not seem to be so obviously parallel to the case of speaking.

Another line of response is to turn the objection on its head – to agree that there is a disanalogy between cases of learning via testimony and cases of learning via empathy, but to claim that it is *precisely* in the disanalogy between speaking and emotions, that makes learning via empathy a valuable source of knowledge. Let me elaborate.

As a speaker I know that there are certain rules of conversational practice by which I better abide. I know that you, as a hearer, are on the look-out for what

I say. This might make me carefully calculate what I am saying, and thus, by merely listening to what I say, you might not be able to get at what *I really believe*. Empathy, by contrast, offers us more of a window into what your *actual* evaluations of things are. You might say one thing but feel another, and if I do not empathise with you, I will not get what it is that you actually feel, which seems an important part of your evaluative judgment of things. This is based on the assumptions that (1) it is harder to fake an emotion rather than assert an untruth, since the former requires to put on an act, which is very involving, and most of us are not very well trained in controlling carefully our emotional expressions and our body language, among others; and (2) that I will not be so careful in orchestrating my emotions, or even think about doing it, because emotions are not part of a conversational practice in the same way as words are, so I would not be so likely to begin monitoring them in the first place. If these assumptions are any likely, in empathic transmission of information you have less opportunity to deceive me and empathy would allow me to ‘hear’ your honest evaluations of things, which I might not get at merely via testimony.

Of course, now a further question presents itself. To what extent it is valuable for me to know your *honest* evaluations of things, as opposed to the ones you would have shared with me merely by speaking? I think that most of us would intuitively think that it is obvious that we want to know what people ‘really’ think, but perhaps one might object to this.

One might think of cases where you yourself do not know something very well. Perhaps you honestly believe what you tell me, it is just that you cannot bring yourself to feel about it in a certain way. Say you have become totally convinced that a certain art-work is a work of genius – it is just that you do not really feel it. Or that you know what ‘the right thing to do is’ – to be polite and accepting of someone’s view – it is just that you do not really feel you should do anything of the kind, perhaps the person in fact annoys you greatly. Now, will there be any value in my ‘getting at’ these evaluations of yours? Perhaps it is undeniable that getting at them makes me know *you* better. But is getting at them valuable in terms of me learning something about the *objects* of your evaluation – of the

art-work, and of what the right thing to do is in confrontation with that person? If one holds that one's emotional evaluations might lead someone astray, whereas one's 'purely' reason-based evaluations are more often guaranteed to be on the right track, one might be seriously worried by these cases.

However, I do not think that even people who have this worry would be justified in holding that one is better for *not knowing* what another's actual emotional response to something is. This just seems to be a weird epistemic claim in need of justification.

Still, this line of response which pushes the initial objection on its head relies on quite a few assumptions. I will respond in a third way below.

A third way to reply to the initial objection is to deny the claim that testimony takes all its epistemic credentials from the speech act. I will argue for this now. What I claim is that testimony is at best partly justified by the existence of a conversational practice. What makes testimony justified is that via it we get access to the speaker's knowledge. And this is all that matters. To say that a conversational practice exists is not to add much to what makes testimony justified. The core idea is that you end up believing things which other people already believe. And what makes this a justified way to attain knowledge is something about people being good enough epistemic agents, and that, for many things, it makes sense to take another's belief and this is a better strategy than coming to deduce each and every belief by yourself. To use Godfrey-Smith's terminology of two kinds of reliability, the latter strategy might have greater *Cartesian* reliability – for each belief attained via this strategy, it is likely that it is a true belief – but the strategy of testimony has a far greater *Jamesian* reliability – for each true belief out there, it is likely that I attain it.<sup>214</sup> What is relevant here is that in testimony the norm is such that I should only assert things that I know. In this sense, there is a selection procedure – what I can acquire via testimony should, ideally, only be things that the other person believes they know. This filter certainly increases the epistemic credentials of

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<sup>214</sup> Godfrey-Smith, 2012, p.247.

testimony as a means of attaining knowledge. By contrast, in the case of empathy, there does not seem to be any such filtering effect; I could learn just *anything* about the way you evaluate things. Therefore in the case of empathising with you, I should be less expected to take on your evaluations of objects.

Further, to show that the existence of norms in conversation does not add that much to the credibility of testimony, one can take the fact that in many ordinary cases of testimony, the speaker rarely thinks a few times before they produce an assertion. On the contrary, many of the assertions that we take to be good examples of testimony are often spontaneous. For example, most of us *would*, I think, take as a reliable piece of testimony a statement if it was one we overheard someone speaking to themselves. So there is no special step that the speaker takes in order to become intentionally a part of the social conversational practice. There is no reason, in many ordinary cases of testimony, to believe that something qualitatively different happens when the speaker is speaking to you, rather than were they merely to assert something to themselves aloud, or were they to write their words down in a notebook they do not intend for anyone to read. This is not an altogether strange view of what testimony is. For example, Sosa takes that all testimony requires ‘a statement of someone's thoughts of beliefs, which they might direct to the world at large and to no one in particular’.<sup>215</sup>

If this is true, then perhaps it is awkward to place *all the epistemic justification* in testimony on the existence of conversational practice alone. In other words, if a conversational practice did not exist, but we still were able to get access to people's beliefs about certain matters, that would still be a reliable source of epistemic justification. Imagine we had a device by which we could tap into a people's thoughts without their being aware of it – that would be a reliable source of epistemic justification. One way to see this is to observe that, in general, what people assert is not miles removed from what they would have asserted to themselves, in the privacy of their thoughts. And if we take the

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<sup>215</sup> Sosa, 1991, p.219.

former – testimony – to be epistemically justified, then there is no reason to not take the latter to be so, too.

Therefore, it seems hard to deny that testimony works not *only* because people abide by certain conversational practices alone but also because *whatever it is that the speaker has ‘in stock’ in his mind, ready for assertion, will be in general reliable*. It is hard to see how even the most rigid conversational practice would be able to produce epistemic goods, if the latter were not the case.

But if part of the justification for ordinary testimony comes from the fact that whatever beliefs a speaker has ‘in stock’ are likely to be reliable, then, since we rely on testimony so much, we need to grant that, in many cases, what the speaker has ‘in stock’ is likely to be reliable.

And if *this* claim is true, then it is hard to see why the same would not hold for the case of emotions. If we can accept that people are good enough sources of beliefs and epistemic knowledge, why deny that they are good enough sources of evaluations? In other words, it seems difficult to doubt that, in general, most people would have roughly appropriate emotional evaluations of certain objects.

### 3.3. The epistemic value of empathy for understanding oneself.

Above I argued that empathy is a valuable tool for understanding others, and for understanding objects in the world beyond the experiences of other people. Here I will argue that empathy has epistemic value for understanding oneself.

First thing to note is that one can use empathy to learn about oneself just as one can use it in order to learn about others - one can empathise with one’s past or future self, just as one empathises with others. In the same way in which empathy can be valuable as a method for understanding others, already discussed in [section 3.1](#), empathy can be useful for understanding oneself. I will not dwell on this point any further here.

Second, what can be of epistemic value can be attaining the *skill* of empathising rather than one-off instances of empathy. In discussing *this* kind of epistemic value of empathy, I do not claim that it is likely that a particular instance of empathising will itself be valuable for the empathiser's better understanding of themselves. Rather, I am claiming that developing the skill of empathy has epistemic value for the individual.

In [section 2.3](#) I discussed in some detail what the skill of empathy involves. I argued that the skilled empathiser is skilled in three things: (1) detecting experiences in others; (2) differentiating between the phenomenology of subtly different experiential states; and (3) seeing connections between various dimensions of experience in a way which allows them to 'fill in' any unknowns in the other's experience. I would argue that the latter two skills are valuable not only when it comes to understanding other people, but also for understanding oneself.

First, cultivating empathy makes one better able to differentiate between subtly different experiential states. This ability is beneficial for understanding oneself since it means one is able to be better aware of the kind of experience one is undergoing at any moment. I take it that being better aware of one's own experience can mean two different things. In one, weaker reading, it means that one has an increased awareness of the states one is going through. In this sense better awareness is like enhanced perception, being able to better see things which are already there, in a higher resolution, as it were. There is another, stronger reading of the claim. One can argue that the skill to differentiate between subtly different experiential states has a formative value; we come to have certain experiences which we would not have come to have otherwise. Perhaps via developing this skill we come to be more refined in our own experiences. We become able to distinguish in ourselves experiences with a certain degree of subtlety that did not exist before; and, in this sense, arguably, we would come to have experiences which we otherwise would not have had.

Second, the ability to see relations between dimensions of experience can have epistemic value for understanding our own experiences. We will be better

aware of how different dimensions of our own experience go together, and would be able to use this understanding in order to guide our actions and choices in an informed way. For example, this skill would be useful when we are planning ahead and considering possible scenarios that can occur to our future selves. We will be in a better position to appreciate how various things can influence us.

With this I hope to have shown that developing the skill of empathy has prudential value for understanding oneself. As already argued in [section 2.3](#) cultivating empathy makes us able to well appreciate how various dimensions of experience influence one another and makes us more refined in our awareness as it makes us able to differentiate between subtly different experiences. In the present section I merely pointed attention to the fact that having these skills is overwhelmingly likely to be beneficial for understanding one's own experiences. Knowing oneself is desirable for all sorts of reasons, not the least because it put one in a better position to make more informed choices about oneself. With this I hope to have shown something which, once pointed to hopefully seems obvious – that there are prudential reasons for one to develop the skill of empathy. Even if one is not interested in the experiences of other people in themselves, there are still instrumental reasons why one would want to empathise with others – because developing a good understanding of the experiences of others might teach one a lot about how to live one's own life.

### 3.4. Conclusion.

In this chapter I argued that empathy has three kinds of epistemic value. First I argued that empathising with another allows us to understand them. Then I argued that empathising with another allows us to understand objects in the world via giving us access to their evaluations of these objects; I compared empathy to testimony and argued that if we consider testimony as a source of epistemic goods, then we must consider empathy to be one too. Finally, I argued that attaining the skill of empathy has the epistemic value of allowing



us to better understand our own experiences – to better interpret our present experiences, as well as to be better aware of how different dimensions of our experience affect one another.

All this suggests that there are prudential reasons to empathise with others, and to cultivate the skill of empathy. I have argued that empathy has epistemic value. In the next two chapters I will turn to what has more traditionally been the focus of discussions of empathy; I will argue that empathy has moral value.

## 4. The Moral Value of Empathy: Answering Criticisms.

In this chapter and the following I will defend the claim that empathy is morally valuable. Importantly, I subscribe to the view that in order to evaluate empathy in the right way, we need to evaluate a cultivated form of it. Empathy is a tool which, just like any other, should be cultivated and used in the right way. Therefore, instead of merely observing what empathy can result in in a set of very particular contexts, a proper evaluation of empathy's moral and epistemic worth should discuss empathy which is applied intelligently and in conjunction with other faculties, like beliefs and judgments. In this vein, in this and the following chapter I will argue that empathy which is cultivated and deployed in the right ways is morally valuable. In the following chapter I will make a positive case about the moral value of empathy, and in this chapter I will reply to arguments to the effect that empathy is morally problematic.

Even though empathy is usually considered beneficial for morality<sup>216</sup>, some thinkers have argued against this. The most sustained critiques of empathy have been given by Goldie and Prinz. In this chapters I will address theirs and other existing criticisms about empathy. I will also raise a concern with empathy of my own, in the final section [4.6](#).

The first two sections [4.1](#) and [4.2](#) are criticisms according to which empathy interferes with lucid moral judgment. Then in [4.3](#) I consider the criticism that empathy, even if it does not interfere with our judgment, might do so with our action. In [4.4](#) I discuss the attack on the 'politics of empathy' by Bloom and Prinz. In [4.5](#) I consider the worry that empathy is unhealthy for the empathiser. In the final section [4.6](#) I formulate an original criticism of empathy: I suggest that empathy gets in the way of our imaginative resistance, and at the same

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<sup>216</sup> Peterson, 2017.

time I argue that we might have independent reasons to consider imaginative resistance morally desirable.

I proceed now to addressing the criticisms aimed at empathy. My conclusion will be that neither of these criticisms can be taken to show that empathy is more morally worrisome than useful.

## 4. 1. Empathy is prone to bias.

The most serious criticisms of empathy are that it leads us to treat preferentially people with whom we empathise more, and thus results in unfairness towards people with whom we empathise less or not at all. This I will in general address as the worry that empathy is prone to bias.

This section is structured as follows. In the first subsection [4.1.1](#) I will present in some detail what is probably the most sustained critique of empathy in this regard, that of Prinz. Unpacking the actual claim of the argument against empathy will take some work since, as I will show, the criticism that Prinz airs at empathy is not unambiguous, and can be interpreted in one of a couple of ways. I show that two interpretations in particular present a worry for empathy and discuss these worries in subsections [4.1.2](#) and [4.1.3](#). Finally, in the fourth subsection [4.1.4](#) I speak about how a cultivated form of empathy makes these worries less problematic.

### 4. 1. 1. Prinz's criticism.

Prinz worries that empathy is subject to bias in four different ways. He worries that we have more empathy for: 1) cute or attractive agents; 2) members of the in-group; 3) the near and dear; and 4) salient events.<sup>217</sup> All these worries have a similar structure: we empathise for certain individuals more than we do for others, and this seems unjust.

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<sup>217</sup> Prinz, 2011b.

I think it is important to observe that this claim is not unambiguous and it is not immediately clear what exactly claims Prinz is making. He does not elaborate much on them, since he presents them as part of what he himself calls a ‘laundry list’ of worries about empathy.<sup>218</sup> But as I will now argue, his claims are ambiguous, and can mean any of several things.

#### 4. 1. 1. 1. The ambiguous talk of ‘degrees of empathy’.

A systemic worry which I have with Prinz’s criticisms is his talk of ‘degrees of empathy’, namely, his talking of ‘more empathy’, and ‘less empathy’. I think that it is not clear what the degrees of empathy talk means, and so it is difficult to know what Prinz means by his claim that empathy is prone to biases. I suggest that the moment we unpack the meaning of ‘degrees of empathy’ the worries he airs seem less grave than they otherwise appear.

I can find no evidence of which of the following interpretations is the one most likely that Prinz has in mind, but I suggest that talk of ‘degrees of empathy’ might mean any of four things: 1) willingness to empathise; 2) empathising with only *aspects* of one’s experience as opposed to empathising fully with one’s experience; 3) success at empathising; and 4) stronger emotional response. The fact that Prinz himself does not seem to be clear on the ambiguity is shown by his seeming to switch between different meanings in the same short paragraph where he introduces the cuteness worry.

First, to say we have ‘less empathy’ for someone could mean that we are less likely to empathise with them. This would refer to what Prinz in another place calls the ‘selective nature’ of empathy which he suggests could be overcome if we ‘empathise with a broader range of people’<sup>219</sup> and he seems to have the same worry in mind when he speaks about ‘allocation of empathy’ which, he claims, ‘can vary dramatically as a function of morally arbitrary concerns’.<sup>220</sup> Here what seems to be the issue is that one does not consider other people to be

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<sup>218</sup> Prinz, 2011b, p.225.

<sup>219</sup> Prinz, 2011b, p.17.

<sup>220</sup> Prinz, 2011b.

appropriate targets of empathy in the first place. There does indeed seem to be a worry, and I will consider it below in [section 4.1.2](#).

The second interpretation of 'less empathy' is that it means empathy which is less involved, in the sense that I empathise with certain aspects of your experience, as opposed to empathising with your experience more fully. Recreating another's experience in one's imagination is always partial, and perhaps I am willing to be more involved in my imaginings if you are part of the in-group. The worry therefore would be that morally irrelevant factors, such as whether you are a member of the in-group, or not, or whether you are cute or not, would influence the extent to which I am willing to empathise with different aspects of your experience. For example I might be willing to try to imagine certain aspects of your situation, but not many of them, if you are a member of the out-group; whereas if you are a member of the in-group I would be more willing to imagine additional aspects of your situations. I consider this to be on a par with the first interpretation of 'less empathy' I considered above. The problem here seems to be that of lacking a willingness to go a certain length in the empathic exercise. Therefore I will address this challenge in the same section where I address the problem of 'the selective nature of empathy'.

Third, 'less empathy' for someone could mean that we are less likely to succeed at empathising with them, even if we try to do it. Prinz might be having this in mind when he brings in support of his claim that empathy may be subject to biases, a study by Ickes et al. which finds that we can more accurately identify the emotions of attractive agents.<sup>221</sup> This I see as a more serious challenge to empathy than the previous interpretation. After all, if our empathic accuracy is doomed from the start to be low when empathising with certain people then perhaps empathy is not the best heuristic to use when making decisions which involve these people. I will address this below as the empathic accuracy worry in [section 4.1.2.2](#).

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<sup>221</sup> Ickes, 1993; Prinz, 201b.

Fourth, 'less empathy' for someone might mean that our emotional response to their situation is less strong. This is something that Prinz also suggests in the same cuteness effects paragraph, when he says that 'we would feel more vicarious sadness for a dying mouse than a rat'.<sup>222</sup> Since Prinz defines empathy as experiencing another's emotions, cases where these emotions are somehow less intense would be indeed cases where empathy itself is somehow dimmed. But this would not be so on the present account, which does not see empathy as merely an emotional response. If we compare two cases – one where I experience in my imagination your emotions very intensely, but am unable to appreciate your thoughts very well; and another where the opposite is true, i.e., I have a very deep understanding of your thoughts yet can barely feel what you feel – it is not clear on my account which of the two would be a case of 'less' empathy. This is one point. Second and more important, it is not clear that the *intensity* of the affective response should have a moral value itself. It seems to me that in order to claim that a less intense emotional response is a morally undesirable outcome, one has to justify why intense emotional responses are desirable. The only possible justification I can think of is the claim that the intensity of emotions makes them more motivating – if I am more angry, rather than less angry, I am more likely to act on my anger and bring up the good that will follow from it. However, it is still not clear how this could apply to the case of empathy. Empathy is an exercise in imagination throughout which I keep in mind that the emotions that I recreate in my imagination are *yours* and not mine. Therefore, by definition I will not act on the emotions that *you* have, so it would not matter much whether I vicariously feel your emotions more intensely or less so.

One might here claim that what Prinz has in mind is not the intensity of the vicarious emotion, but rather of my overall emotional response. You might not at all feel sad about your situation, but after I empathise with you, *I* might feel sad for you, and *this* sadness can be more or less, depending on morally irrelevant considerations, like for example how attractive you are. But if this is

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<sup>222</sup> Prinz, 2011b, p.226.

Prinz's worry, again it is not clear how this is a worry about empathy itself. There does not seem to be anything in the nature of empathy that would result in my feeling more sadness for an attractive A than an unattractive B. I cannot think of a mechanism that would explain how my recreating another's experience in my imagination, provided I have done it for both A and B in equal measure, would result in my feeling more sadness for A than for B. And if it is true that in reality we tend to feel more sadness for A than for B, I would suggest part of the reason is precisely that we do not empathise in equal measure with both A and B. It is precisely if I do not empathise with both A and B that I will feel sadness differentially.

Therefore I consider the fourth interpretation of 'less empathy' to not present a worry for the moral value of empathy. So there remain two different worries that need to be addressed. Those are the worries that we are less likely to be motivated to empathise with certain people; and that we are less likely to empathise with them accurately. I will address these two worries in sections [4.1.2](#) and [4.1.3](#).

#### 4. 1. 1. 2. A few notes about Prinz's criticism.

Before proceeding to reply to the two criticisms that we identified, I will note something about Prinz's own worry with empathy that I think is worth mentioning, given that Prinz is probably the most vocal critic of empathy in the moral philosophy literature. I will note that Prinz defines empathy in a way more narrow than it is defined here. In the papers in which he attacks empathy, Prinz sees empathy as experiencing the same emotion as the person one is empathising with: 'empathy is a matter of feeling an emotion that we take another person to have'.<sup>223</sup> I have a slight worry with this. It seems to be the case that for Prinz I only empathise with you if I experience myself the same emotion as you do, and it seems to be the case that for Prinz I cannot be said to empathise with you if I imagine what it is like to experience the same emotion

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<sup>223</sup> Prinz, 2011a, p.215.

as you do, without actually experiencing it *myself*. For example, if you feel afraid of that spider, it seems to be the case, from Prinz' definition, that I am only empathising with you if I start to feel afraid of that spider *myself*, and presumably I am not empathising, according to Prinz, if I vividly imagine what your fear feels like, without actually starting to be *myself* afraid. But maybe I am just not afraid of spiders, and cannot make myself fear them. Does this mean then that I can never empathise with you? To me this seems implausible. If Prinz really means to restrict empathy to cases where I, the empathiser, actually adopt for myself the emotion you, the person I empathise with, are having, then it seems that empathy would be quite uncommon and different from how we normally think of it. I think that a more charitable interpretation of Prinz here would be to suggest that he has not been very careful in setting up his definition, and that he would also refer to as 'empathy' cases in which I vicariously feel your emotion while imaginatively recreating your experience, yet without actually adopting that emotion myself. Of course it is possible that Prinz has implicitly adopted a view similar to that held by Currie and Ravenscroft, according to which emotions are 'transparent' to imagination, in the sense that there is no difference between recreatively imagining an emotion and really experiencing it.<sup>224</sup> If this is the case, then Prinz would presumably take his definition of empathy to already include the cases which I discussed above. But I cannot make a commitment to the transparency of emotions to the imagination on Prinz's behalf. So I will take it that 'feeling of an emotion' includes vicarious feeling without adopting it, and that therefore Prinz would consider it to be an instance of empathy the case where I vicariously feel an emotion without adopting it myself. As we will see this move from my part will not be entirely unproblematic, as at least one interpretation of some of Prinz' challenges does not seem to work if we adopt the more extended definition. But Prinz's challenges against the more narrow definition would be little more than defeating a straw man, on Prinz's part, therefore it is more charitable to adopt the extended one.

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<sup>224</sup> Currie and Ravenscroft, 2002.



Still, it is worth noting that even with this allowance what Prinz sees as empathy is importantly different from empathy as understood in this thesis. It is more narrow than the latter. It is either a non-necessary part of empathy, or a consequence of empathy as defined in this thesis. Empathy here is seen as the recreating of another's experience in one's imagination, and this is not limited to the affective domain, so it might or might not involve the feeling of an emotion which another is feeling: our empathy might merely involve seeing the world from their point of view without feeling their emotions. This difference in definition means that some of the worries Prinz airs against empathy do not apply to empathy as understood here at all. However, his worries about empathy being biased can still be raised about empathy as defined here, so this is why I am addressing them.

In conclusion, in this section I argued that talk of empathic bias is ambiguous, and disambiguated Prinz's criticism of empathy in this regard. This results in two versions of the criticism that I should be worried about. These are what I call the 'selective nature of empathy' worry, and the 'empathic accuracy' worry. I will now proceed to phrase more carefully, and reply to, these criticisms, in the following two sections.

#### 4. 1. 2. We have less empathy for certain agents and this is *itself* problematic.

Above, I disambiguated the phrase 'less empathy'. The result of my analysis is that the criticism that we have 'less empathy' for certain individuals rather than others can mean two things: either a criticism that we are less willing to empathise (with a great degree of involvement) with certain individuals, or a criticism that we are less likely to achieve an understanding of certain individuals. In short, when saying that empathy is biased, one might mean either of these two things.

There is one more thing which is not yet clear. When stating that empathy is biased that is, that we have 'less empathy' (on either of the two interpretations) for certain individuals rather than others, what exactly is morally problematic?

I think that there are two kinds of things which can be morally problematic in having ‘less empathy’ for certain people. One thing is the mere fact that the empathy is less. Perhaps having someone empathise with you is desirable, and therefore it is simply not good to receive less empathy than others. What is at issue is the lack, smaller ‘amount’ of empathy itself.

The other, and perhaps graver sort of consideration is about things which can be plausibly seen to *follow* from empathy. For example, if empathising with you would make me more likely to help you, then a direct consequence of having ‘less empathy’ for certain individuals is that I will be presumably less likely to help them, than I am to help you. In this case the issue of ‘less empathy’ becomes an issue of perhaps unfairly distributing certain kind of ‘resources’ distinct from empathy itself, and where these resources are of crucial importance, the fact that we have ‘less empathy’ for certain individuals might result in our treating them in an unfair way.

In the next section ([4.1.3](#)) I will address the second kind of criticism. Now I will address the first.

#### 4. 1. 2. 1. Another group: those who express their emotions.

Before I address the criticism, I would like to point attention to one more dimension which I think might also influence the extent to which we are willing to empathise with someone, and the extent to which we might be successful in so empathising with them, which as far as I am aware, has not received special treatment in the literature just yet. It is the dimension of whether an agent is ‘charismatic’ in expressing their emotions.

Apart from the four dimensions mentioned above (section [4.1.1](#)), another dimension that seems to be ‘morally irrelevant’ but is likely to influence the extent to which we are willing to empathise with someone else, and the extent to which our empathising with someone else might or might not be successful, is the dimension of whether or not an agent is able to express their emotions. It seems likely that agents who express their emotions are more likely to be

empathised with; they are already helping us as it were, to imagine what it is like to be them. It is harder to not empathise with someone who expresses their emotion than with someone who does not. And this might lead sometimes to unjust treatment whereby individuals who do not express their emotions are put at a disadvantage.<sup>225</sup>

#### 4. 1. 2. 2. The selective nature of empathy.

One might be worried that we apply empathy selectively, to particular groups of people only, and that the factors that decide whether we are willing to empathise with them are morally irrelevant ones, such as the agent's cuteness, or their salience.

The assumption behind this worry is that empathy itself is a desirable thing. What is problematic is that our 'distribution' of empathy (comparable perhaps to our distribution of attention) would be in a way unfair, decided by morally irrelevant factors.

The first thing to note is that, just as the fact that attention itself can be distributed in morally questionable ways is not a point against giving people attention, so is the case with empathy – just because we might tend to distribute empathy in, say, an unfair way, this does not mean that empathy is itself undesirable, or should not be encouraged.

Therefore the worry here cannot be that there is something wrong with empathy *when* we empathise. It is rather that, if we rely on empathy, as a tool, in a certain kinds of project, we would be likely to end up having the wrong sort

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<sup>225</sup> In certain contexts, it seems to me, it is not altogether unfair to treat preferentially people who express their emotions. When nothing important is at stake, I can just as well prefer people who do not expect me to read their mind and instead do something to ease me in this respect. Emotions are in an important sense social, and communicating your emotion is a valuable thing in the social contract which should be encouraged. If you cannot be bothered to help me by expressing your emotions, I might be justified in treating you with relative indifference compared to other people who express their emotions. But of course, this is not a relevant point in cases such as jury trials, where considerations such as this ought to not play a part.

of judgment, since we would have empathised with different people to a different extent, instead of having empathised with everyone involved equally.

However, as understood in this thesis, empathy is voluntary. It is an involved, wilful act of imagination. Therefore, any decision that is made which would rely on empathy, say, in order to gain relevant information, would rely on empathy knowingly.

Therefore it is possible to counteract the problem about the selective nature of empathy. Namely, any time that a decision is about to be made, one needs to empathise *with all the parties involved*. As long as one adheres to this principle, empathy would present no problem. It might, of course, be a thing that we are more willing to empathise with, say, attractive agents. This is probably why the characters in movies often are attractive, to help the audience in taking in their viewpoint. But this tendency for us to be more naturally willing to empathise with the more attractive agents need not have any bad repercussions. When we have to take part in some decision-making, for example, we can always adhere to the principle where we try to empathise with representatives (hypothetical or otherwise) of all the parties likely to be affected by this decision.

Therefore, since I am assessing the merits of a cultivated empathy, as opposed to some spontaneous spark of fellow-feeling – which is not what empathy is understood to be in this thesis anyway – this issue does not present much of a problem with empathy.

Any such tendency to be willing to empathise with only certain individuals is best countered not by disallowing oneself to empathise with them, but rather, by making the effort to empathise with others as well.

#### 4. 1. 2. 3. Empathic accuracy.

Another, and as I said, more challenging worry for empathy, is the worry that empathy might be *bound to be less accurate for certain people*: if you are a member of my family, or of my nation, my empathy with you will likely yield a

true understanding of your experience; however, this would not apply if you are a total stranger, or someone with a life experience radically different from mine.

I accept that this is a limitation of empathy. However I do not consider this to be a point against it. Prinz seems to suggest that this worry is a reason why we should not have a morality 'based' on empathy. However, he does not specify his claim as to what he means by a morality based on empathy; if he means by this a moral system in which empathy is the only thing that guides our moral choices, then he seems to be defeating a straw man.

#### 4. 1. 2. 4. Conclusion.

So far I have addressed the worry that we experience 'less empathy' – less of a good thing – for certain people. As already argued above, this worry has two interpretations. I answered them both: in the first case, my reply was that we should make ourselves empathise with more people; in the second case that empathy is still a good thing, and something we should be trying to do, even if doomed to a relative failure from the start.

In the next section I will address the worry about unfairness – where what is at issue is not merely the distribution of empathy *itself* but something else that seems to depend on empathy.

#### 4. 1. 3. Empathy results in an unjust treatment of others.

The most serious worry with empathy is not that empathy might be itself a good which tends to not be fairly distributed among people. Rather, it is that empathy might result in us treating people unfairly in other ways, beyond our not empathising with them in the right amount.

For example one might worry that empathy towards certain individuals or groups might lead us to act in ways which are unfair or straightforwardly harmful to other individuals or groups. The worry here is that empathy for the in-group results in harm to the outgroup. I will consider two versions of this

criticism. One is that empathy leads to preferential treatment of certain people which results in harms to other people. The other version is one raised by Bloom recently, and it is that empathy directly incites violence to the outgroup.

I will in this section present the two criticisms. In the following section, [4.1.4](#), I will reply to them.

#### 4. 1. 3. 1. Empathy leads to preferential treatment of people we have empathised with.

One of the most serious worries about empathy is that empathy leads to preferential treatment of those we empathise with. Prinz cites a finding that if asked to empathise with someone subjects are more likely to move that person up a waiting list, even when they know that on the same waiting list there are other people who are more deserving to go up.<sup>226</sup> The worry is therefore that when we empathise with someone we are likely to do things for them which might result in injustice for other people.

This is a serious problem. If Prinz is right that empathy is the main propulsion for injustice here, then there is a good reason to be worried about how empathy might influence our actions. Perhaps in certain decision-making contexts it will be good to avoid empathy altogether.

I will not here argue against the finding that Prinz discusses. It seems plausible that it is precisely empathy with a particular individual and not something else that which triggered people to move that individual up the waiting list. What I think can be concluded from that is that we should beware certain action tendencies that result from empathy since like any potentially powerful tool empathy too has to be used with care.

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<sup>226</sup> Prinz, 2011b, p.226.

#### 4. 1. 3. 2. Empathy incites violence.

Another recent criticism of empathy is that by Bloom who has claimed that empathy incites violence.<sup>227</sup> He observes that empathy with victims often motivates us to act violently towards the perpetrators and concludes from this that empathy is morally undesirable, that we would be better off without it. Presumably he thinks that if we were not empathising with the victims, we would not have had the motivation to revenge them, and this motivation often leads to cruelty and disproportionate punishment, which makes empathy undesirable. He uses the example of American troops torturing and executing Nazi soldiers at a concentration camp in a way which is morally reprehensible. Even though the Nazi soldiers needed to be punished, Bloom says, the specific punishment was too much and immoral.

It is not easy to assess Bloom's criticism, as he is not overly careful in framing his argument. There are a couple of things to note. First, Bloom seems to be right to observe that sometimes empathy with victims leads to acts of violence that are morally unjustified. However, it is a far cry from this observation to conclude that the best solution to this problem is to have less empathy. In order to be able to conclude this, Bloom needs to argue that were I not to empathise with a victim of a crime, I would not be led to desire punishment for the perpetrator. But Bloom fails to do this. And I think this is a false claim anyway. The American soldiers in Bloom's example need not have empathised with the Jews killed at the camps or with anyone in particular in order to have been motivated to revenge. It seems uncontroversial to point out that not all desire for excessive violence in the name of revenge is fuelled by empathy with the victims. But if this is true, then Bloom's criticism of empathy as inciting violence is not a strong point against empathy.

If there is any truth in Bloom's observation, I think it has to do with an intuition that emotionally experiencing a victim's suffering - what Bloom takes empathy to mean - is somehow more motivating towards violent revenge than a cold-blooded cost-benefit analysis would be. Given the motivating power of

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<sup>227</sup> Bloom, 2015; Bloom, 2016.

emotions, this seems approximately right. Still, the most that Bloom can claim here is that if we are revenging out of empathy with the victim, we would be more likely to err on the side of more violence than if we are revenging out of other emotions or without emotions. But even this claim is in need of further backing. The question of whether there even is such a thing as a 'proportionate' revenge notwithstanding, I can imagine someone quite dispassionately allocating punishment according to a set of rules without realising that the punishment is too great for the wrong that has been committed. It would be a different kind of crime, a crime of 'thoughtlessness', but a crime nevertheless. It is not immediately clear that the two kinds of crime can be compared. Which is worse – punishing someone out of excessive empathic anger, or out of thoughtlessness? If I had the space to make this argument, I would argue that the latter is worse. There is something distinctively human and valuable in anger. But I do not need to pursue this quite interesting, yet involved line of thought here. All I need is the hardly controversial claim that crimes of thoughtlessness are not in any obvious sense 'better' than crimes of outrage. And because they are less noticeable it does not mean they do not happen just as, if not more, often. Also other emotions might make us revenge 'disproportionately' e.g. anger. Anger need have nothing to do with empathy, as Prinz has argued.<sup>228</sup> So to think that empathising with the victim of a crime would somehow lead me astray so often that a world in which I do not empathise with victims of crime is a better world than a world in which I do, is a very strong claim and Bloom has not given us any good reasons to hold it. To back his criticism he not only has to show that empathy in fact often leads us astray in the direction of more violence, he also has to show that a world without empathy would not too often lead us astray in other ways which would be less preferable than a world in which revenges are more violent than they should ideally be. And I think these are difficult claims to defend. If one agrees with Bloom that empathy is very motivating, it seems too likely that in a world

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<sup>228</sup> Prinz, 2011a.



without it we would shrug our shoulders at committed wrongs way too often to make this non-empathy world overall morally better.

If there is any truth in Bloom's observation, I think it has to do with the way empathy is exploited in political rhetoric, e.g., in justifying going at war with another country. The exploitation of 'experience the victim's suffering' in the press can manipulate people in dangerous ways. This is a slightly separate worry that merits a discussion on its own; I will further discuss the worry from manipulation in [section 4.2.3](#) below.

#### 4. 1. 4. The solution: cultivating empathy.

In this section I will reply to the worry that empathy might lead us to treat people in an unfair way. The two versions of this worry that I considered are described in the previous [section 4.1.3](#).

I will argue that despite the worries empathy is still morally desirable. This I will do in two ways. First I will argue that if we are better aware of empathy, and cultivate ourselves to use it in the right way, namely, a systemic empathy, it becomes less likely to treat people unjustly. One feature of a cultivated empathy is that it allows us to expand our circle of care. I will also argue that empathy can and especially in the relevant context, should be combined with other considerations, such as justice. To note that empathy is not always sufficient to arrive at the best moral judgment is not an argument against my thesis that empathy is desirable.

Second, I will consider alternatives and argue that a world without empathy and where we let empathy influence our decisions even less than we do at present, would in fact be a grimmer prospect. Empathy has shortcomings and is not perfect, yet it might still be in certain ways, the best thing that we have. Without the prospect of a better alternative, the claims that empathy has shortcomings can be little more than warning to use it with caution. They cannot be taken to be arguments against employing empathy in making our

moral choices, even if we are speaking about, say, making political decisions that involve many people.

#### 4.1.4.1. Empathising systemically.

In order to properly assess the moral merit of empathy, what we should assess is a cultivated form of empathy, rather than empathy as it happens to be in certain circumstances. Here I will argue that a cultivated empathy is at a much smaller risk of being prey to the biases that critics of empathy have been worried about.

In order to be able to speak about cultivated empathy, one needs the implicit claim that empathy is malleable - 'it can be changed, redirected, and cultivated'.<sup>229</sup> This is something there is no reason to doubt, and even the critics of empathy admit it, e.g. the worry that empathy can be manipulated (4.2.3) relies on this claim. We can modify our empathic response<sup>230</sup> rather than it being the case that empathy leads us to have a fixed response to a situation. Empathy can be cultivated which means that we can cultivate ourselves to (spontaneously) empathise with certain people in a certain kind of circumstance.

A cultivated form of empathy will mean, first, that we will be able to balance considerations coming from empathy with other considerations such as judgment, etc. Being more familiar with empathy, that is, being more experienced with empathising with different people will mean that it is less likely that empathising with someone will overwhelm one so much so that they forget to take into account any other morally relevant consideration, such as fairness, when reaching a decision.

Awareness of the way in which empathy might influence our decisions seems to be good enough for us to know how better to respond in certain situations. For example the case that Prinz discusses it does not seem as if considerations

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<sup>229</sup> Hu, 2018, p.351.

<sup>230</sup> Peterson, 2017.

of fairness could not have overridden the tendency to move the person up the waiting list. It is just that these considerations have not been made salient to the people asked. Empathy was never meant to be the sole and only factor to influence our moral actions; and it seems possible to combine empathy with considerations of fairness.

Second, one can become what I call a 'systemic' empathiser. What I call systemic empathy is trying to empathise with representatives from all the parties involved in making a decision. If one adopts this as one's principle, the more spontaneous empathy for certain individuals which presumably triggers responsive reaction in relation to them will be balanced with the empathy for others, leading to an overall more balanced decision and preventing us from acting on these initial urges if it would be the case that these urges would come at the expense of other parties.

In this case the biases inherent in empathy would not be such an issue. The fact that empathy might tend to lead us to do something for someone would not result in an unjust treatment of others if we take the time to take into consideration those others too. Take for example the study Prinz quotes. If one adopts empathy as a strategy, one would not commit the moral error that the subjects from the finding did; one would be able on these occasions, to also empathise with another individual, e.g. with an abstract individual who is going to be pushed down on the waiting list. In other words, even if individual empathy might on occasion result in injustice, a more rigorous practice of empathy is far less likely to do so. The fact that our experience of empathy for others is influenced by morally irrelevant factors such as an agent's cuteness, is not problematic since, in Hu's words, 'it does not mean that one must come to inconsistent conclusions or have contradictory moral motivations after empathising with different sides'.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Hu, 2018, p.353.

#### 4.1.4.2. Empathy is our best bet.

The criticisms of empathy discussed above can be taken to be little more than a warning for us to use empathy with caution. In this sense they are a welcome argument in favour of us dedicating special attention to *cultivating* empathy, and entangling it with our moral choices, as opposed to letting it influence our choices spontaneously and non-consistently.

However, sometimes critics of empathy have wanted to do more than just warn us about potential risks of using empathy. For example Prinz suggests that we would be better off if we did not empathise at all when making a certain kind of decision, but instead of empathy we used direct emotional response to action-types.<sup>232</sup> However, I would argue that his proposal does not fare any better than empathy does with regards to his own criticism of it. For example, Prinz's own proposed alternative – to 'directly condition each other to be outraged at the thought of iniquity, genocide, and neglect'<sup>233</sup> seems to make it much easier for audiences to be manipulated. One can just choose to describe an event as 'neglect' and without empathic insight into whether this event was actually neglect, the judge would be just as likely to be manipulated by a skilful defendant, victim, or lawyer. Depending on the way information is served to us, it seems to me that direct emotional response to action-types would be subject to bias just as much as empathy is. It seems hard to deny that would be more likely to have a (strong) emotional response, if the action-type is salient, or if it concerns someone who is near and dear, or attractive, or a member of the in-group. If there is any reason to be optimistic that a direct emotional response can be cultivated in such a way as to be applicable equally and indiscriminately to all kinds of actions, it would be hard to deny this for the case of empathy as well. There is no reason to doubt that empathy (including on Prinz's own definition, as well as mine) can be cultivated any less than a direct emotional response to action-types can.

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<sup>232</sup> Prinz, 2011a.

<sup>233</sup> Prinz, 2011b, p.229.

Any attack on the moral value of empathy whose aim is to actually discourage us from empathising has to propose a serious alternative to it and to argue that it would indeed be a better world one in which we did not let empathy influence our decisions. One might consider as an alternative to empathy a world in which we are more disengaged with the experiences of other people.

First thing to note is that such an outlook might be very difficult to attain. If empathy is indeed hard-wired into us, and if we have a strong tendency to empathise at least in certain cases, it seems that either way – cultivating empathy, or cultivating a more disengaged non-empathic attitude – we would need to do a lot of work. Given that empathy is already a tool on our disposal, a tool which even the harshest critics of empathy acknowledge is sometimes good and leads to morally valuable judgments and actions, it seems far more sensible that we should learn how to handle this tool, and how to make use of it, rather than try to avoid using it altogether.

Second, I would like to point to scenarios where the good we do to someone does not harm or result in an unfair treatment of another person. Then, Prinz's observation that empathy propels us to help someone means that in this case the fact that empathy would motivate us to bring about something good to the first person seems to be an unquestionably good thing. The alternative – to not feel empathy – seems grim because it would inhibit us from doing a good deed even where that would come at a cost to no one else.

With this I hope to have shown that empathy is not necessarily more problematic than a more disengaged attitude.

#### 4.1.5. Conclusion.

In this section I discussed the worry that empathy is prone to bias. In particular, empathy can be problematic in cases where the good deed that empathy motivates us to do towards one person is likely to result in an unfair or even harmful treatment of another. I hope to have shown that in these cases a cultivated form of empathy is not necessarily problematic and that despite the

legitimate worry about empathy leading to a problematic preferential treatment, a cultivated form of empathy is more useful than worrisome.

## 4. 2. Empathy clouds our judgment.

So far I have addressed criticisms of empathy having to do with its biased nature. There are other criticisms that also have to do with the more general worry that empathy does in some way cloud our judgment. The worry that empathy is biased is within this category, but now I will discuss some other criticisms which are also about empathy clouding our judgment.

### 4. 2. 1. The ‘inside’ perspective might be misleading.

One line of criticism that falls within the category of worries that empathy leads us to wrong judgment, is the criticism that states that we would be better off at judging what another person needs if we saw them from an ‘external’ rather than an internal perspective. A criticism of this sort is aired by Goldie.<sup>234</sup> Goldie considers empathy an inferior response to sympathy when it comes to morality.<sup>235</sup> He thinks that empathy can inhibit lucid moral judgment, and be an impediment to right action, whereas sympathy is the quintessential ‘moral emotion’ because it is a third-personal response where the sympathiser is not feeling what the other is feeling.<sup>236</sup> The intuition is that our being ‘separate’ from others makes us better able to judge what is the thing that will be truly beneficial for them.

There is something to this observation. For example, sometimes we want to see *ourselves* ‘from the outside’ because we think that this can provide us with a better perspective of what is actually good for us. This is one of the reasons we often ask our friends for advice: that they can easily see us ‘from the outside’ whereas for us this can be difficult. The external perspective can sometimes

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<sup>234</sup> Goldie, 2007.

<sup>235</sup> Note this is in earlier work by Goldie; I am not concerned here with Goldie’s subsequent argument for the conceptual limitations of empathetic perspective-shifting. For these, see chapter 3.

<sup>236</sup> Meyers, 2017.

provide epistemic goods which the internal perspective cannot, as Goldie points out.<sup>237</sup> I will not argue with that.

However, I do not think that this observation makes empathy any the less valuable. Goldie emphasises the role of adopting an external perspective towards other people, however, I do not think that empathy is incompatible with, or necessarily gets in the way, of that.

This might at first seem like a contradiction. I hurry to stress that I do not mean to claim that *while* empathising with someone I am also *at the same time* viewing them from an ‘external’ perspective. This does indeed seem like a contradiction. What I am claiming instead is that, when we take any temporally extended period of time, there will be time right before and right after the duration of our empathising, during which time I will be seeing you from an external perspective.

This claim is hard to deny. It seems implausible to suggest that we are even able to see another person *only through* their own perspective. Just as Goldie says, the external perspective is the default position<sup>238</sup>, is something that we do so often that, like the air we breathe, we forget to think about it.<sup>239</sup> This means that we return to the default external position before and after empathy anyway. But if so it seems problematic to suggest, as Goldie does, that, should I empathise with you, aspects of your situation might be lost to me. It seems unlikely that something that is visible from an external perspective about you will be lost to me, because the external perspective is the one I cannot help but adopt most of the time. By contrast, what *is* at risk of being lost to me, precisely because it is not the default perspective I have of you, is the insight I would gain if I empathise with you and I imagine how you yourself experience certain things. Empathy is an additional, bonus way, of seeing another person. And this is why Goldie’s criticism seems to me unsuccessful.

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<sup>237</sup> Goldie, 2005; Goldie, 2007.

<sup>238</sup> Goldie, 2005.

<sup>239</sup> Goldie, 2007.

What his criticism is useful at is showing that when it comes to making the best decision, we should not limit ourselves to the other's perspective. We should not take *only* that into account when making a decision. There might be things that are unknown to the other, yet that might be good to take into account when trying to figure out what the best thing to do is. This is the point Goldie raises about dramatic irony.<sup>240</sup> And this is a good point to consider when we want to weigh our considerations in favour of various possible courses of action. Certainly, I cannot fail to have both the external, and – if I empathise – also the internal perspective of the other person. So there is no worry that empathising inhibits us from *seeing* things. However, there might still be the worry that *if we rely only or too much on the perspective of the other when making a judgment, that* might lead us to make an unsuitable judgment. I will consider this worry now.

#### 4. 2. 2. Empathy weighs the scales the wrong way.

Another way in which one can worry that empathy clouds our judgment is to consider cases where empathy makes us take the other's opinion and perspective as having too much weight in our consideration of what to do. This might ultimately lead us to do not what is good, but what the other person thinks is good which is not always the best thing. One can think of a spoiled child as a good illustration of this case. The parents end up doing too much of what the child wants, which in the end might not be good for the child. One might think that, if empathy makes us more likely to commit a similar mistake, then we should handle empathy with care.

It seems clear to me that, in the spoiled child example, the problem is that of balancing out different considerations. That is, there is not anything wrong in seeing and appreciating the perspective of the child. What is wrong is the parent's failure in weighing the different considerations in the most beneficial way. So I think that phrasing the criticism in the way Bloom does – by saying

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<sup>240</sup> Goldie, 2007.



that parents in such cases err by having too much empathy – is incorrect.<sup>241</sup> It is not the getting of the other’s perspective that is problematic, it is what one decides to do as a result of getting it.

Someone might object by holding that even if empathising with the child and not acquiescing in its wishes are logically compatible, they are not likely to co-occur in reality. Maybe empathy just tends to make us err on the side of taking the other’s perspective as having too much weight in our decisions?

However, I do not think that there is a good reason to think this is the case. As I argued above in [section 4.1.4.1](#), a cultivated empathy is able to balance considerations coming from empathy with other kinds of considerations, such as considerations about the other’s own well-being.

Therefore having empathy would be just like having extra information which in and of itself is not problematic. What could be a problem is how we decide what to do, on the basis of that information. The problem about weighing the scales the wrong way is one of managing the information that empathy provides one with, and not a worry about empathy itself.

#### 4. 2. 3. Empathy makes us easy targets of manipulation.

It has also been suggested that empathy might cloud our judgment by being ‘easily manipulated’; Prinz cites evidence from a study by Tsoudis that found that judges deliver lighter sentences to defenders who display regret and harsher ones when the victims are visibly emotional.<sup>242</sup> Prinz suggests that this happens because the judges had empathised with the victims or defendants in the cases when they expressed regret and therefore the verdict has been altered.

I have two problems with this. First, it is not clear whether empathy as defined here, or as defined by Prinz (emotional mimicry) has been instrumental in altering the verdict of the judges. What Tsoudis has really measured seems to me to be compassion instead, the question used to measure empathy in her

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<sup>241</sup> Bloom, 2016.

<sup>242</sup> Prinz, 2011a, p.227.

study being: ‘To what extent do you feel compassionate towards the (criminal/victim)?’<sup>243</sup> Further, it is not clear to me that the alterations in the verdicts have been altogether a morally undesirable thing. Prinz claims: ‘What matters is whether victims were really harmed and whether perpetrators are really responsible’<sup>244</sup> and I am inclined to agree. But it seems reasonable to suggest that in order to assess the extent of a victim’s harm and of a perpetrator’s responsibility, empathy as defined here could provide important epistemic input and that a judge is therefore better off to take into account how the parties involved experienced things. Two crimes might look the same from the outside, but might be very dissimilar ‘from the inside’ for the parties involved and the fact that verdicts can be sensitive to this is not obviously ethically problematic.

One aspect of Prinz’s worry about manipulation is that the judges were presumably in a way manipulated by the agents skilled at expressing their emotions. I think that Prinz is worried that being more, rather than less, responsive to another’s emotions makes one more vulnerable to the other person manipulating them in some way. Since empathy usually involves recreating in one’s mind emotional as well as other states, then perhaps this worry can extend to empathy as well.

But still the worry does not seem fair. It is true that being able to completely block the emotions of another person might make our judgment more ‘objective’ in a way. But even by not taking another’s emotions into account we can be manipulated by them. More importantly, being responsive to another’s emotions does not automatically mean that the other person will be able to trick us into thinking whatever they want us to think. On the contrary it seems to me that it makes it even easier to detect, for example, when an agent has particular non-spoken intentions such as trying to manipulate us. The agent who is trying to manipulate us will now have more work to do; in the first case they only needed to carefully orchestrate the *content* of what they say, whereas

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<sup>243</sup> Tsoudis, 2002, p.60.

<sup>244</sup> Prinz, 2011a, p.227.

in this case they also need to carefully orchestrate the emotions they are displaying, and to put some work into hiding their real emotions.

Therefore, if anything, it seems to me that it is relatively harder for me to manipulate someone who is empathising with me, compared to someone who is not. If you recreate my experience in your imagination, it seems to me, it would be harder for me to mislead you because you will be aware of a greater pool of information than otherwise.

### 4. 3. Empathy inhibits action.

Another way to criticise empathy is to hold that, even if we have arrived at the right judgment about what to do, empathy might inhibit us from acting on that judgment.

Three separate worries fall in this category. One is the worry that when we empathise with people in distress, we might end up being so overwhelmed by their suffering that we become unable to act. This is to my mind the most challenging worry. A second worry is that empathy might detract our attention from acting, as we end up indulging in experiencing another's emotions vicariously and this somehow inhibits us from acting. Finally, the worry has also been raised that empathy has a limited motivational force. As I will argue, the latter two criticisms do not stand much ground. In all three cases the criticism is not relying merely on the weak claim that empathy is insufficient for right action but rather on the claim that we would have been more likely to act had we not empathised to begin with.

#### 4. 3. 1. Empathy inhibits us because of distress.

One worry is that empathising with certain kinds of experience tends to inhibit the empathiser from action. In particular this might seem to be the case with experiences which are excessively distressing: they might actually result in the empathiser becoming distressed themselves. In such cases one might worry

that empathising might actually get in the way of one's acting to alleviate another person's condition. Thus Hoffman defines empathic over-arousal as the phenomenon where a victim's distress cues are 'so aversive that an observer's empathic distress is transformed into an intense personal feeling of distress'.<sup>245</sup> Kaplan is worried by a similar thing, what she has called a 'vicarious trauma' response<sup>246</sup> in the case of which empathy does not result in a pro-social behaviour because the empathiser becomes immediately concerned with removing the source of the vicarious distress to themselves – for example, by looking the other way, crossing the street away from the beggar, switching the TV channel when shown news of a natural catastrophe, and so on. Prinz also speculates that misery might promote social withdrawal<sup>247</sup> and cites evidence that vicarious distress can interfere with prosocial behaviour.<sup>248</sup> He speculates that unhappiness might lead to withdrawal, avoidance, and defensiveness and contrasts this with a more 'dispassionate' registering of another's emotions<sup>249</sup> which according to him does not inhibit prosocial behaviour.

In short, empathy might be so overwhelming that it actually inhibits positive action. This seems to imply that in certain cases it is better to not empathise at all. For example, if I see a beggar and empathise with him I might be overwhelmed by his suffering and as a result do something to avoid him, e.g. cross to the other side of the road. By contrast, if I hadn't empathised, I would not have felt overwhelmed and would not have crossed the street to avoid the beggar, which would have been more likely to result in my giving him change. It does seem indeed that in certain cases empathising might actually get in the way of our acting to bring about something good. These would be cases where the person we are empathising with is suffering to such an extent that we cannot really bear to think about it.<sup>250</sup> These cases might be of a limited range

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<sup>245</sup> Hoffman, 2001, p.13.

<sup>246</sup> Kaplan, 2011.

<sup>247</sup> Prinz, 2011a, p.223.

<sup>248</sup> Eisenberg et al., 1988.

<sup>249</sup> Prinz, 2011a, p.223.

<sup>250</sup> This is best characterised as distress but it is worth noting that similar but slightly different is the case of depression. Depressive states are characterised by a lack of motivation and there is danger, that empathising with a depressed individual might lead to the

but they are by no means exceptional; depending on the general sensitivity and particular momentary state of the individual who is empathising, sometimes even more ‘trivial’ kinds of suffering can easily become ‘too much’ and trigger a reaction of avoidance.

One available reply here is to agree that empathy is not a suitable response in these cases, but to hold that empathy is a suitable response in other cases where the target of empathy is not undergoing too intense a suffering as to trigger an avoidance reaction from the empathiser. Perhaps a good (and healthy; see [section 4.5](#)) heuristic for the empathiser is to empathise selectively, only in cases where suffering is not ‘too much’. When we have good reasons to suspect that empathising with an individual might distress us excessively, we just would be better advised to not empathise at all.

This is certainly a reasonable strategy to follow in some cases, but I do not think that avoiding empathy altogether is the best heuristic to use. Using this strategy would mean, for example, that the moment I see a beggar I should stop myself from even attempting to imagine his condition. But given the epistemic import of empathy already discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and considering its moral value, it seems that empathising with people in distress should ideally not be avoided.

Therefore, it seems that more reasonable than avoiding empathy *altogether* would be to at least begin empathising, but pull out if and when we begin to become empathically distressed. One way to do this would be to empathise partially, imagining only select aspects of the other’s experience, yet without fully recreating the emotionally distressing aspects of it. Another way would be to somehow distance oneself when one feels the surge of negative emotions and to observe them without experiencing them.

Since our empathic responses are modifiable<sup>251</sup> one can learn to control one's own responses and not let oneself be too overwhelmed by another emotion. Hence it seems that if we have cultivated empathy so as to become good at

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empathiser becoming depressed themselves, and thus unable to offer help. However, I will understand suffering more broadly, so that it refers to both cases of distress and depression.

<sup>251</sup> Peterson, 2017.

controlling our empathic responses, we should be able to avoid empathic distress. While empathy does indeed sometimes lead to avoidance, a cultivated kind of empathy would be able to manoeuvre around the excessive, unhealthy distress in such a manner so it does not tend to result in our avoidance of otherwise easily available morally valuable actions.

#### 4. 3. 2. Empathy distracts us from action.

The second worry is that empathy somehow distracts us from action. It takes away our attention from action to feeling the other's emotion. For example, even defenders of empathy such as Gruen seem to acknowledge that feeling-along-with can be a distraction from getting something useful done.<sup>252</sup> Similar criticisms have sometimes been aired in the press. Brooks in his *New York Times* column criticises empathy as being 'a way to experience delicious moral emotions without confronting the weaknesses in our nature that prevent us from actually acting upon them'<sup>253</sup> seeing empathy as little more than a self-serving affirmation. The common thing between these criticisms is the claim that empathy compromises action.

I think however that there is a serious problem at the heart of these criticisms which reduces their strength. It is that they rely on an unstated assumption that *there is a disjunct between feeling and action and the feeling somehow takes away from the action*. But this assumption is at the very least very controversial. On the face of it, it seems plainly wrong to assume that the more one feels, the less one acts. Feeling and action are not components of a zero-sum game. Not only that, it seems intuitively more plausible to hold with Prinz that emotions are inherently motivating states<sup>254</sup>, states that prompt us to action, so the more feeling there is, the more action there will be.

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<sup>252</sup> Gruen, 2015.

<sup>253</sup> Brooks, 2011.

<sup>254</sup> Prinz, 2011a.

#### 4. 3. 3. Empathy and motivation.

Finally, another criticism has been aired at empathy: Prinz has criticised empathy by claims that it has a limited motivational force.<sup>255</sup> I think he is wrong to claim this and will now explain why.

Prinz holds that the empathetic emotions are limited to sadness, misery, and distress, and that these emotions do not have great motivational force. On the other hand, he argues that other emotions – what he calls emotions of disapprobation – anger, guilt, indignation – have great motivational force. He also cites evidence in support of the claim that positive emotions do have great motivational force.<sup>256</sup>

I am not going to challenge Prinz on the claim that emotions of disapprobation and positive emotions have great motivational force. I think he is right, and he cites good empirical evidence in support of this view. However I do not buy Prinz's claim that emotions which arise from empathy are limited to sadness, misery, and distress. I do not think Prinz can defend this claim either. On his view empathy is experiencing the emotions that another person has. And if 'empathetic emotions' is taken to mean the vicarious emotions, it seems clear that, just as the other person can have each and any emotion possible, so I can vicariously experience each and every emotion. On the other hand if 'empathetic emotions' are not the vicarious experience of another's emotions, but rather the emotions that arise out of the appreciation of another person's experience it also it is unclear that these emotions would be limited to misery, sadness, or distress. On the contrary empathy might make me feel anger or indignation at another person's situation. Hence Prinz does not support his claim that the empathic emotions are limited to sadness, misery distress, and so the only thing left to assume is that Prinz merely *chooses* to call the emotions of sadness, misery, and distress 'empathetic emotions'.<sup>257</sup> But certainly this is misleading and cannot be taken to mean that there is anything motivationally

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<sup>255</sup> Prinz, 2011b, p.9.

<sup>256</sup> Prinz, 2011b.

<sup>257</sup> Prinz, 2011b.

problematic with empathy since in fact empathy has no special connection with these negative emotions. With this I have shown that Prinz is wrong in his claim that empathy has a limited motivational force.

#### 4. 4. Empathy and politics: empathy distracts us from the ‘real’ issues.

Both Prinz and Bloom have claimed that a ‘politics of empathy’ is morally harmful. They worry that a focus on empathy distracts and takes away from the attention that other issues should deserve.<sup>258</sup>

Unfortunately these criticisms have not been put forward very carefully and before I can address them I will have to make more explicit the claims that Prinz and Bloom are probably making. I think that they might be making any or all of the following claims: that people should not make political decisions based on empathy; that political leaders should not tap into people’s empathy in order to manipulate their decisions; that there is something morally objectionable about a milieu in which empathy is put to the fore of public attention. As I will argue below, neither of these interpretations of the claim that a ‘politics of empathy’ is morally lacking, presents a problem to my thesis that empathy at the individual level should be encouraged and that cultivating empathy and involving it in one’s decision making is usually a desirable thing. First to the claims Bloom and Prinz are making.

Bloom in *The New Yorker* argues against an ‘increasing focus on the emotions’ and ‘politics of empathy’. He states that instead of empathy which he sees as a little more than a ‘spark of fellow-feeling’ we should concentrate on a ‘reasoned, even counter-empathetic analysis of moral obligation and likely consequences’<sup>259</sup> which involves what Pinker refers to as ‘harder-boiled faculties’ namely ‘prudence, reason, fairness, self-control, norms and taboos,

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<sup>258</sup> Prinz, 2011a; Bloom, 2016.

<sup>259</sup> Bloom, 2013.



and conceptions of human rights'.<sup>260</sup> Dayan in a *Boston Review* article interprets Bloom's position as follows: 'empathy summons an intensely humanized world, where our emotional life—how much we feel for or with—matters more than the conditions that cause suffering'.<sup>261</sup>

Bloom finds it particularly worrying that a certain kind of stories, namely those with identifiable victims which we can easily empathise with, get all the media attention, and thus take attention away from other more important issues. Bloom gives us convincing examples of how, say, a story about a baby trapped in the well, or a missing teenager, is able to captivate all media attention and unleash an outpouring of support, whereas other issues, presumably more deserving of attention, such as improving medical facilities, leave people unmoved.<sup>262</sup>

#### 4. 4. 1. A most plausible interpretation: criticising public attention in media and politics.

The claim that a 'politics of empathy' is not morally desirable here can be read as a weak claim about the desirable distribution of public attention. However, it is not clear whether Bloom intends it in this way, or as an argument against encouraging empathy in general. I will discuss the stronger interpretation in the following subsection, but first I will start with the weaker, and to my mind, much more reasonable one. I agree with Bloom that the way the public attention was distributed in this case, and perhaps in other cases, is in a way morally lacking. I do think that there is something left to be desired if the media attention is all consumed by a case of individual suffering rather than of some larger-scale disasters. I agree with Bloom that a world in which perhaps our media spends more coverage on other 'more important' issues would in some sense be more desirable. With this weak interpretation in mind, I agree with Bloom that a politics of empathy is undesirable.

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<sup>260</sup> Bloom, 2013.

<sup>261</sup> Dayan, 2015.

<sup>262</sup> Bloom, 2013.

And this claim, of course, does not pose any problem to my thesis that empathy at the individual level should be encouraged. What causes the problem here is not the fact that people can, and do, empathise. It is not at all clear that either decision-makers or the public empathising with victims is itself the reason for the distribution of media attention. There are a whole lot of other factors involved. Hu has recently replied to this criticism as well by nothing that ‘empathy’s preference is not the sole explanation, and may not be the best explanation for the phenomenon Prinz observes here’ since there are ‘a number of factors such as media coverage, political relevance, and so on’ which ‘contributed to the distribution of public attention’.<sup>263</sup>

The criticism of a ‘politics of empathy’ in this sense is at most a criticism that political decisions should not be made when *only* taking considerations from empathy into account; rather they should be made when taking other considerations into account as well, considerations such as fairness, rational problem-solving and the like. What seems problematic here is that political decisions are found lacking when it comes to ‘hard-boiled’ analysis, and considerations of fairness and the like. Even though Bloom calls this kind of analysis ‘counter-empathetic’ there is nothing in it which is contrary to empathy. They are just two completely different things. Again, this is not a criticism of empathy itself.

Another critic of the ‘politics of empathy’ is Prinz, and he is not much clearer on the issue of what exactly is undesirable about (the politics of) empathy either. He claims that ‘The politics of empathy tends to treat the victims of inequality without targeting root causes’<sup>264</sup> without aiding us much in understanding this claim. Since Prinz does not specify what he means by ‘politics of empathy’ his attack seems little more than giving this label to politics that does not lead to appropriate moral action. For example Prinz claims that empathy might offer ‘very helpful support’ to victims of economic injustice, but that it does not target the root causes of such injustice. This seems like a bold

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<sup>263</sup> Hu, 2018, p.351.

<sup>264</sup> Prinz, 2011b, p.224.

claim and in the absence of Prinz actually giving an argument in its support, it is hard to guess what his line of reasoning is. I would argue that this claim false: it seems unreasonable to assume that if I empathise with you as a result two things will happen: I will be willing to give you financial aid, and I will not be willing to work for a change in social structures that will secure your child's free education. Therefore it seems a rash and unjustified claim to say that empathy limits the scope of our actions in the way Prinz claims. On the contrary, it is far more probable that imagining other people's situation is a likely motivator for us to target root causes of economic injustice, just as it is a likely motivator for us to offer immediate financial help.

It is difficult to unpack the substance of Prinz's argument, but again on a weak interpretation perhaps his criticism is aimed not at how empathy affects us, but rather at the attention distribution in politics and media coverage. Perhaps the phrase 'politics of empathy' as used by Prinz is really supposed to pick out the fact that, say, the media covers stories about victims of inequality far more than, say, discussing ideas about root causes of inequality. As already mentioned, I think that this worry, if it applies, is a legitimate worry, and I will address it now.

I think that Bloom is right that there is something undesirable about a milieu in which it seems acceptable and normalised to have an entire nation's attention directed at some individual suffering, whereas other causes do not receive the attention they should. One might even (although this is not Prinz's claim) think about a Randian anti-hero, Ellsworth Toohey as embodying the sort of worries Prinz is on about. There is something sickening, almost evil, in not getting any help in building a better future, something good for all of us, because we are too busy feeling sorry about the less fortunate among us. And especially where distribution of public resources is concerned, such as public attention or funding, a focus on particular emotions might indeed be harming to society at large.

#### 4. 4. 2. What if the criticism is not just about public attention?

But is it possible that Prinz and Bloom mean something more than merely criticising the political milieu? Perhaps it is the way they phrase their criticism, but at times it does sound like they are almost against empathy itself, rather than merely the political climate and media coverage.

I think that in this sense there is a possible interpretation of Prinz and Bloom's worry with the 'politics of empathy'. Perhaps they worry that we end up affected by one thing *instead of* another and that the 'focus on empathy' is somehow 'getting in the way' of a reasoned analysis of moral obligation and consequences. What Prinz and Bloom particularly dislike here is the emotional aspect of empathy. However, this worry comes from an unjustifiable dichotomy between reason and emotion and the claim about one of them distracting us from the other is hard to justify. Whereas it is true that we have a limited attention span, it is a whole other matter to claim that it is exactly the attention that we would have given to one issue that has been wasted on this other issue, and also that it is exactly empathy which is to blame for this.

Therefore my thesis – that empathy in the individual should be encouraged – is not challenged by Bloom and Prinz's critique of the 'politics of empathy'. Except if one has a further worry. If the result of my thesis is to encourage empathy at the individual level, then one might wonder: would not such a kind of encouragement ultimately promote and make more likely the unjustified political and media attention, which I agreed was undesirable? Perhaps encouraging and praising empathy in individuals is more likely to result in, in such kind of distribution of media and political attention? I think this is a fair question and I will address it now.

#### 4. 4. 3. How does encouragement of individuals' empathy square with the ideal of avoiding an undesirable distribution of public attention?

Even if Bloom and Prinz are not criticising the individual functioning of empathy, but rather a kind of milieu that seems to place higher value on

emotional attunement with another person than that attunement really deserves in areas such as politics and media coverage. If this is true, however, this position is still compatible with my thesis that individual empathy should be encouraged. It is a criticism of what is put to the front of media attention rather than anything else.

However, one might think that the thesis that I defend here, even if not incompatible with Bloom and Prinz's view that there is too much 'politics of empathy' perhaps seems to suggest otherwise. If empathy is to be highly cherished on an individual level, how are we to escape a consequence such as the consequence that there will end up being 'politics of empathy'? Even if this is not in my immediate concern, perhaps it is a downside of empathy if the encouragement of empathy in life of individuals is likely to lead to such problematic 'politics of empathy'.

To this I can say that 'encouragement of empathy' does not mean encouraging it everywhere and always, and most certainly it does not mean encouraging it at the expense of other highly desirable things, such as rational analysis, and fighting causes of injustice rather than its symptoms. I would argue that, on the contrary, a cultivated form of empathy, one where we are less likely to be 'manipulated' by it, but rather in control of it, does make it *easier* rather than more difficult, to employ this analysis.

For example, in order to find a solution to the root causes of injustice, a huge motivation can come from one's imagining what would people who are the victims of such injustice feel. Even if in these cases empathy is not *as* palpable as empathy with real, rather than hypothetical, individuals, still if one empathises *systemically* with hypothetical representatives of all involved parties to be affected by a certain decision it seems to me that the chances of overlooking some ultimately desirable course of action are significantly diminished. This is so because empathising with more people, as opposed to a small number of people, is likely to dilute any biased effect that might come through from empathy. Were empathy systemic it would have been less likely that one particular story, such as that of a baby trapped in a well, would

dominate the landscape of public attention, since there would be so many other stories apart from this one to which people would attend. A systemic empathy would take into account, say, the future generations, empathising with the happier as well as the unfortunate, and so on. Therefore systemic empathy seems a reliable way to diminish the risk of overlooking a desirable course of action.

#### 4. 5. Empathy is unhealthy.

So far I considered ways in which empathy can negatively affect one's judgments and actions. The criticisms discussed above have been put forward in the moral philosophy literature and the popular press.

In this section I will discuss another, and to my mind even more serious issue with empathy, an issue which concerns the effect empathising can have on the empathiser themselves. It has to do with the fact that empathy can become 'too much' and not healthy for the person engaging in it. Although this dimension of empathy has not received a great deal of attention in moral philosophy, it has been extensively discussed in the medical literature, and in particular has been part of the discussion about what should be the preferred attitude practicing clinicians<sup>265</sup> (which includes health professionals who deal with mental as well as physical health) have to adopt with regard to their patients.

The main observation here is that empathy can become 'too much' and become unhealthy for the person engaging in it. This claim has, I think, an intuitive appeal, and I will not specifically argue for it here. Perhaps many of us have felt in one instance or another, how engaging too much with a negative experience of another person, can leave us drained, depressed or distressed. It is this complex of negative experience for the empathiser, which lasts for a significant

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<sup>265</sup> I will refer to all mental health professionals as 'counsellors' to avoid having to distinguish between the labels of psychologist, psychiatrist, psychotherapist, and others. Also, I will refer to all health professionals as 'clinicians' which includes any professional who has to deal with any aspect of a person's mental and/or physical health.

amount of time after the exercise of empathy, that I refer to as ‘unhealthy’ effects of empathy.

In this sense especially at a risk of experiencing the unhealthy effects of empathy are those who are in a position to spend a lot of their time interacting with people with grave negative experiences and who have to attend to these experiences. The prime example of a profession which is at risk in this sense is that of clinicians, as clinicians are expected to deal with issues that concern people’s mental and physical health. Clinicians are not the only professionals at a systemic risk of experiencing the negative effects of empathy, other professions like social work and charity work come to mind as well, and certainly the issue of the negative effects of empathy, although most easily observable in the medical professions, is an issue which is by no means restricted to the context of any particular profession since any individual who happens to empathise too much with someone’s negative experience is at risk of letting empathy become unhealthy for them. Nevertheless, since it is in the clinical literature where there is most systemic discussion of the way empathy can backfire on the person empathising, it is this literature that will guide the discussion in the present section.

In the medical ethics literature there is a debate over whether, and to what extent, clinicians should empathise with their patients. On the one hand is the position that clinicians should not be engaged emotionally when interacting with their patients, and instead should adopt an attitude of ‘detached concern’ which amounts to trying to understand the patient without emotional engagement.<sup>266</sup> This attitude of detached concern is only a less involved empathy according to the way empathy is understood in the present thesis, because a full-fledged version of empathy would also involve emotions, and is thus closer to what in the medical literature is sometimes referred to as ‘engaged empathy’<sup>267</sup> defined for example by Halpern as ‘an emotion-guided

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<sup>266</sup> Halpern, 2007.

<sup>267</sup> Halpern, 2003.

activity of imagination, making use of such distinctive emotional processes as associating, resonance, and moods that provide context'.<sup>268</sup>

One of the crucial considerations behind the view that clinicians should not be adopting anything more than detached concern when dealing with their patients, is that of protecting clinicians' own health. The thought is that too much emotional engagement with the patients can be overwhelmingly straining on the clinician. In other words, empathy can backfire, leading to emotional depletion, distress, and depression.

On the other hand some have argued that clinicians should empathise in an emotionally engaged way with their patients. One set of arguments to this effect is aspirational – being empathic is seen to be more in line with the aspiration of the medical profession, and with the move toward a patient centred care. Also it has been suggested that emotionally engaging with the patient might have certain benefits in the clinical context, such as increasing the patient's trust and thus enabling them to share relevant information with the clinician. Further, in the context of mental health in particular, one might reasonably suppose that there are independent reasons why empathy between clinician and patient might be desirable: for example, empathy might be one of the most effective ways to make the sufferer feel 'connected' to a reality beyond their own, a suggestion about which I will also speak in the following chapter.

Defenders of empathy in the clinical context have, as a rule, not been denying the claim that empathising with many people with significantly negative experiences can be exhausting and that too much investment on the part of the clinician can lead to negative effects for the clinician's well-being. And they certainly have not been denying that clinicians, just as any other people, should look after their own well-being.

The presumption is that there is a way to empathise which reliably does not backfire on the empathiser's own well-being. When one cultivates empathy in the right way, one would be able to know where one's own limits are, and there

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<sup>268</sup> Halpern, 2011, p.11.



will be a significantly reduced risk of empathy backfiring. And just because this risk is not completely removed does not mean that empathy should, as a whole, be discouraged.

Of course the exact same thing can be said for empathising with people in any context, not just the clinical one. We undeniably have the responsibility to take care of our own well-being. But just because empathy can sometimes, if overdone, backfire, does not mean that we should avoid any empathic engagement with others. The benefits of empathy are far too many for it to be dispensed with and not just any unpleasant sensation that was formed as a result of empathising with someone, counts as empathy 'backfiring'. Empathy can have negative effects on one's well-being only in the more extreme cases. And more importantly, it is certainly possible that one trains oneself to be aware of one's own mental and physical well-being in such a way as to be able to manage and reduce the risk of empathy backfiring.

Just as we are sometimes expected to go out of our way to help another person, so it is with empathy. Certainly, being a complete egotist who is not moved by anyone else's experience is, in a sense, the most 'healthy' of choices. And whereas looking after our own selves should, in my mind, have a very central place in any moral system, this is not to say that morality should mean we are all egotists. Getting a bit out of our way is certainly the right thing to do in many circumstances. And in the case of empathy, I think, the getting out of the way is in most cases fairly minimal compared to the advantages, both the general ones, and in particular the advantages to the person who empathises.

There is one more thing that has been suggested by some defenders of empathy in the clinical context. An argument has been put forward that empathy decreases rather than increases clinician burnout, due to its increasing the physician's overall job satisfaction.<sup>269</sup> The thought is that symptoms of burnout include a sense of depersonalisation, and diminution of personal accomplishment<sup>270</sup> which supposedly are counteracted by a more involved

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<sup>269</sup> Thirioux et al., 2016.

<sup>270</sup> Thirioux et al., 2016.

engagement of the clinician with their patients which contributes to clinicians experiencing their profession as more meaningful. Indeed there have been studies finding that domains of burnout inversely relate to empathy<sup>271</sup> but it suffices for present purposes to acknowledge that it cannot be quickly assumed that empathy does overall, increase rather than decrease burnout. Perhaps when all its negative and positive effects are balanced, it becomes less obvious that empathy's effect on one's well-being is if anything negative. Empathy might provide a sense of purpose and connection that would not increase emotional exhaustion, and perhaps a clinician who is very detached might burnout more quickly than one who is not.

Even though the clinical context can provide an additional reason why someone who empathises might feel satisfied with themselves ('I did my job well today') there is a sense in which empathy can provide us with a feeling of connectedness and a kind of special satisfaction and a sense of purpose in a variety of contexts. It is hard to articulate this idea of connectedness, but I give a go at it below, in [Chapter 5](#). For now I will just state that when taking into account *both* empathy's negative, as well as positive effects on one's well-being (speaking about one's levels of depletion, distress, and depression) it is not at all clear that empathy's overall effect on that well-being, even when empathy is 'too much' is a necessarily a negative one.

Still, this is not to say that excessive empathising cannot on occasion be a serious concern about one's own well-being. This means that empathy should be cultivated because once empathy is cultivated in the right way the risk of its having unhealthy effects on the empathiser is minimised to a great extent. Not only experience with empathising, but also awareness of one's own mental well-being is necessary. And of course there are independent reasons why such an awareness is always desirable. In order to be able to truly assess empathy's merits, we have to assess a cultivated form of empathy.

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<sup>271</sup> Thomas et al., 2007.

#### 4. 6. Empathy weakens our imaginative resistance.

Finally, I will raise an original criticism of empathy which has to do with imaginative resistance. The criticism is that empathy has the potential of being morally degrading because if we systematically empathise with all kinds of people, including moral transgressors, we would imagine things which our imaginative resistance might have otherwise inhibited us from imagining. But perhaps there is moral value in imaginative resistance, and if this is true, one can worry that systematic empathy might erode the protective barrier of imaginative resistance, and this might make us worse off morally.

There are two layers of this worry. One layer is that the 'perfect moral agent' as it were, is not someone who empathises on every occasion it is possible to do so. On the contrary, there are cases where the truly moral thing to do would be to not empathise with another person. Would we think highly of someone when, instead of flaring up in a righteous anger at a transgression, they decide to carefully and full-heartedly consider the perspective of the transgressor? The intuition is that in certain cases something of moral worth would be lost if an agent sets off to empathise with another person.

One can reply to this relatively easily by acknowledging merely that empathy is not always and everywhere the right response to a situation. This, stated in this way, might sound obvious. What the objector here seems to assume, which is wrong, is that I advocate the idea of a person who empathises everywhere and always, but I have not anywhere made this claim, and now I am specifically pointing out that I consider there to be situations such as righteous indignation, where empathy is not, at least at the moment, the most virtuous response. It is a separate lot of work to delineate where and under what occasions empathy is the 'right' response; I do not think there is an easy formula-like answer to this. Perhaps it is only up to a virtuous agent in a specific situation to know, when the situation arises.

Therefore this layer of the worry can be dealt with without much ado. It is not really an objection against empathy to say that a virtuous agent would not

empathise in a specific situation in which a less virtuous agent may find it appropriate to do so.

What is a challenge to my claim that empathy at the individual level should be encouraged, however, is the second layer of the worry. It has to do with systemic empathising. I *do* advocate that a virtuous agent is one who empathises a lot, and often, and with various people in various circumstances. The worry here is that, little by little, such kind of empathising might erode the agent's imaginative resistance, which could eventually lead them to become less virtuous. It is just one consequence of having eroded imaginative resistance that in the scenario mentioned above, when prompted by someone to imagine the situation of a moral transgressor, the agent would not deny it, but rather might indeed have 'second thoughts' about this – second thoughts that would immediately, on at least some moral frameworks<sup>272</sup>, reduce the agent's virtuosity. Thus, indirectly, too much empathy perhaps, whereas it is compatible with a high level of virtue, perhaps indirectly precludes someone from being super virtuous, a virtuous super-star, as it were.

This is the place to mention that this objection is inspired from a discussion in Morton.<sup>273</sup> Morton argues that being a decent person involves having internalized a code of behaviour that constrains one's imagination, and which has a blinkering effect that makes it difficult for one to understand important parts of human possibility. For example, when confronted with information about some committed atrocity (say a Nazi soldier shooting people in a concentration camp) a decent person is most likely to be shocked and quickly conclude that the soldier in question was a monster, a non-human, and they would not even make an attempt to empathise with the soldier, therefore missing on a chance to understand important things about human possibility. Morton is concerned that the imaginative resistance that goes along with being

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<sup>272</sup> I am having in mind moral frameworks that put value on spontaneity in arriving at moral decisions. Confucian and Daoist teachings, as far as I am aware, fall within this category, and perhaps also does Aristotelian virtue ethics, since on at least one interpretation of Aristotelian ethics, the truly virtuous person is the one who is of a single mind and does not have to deliberate before arriving at a moral decision.

<sup>273</sup> Morton, 2011.

a decent person makes it impossible to empathise with individuals who perform atrocious acts, and hence limits our understanding of some important sides of human nature. Morton does not formulate an objection against empathy, however his discussion points out to an inverse relationship between empathy and imaginative resistance and as such inspired the present objection.

By imaginative resistance here I mean the resistance to imagine committing certain morally repugnant acts. This is not the usual thing philosophers mean when they speak of imaginative resistance. Far more common is to think of imaginative resistance as the resistance to imagine counter-morals; it is not about resisting to imagine torturing another, but rather about resisting to imagine torturing another *and that being a right thing to do*. This is not how everyone thinks of imaginative resistance though, for example Morton in the paper I mentioned above thinks of it in a way more similar to mine. However, someone might still wonder whether it is a good strategy for me to choose to call the resistance to imagine committing certain immoral acts ‘imaginative resistance’ given that there is sizeable literature on imaginative resistance which yet does not seem on the surface at least to be concerned directly with the thing I am concerned with. What I will say in response is that what I am interested in clearly is a resistance to imagine something, so it clearly is *a kind of* imaginative resistance. Second, it is not at all clear to me that what I am interested in should have a different name, since it seems possible that what explains it would not be something so different from what explains the more ‘usual’ kind of imaginative resistance.

Standardly there are two kinds of account of imaginative resistance which see it as attributable to either our *difficulty* of imagining certain things, or our *unwillingness* to do so.<sup>274</sup> I am myself inclined to believe that in the moral domain the cannot / will not distinction is in an interesting way blurred, since for someone who has deeply internalised a moral code, imagining performing an atrocious act might present itself as an *impossibility* of sorts, even if it is not something that is *technically* impossible for his imagination to tackle. So I take

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<sup>274</sup> Stock, 2013.

it in cases like this it is not clear whether the reason to resist imagining lies primarily in difficulty or unwillingness to do so as both factors seem important and importantly entangled. I am myself tempted to think that speaking merely of unwillingness has the danger of overlooking how it is that in certain cases imagining something immoral might actually present itself as *impossible* for the moral agent. I take it this is at least sometimes the reason people, when being presented with evidence of an atrocious act, say things like 'I cannot imagine doing that'. This I take it is sometimes more than a turn of phrase; it is an honest appraisal of a kind of difficulty. On the other hand, putting the focus primarily on difficulty is at a risk of overlooking the agential aspect of imagination. Perhaps the difficulty interpretation is a more plausible one for the 'usual' understanding of imaginative resistance, yet I consider it to be the case that with the phenomenon I am interested in, unwillingness plays an important role as well. Still, I will not here commit myself to an account explaining imaginative resistance. I am only observing that it seems to be the case that many of us would resist empathising with perpetrators of atrocious acts, whatever the reasons for that, in the sense that we would tend to resist imagining what it is like to commit such an act.

I suggest that there are at least two reasons to suppose that imaginative resistance is morally valuable. One is the instrumental value it has in ultimately preventing us from imagining the adoption of certain attitudes, or the committing of certain deeds, where the thought is that imagining these might somehow make the attitudes more likely for us to adopt ourselves, and the deeds more likely for us to commit. For example, if I imagine what it is like to commit an atrocious act, that might in itself make the act somehow more available in my mind, and thus make me more likely to commit it.

Another reason has more to do with resistance being an expression of a person's principles; perhaps, even if the previous worry does not hold (i.e., even if there happens to be no empirical connection between whether or not I had imagined committing a certain deed, and the likelihood of me actually committing something similar) there is something desirable in people not wanting to even

engage in imagining certain things. It is a valuable act of pride. This latter point might be somehow similar to what Williams in his essay criticising utilitarianism has in mind in the following passage where he suggests that some people might have moral outlooks that would make them refuse to even engage in utilitarian considerations:

It could be a feature of a man's moral outlook that he regarded certain courses of action as unthinkable. [...] Entertaining certain alternatives, regarding them indeed as alternatives, is itself something that he regards as dishonourable or morally absurd. But, further, he might equally find it unacceptable to consider what to do in certain conceivable situations. Logically, or indeed empirically conceivable they may be, but they are not to him morally conceivable [...]. For him, there are certain situations so monstrous that the idea that the processes of moral rationality could yield an answer in them is insane: they are situations which so transcend in enormity the human business of moral deliberation that from a moral point of view it cannot matter any more what happens. Equally, for him, to spend time thinking what one would decide if one were in such a situation is also insane, if not merely frivolous.<sup>275</sup>

In a similar way, one might refuse to empathise with a serial killer, not because one finds it difficult or one fears that the imagining of the killer's experience would somehow influence one's own life; rather as a matter of principle and an expression of one's moral outlook.

It would seem that a commitment to empathising often would go directly against this principle and would, if anything, erode it if empathy is something one does systemically. So the worry is that empathising with all kinds of people and situations might ultimately erode my imaginative resistance, and deprive me of something morally valuable. Therefore developing a habit of empathy, while otherwise a beneficial thing, might ultimately be depriving me of something of moral worth.

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<sup>275</sup> Smart and Williams, 1973, p.92.

I think that this is a very serious objection against empathy. One might be disinclined to agree with me that imaginative resistance is morally valuable, but it seems to me not a straightforward thing to deny this. One cannot easily dismiss the claim that resisting to imagine certain things might be morally valuable. I am personally one who, despite my strive to empathise often, would resist imagining the experience of a serial killer, or a sadist torturer, and I do not think I am any worse human being for that. Intuitively, it even seems that the contrary is true – it seems to me that the internal resistance to even acknowledge the serial killer's experience in my imagination has certain moral value to me. And I am not altogether certain that I desire it to be the case that people around me are easily and without struggle able to jump into the mindset of serial killers or sadist torturers either.

One line of response to the worry would be to argue that imaginative resistance is not particularly valuable. If this is so, then empathy cannot be morally problematic, since it would erode something which wasn't valuable in the first place. Maybe I was wrong to consider this resistance of moral worth, or empathising with some moral transgressor dishonourable. But I am not convinced this is the case, and for the reasons just mentioned I think there is no simple way of denying the potential worth of imaginative resistance. I think this question merits a longer discussion which I cannot provide here.

Therefore two possible lines of response are left to me here. One is to deny that empathy leads to erosion of imaginative resistance. The other is to bite the bullet and to say that even though systematic empathy erodes imaginative resistance, we are overall better with more empathy and less imaginative resistance, than we are with more imaginative resistance and less empathy. I am not convinced of the merits of the second approach, and I will go with the first.

I will deny that empathy erodes imaginative resistance and argue that it is possible to retain our imaginative resistance while being a systemic empathiser.



I distinguish here two aspects of imaginative resistance. One has to do with its disallowing me to form a certain picture in my mind. The other has to do with a felt resistance, and inner 'friction', as it were, should I decide and attempt to form this picture in my mind. This friction is I think an uncontroversial phenomenological feature of imaginative resistance. It is like a slope one has to climb in order to reach the summit, and if one does not reach it, one does not end up imagining the thing one resisted imagining. Empathy is the equivalent of having reached the summit in this analogy: having formed the picture of the experience of the moral transgressor in my mind. Empathy is incompatible with me *failing* to imagine something. Therefore empathising with a moral transgressor is incompatible with the first aspect of imaginative resistance. However empathy is still compatible with the friction aspect of imaginative resistance. The fact that I reached the summit does not mean my climb there wasn't tough. Imaginative resistance would make empathy difficult, but not impossible. The fact that I experienced imaginative resistance is the fact that I was aware of this imaginative act as climbing a summit, rather than taking a stroll in the park. And empathy, even if systematic, need not erode the resistance aspect to imagining certain experiences. There is no reason to suggest that, just because I end up imagining something, my way there would have been smooth and void of inner qualms and friction.

One might be unsatisfied with this response. One might hold that the real value of imaginative resistance is the instrumental value mentioned above in keeping our mind clear of certain thoughts. As long as the thoughts enter our mind, no matter how difficult it was for them to do so, something morally undesirable has occurred. What is truly bad about empathy is that we end up imagining something, with or without an accompanying feeling of friction. And this might be dangerous. After all, it seems plausible that at least very often, the first step of performing a deed, including an evil deed, is imagining it. It does not seem implausible to suggest that it is more likely that I commit, say, a murder, if I have imagined what it is like to commit a murder before, as opposed to when the thought of what it is like to commit a murder hadn't even crossed my mind. One might be right to worry that imagining things makes them somehow more

available. If this is indeed so, the fact that empathy does not erode the feeling of friction when imagining certain things is all well and good; but it is not good enough. The real problem is that we reached the summit and ended up forming that picture in our minds. Our imagining the performance of immoral deeds paves the way to our committing them, and therefore systemic empathy overall increases the probability of our performing such deeds.

I think this is a serious objection. I do not think I can easily deny that in a sense empathy makes the committing of certain atrocious acts more available in our imagination; I will not challenge the claim that it is more likely for one to perform an action that one has imagined performing than an action that has not even crossed one's mind before. My only reply here is that empathy might have other effects too, which push us away from committing these acts, and it is not clear that the overall effect of empathy would push us more in the direction of committing these acts than away from it. There is hope that the insight gained by empathising is multi-dimensional and not confined only to the realisation that the criminal's point of view is one possible for a human being to have. The insight would extend also to the pain of the (potential) victims of the crime, and hence to why it might be a wrong thing. Generally, a practice of empathizing would lead one to a better understanding of the human condition and it is to be hoped, to a more benevolent disposition towards others. There is hope that systemic empathising would overall have made one especially unwilling to act on the immoral deeds that one has imagined just because one will be more acutely aware of the suffering they might cause. So even if the risk of one's performing an evil deed is somewhat increased by the fact that one has imagined that deed at all, the hope is that a risk of committing something immoral would be ultimately decreased by the repeated practice of empathising, since the moral insights gained by that practice are overall contributing to one's good moral disposition, in such a way as to make one acting on one's imagined bad deed particularly unlikely.

Further, one can argue that even without having previously imagined it, people would still be likely to perform atrocious acts under certain circumstances

anyway. As Morton argues, ordinary decent people would willingly partake in atrocities in certain circumstances, and our denial of this and unwillingness to empathise with evil-doers represents a failure of our understanding of human nature.<sup>276</sup> Therefore, it can be argued, that empathy with evil-doers might have a preventative role in that it helps us understand how barriers against committing atrocious acts in ordinary people can be eroded, and this understanding of parts of our nature which we usually do not think about might ultimately be beneficial and help us to control better our barriers. Thus, even if empathy increases the availability of the committing of atrocious acts, it also prevents them from being committed, due to the increased understanding of our nature that it provides us with.

Finally, there is one more thing to be said in favour of empathy. Imaginative resistance is not all of the time good and just sometimes it might be good for it to be countered. Empathy might be especially valuable in this respect. It might occasionally be the case that a deed for which we would normally feel imaginative resistance might in the end turn out to be something that should not be morally condemned. Our moral attitudes change and this is sometimes for the better. For example we can suppose that not too long ago people would resist imagining what it is like to be a homosexual because homosexuality would be seen as immoral, a kind of taboo. But empathising with homosexuals could show to people that homosexuals are not immoral. Thus it seems that where imaginative resistance sometimes makes us blind, empathy sees well, and sometimes empathy might be a way towards a morally good action when going against our imaginative resistance is needed.

#### 4. 7. Conclusion.

In this section I have addressed a variety of criticisms that have been raised against the moral value of empathy. I also developed and addressed an original criticism of my own. I hope to have shown that some of the criticisms are

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<sup>276</sup> Morton, 2011.

mistaken, whereas others point at features of empathy we should indeed be wary of, yet from neither of them we can conclude that empathy should be avoided. We can instead conclude that we should take special care and dedicate special attention to cultivating empathy in the right way, which includes for example, our dedication to empathise at least partially with the different parties affected by our decision-making. I hope to have shown that cultivated empathy is on the whole more useful than worrisome.

## 5. The Moral Value of Empathy: Building a Positive Case.

Empathy is usually thought to bring about moral benefits.<sup>277</sup> In this chapter I will argue that indeed there are good reasons to think that empathy has moral value. In particular, I will argue that empathy has moral value in three distinctive ways: it increases our awareness of how we should act; it provides us with a distinctively gripping motivation to act for the good of the other; and it brings about a special, valuable kind of togetherness with another person.

### 5. 1. Empathy informs our judgment in moral matters for the better.

One way in which empathy is morally beneficial is a direct consequence of its epistemic benefits. In cases in which one is motivated to bring about something good, empathy makes one better informed about the ways in which one's actions are likely to affect other people. If we are already motivated to bring about some desirable state of affairs, empathy would help us do it. This is so because we would be better in touch with how exactly our actions are going to affect others.

In [Chapter 3](#) I discussed the epistemic benefits of empathy. I argued that empathy allows us to understand the experience of the person we are empathising with, and that empathy allows us to gain understanding of things in the world that are valued by these people in particular ways. If empathy brings about these epistemic benefits, then it is easy to see that empathy how empathy can be morally beneficial, since one's better epistemic orientation is likely to produce more morally beneficial results than if one were to act in relative ignorance of the other's experience and of things in the world. For

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<sup>277</sup> Peterson, 2017, p.232.

example, having access to the other's perspective might make us better informed as to how our choices would affect their well-being. Therefore, if I am independently motivated to pursue what is good and avoid what is bad, empathy would be a useful tool to help me in this task. I take this to be a straightforward point about empathy's attaining moral value in virtue of its epistemic value.

## 5. 2. Empathy and morality.

Above I claimed that since empathy offers epistemic insights, then if one is already motivated to bring about something good to others, empathy would help them bring about these goods. Here I will argue for the more controversial claim that empathy is likely to boost one's motivation to bring about what is good for others.

I will argue for three claims. One is that empathy has a great motivational force. The second claim is that that which empathy motivates us to do tends to be for promoting the *well-being* of the person empathised with. That is, empathy intrinsically tends to promote the *good* as opposed to the *bad* or the *neutral* of another person. This, combined with the first claim, will result in a strong case for empathy's moral value. The third claim is that empathy increases what I will call our 'moral perceptivity' – our ability to detect and become aware of morally relevant features of situations. From these claims it follows that cultivating one's empathy will boost one's likelihood of bringing about what is good for others.

### 5.2.1. Empathy is motivational.

Here I will argue that empathy is motivational, leaving aside the question of whether that which empathy motivates us to do is in any way morally desirable. I will argue that empathy tends to motivate us to promote the well-being of

others in the following section. For now the claim is simply that empathy has a large motivational force.

Empathy has a large motivational force because it centres our attention on the experience of one particular individual. It seems that we are more motivated to act when presented with the story of one particular individual, rather than when presented with statistics alone. This has been called 'the identifiable victim effect'<sup>278</sup> and its existence has been empirically confirmed in many studies which show that we are more likely to donate when presented with the story of one person, rather than when presented with impersonal statistics, or the story of many people. For example, apparently we are even less likely to donate to a charity when we know that the money will benefit two children, than when we know that it will benefit one child.<sup>279</sup> The identifiable victim effect finds confirmation for example in the way charities work. Charities have long been using the fact that one particularly gripping way to motivate people to donate is to elicit their emotions, for example by sharing pictures and stories of the plight of one particular individual, rather than by giving out statistics alone.<sup>280</sup> Concentrating on an identifiable individual can extend our circle of care by bringing nearby what is otherwise distant and does not affect us. Empathising with one person can motivate one to help the many to an extent to which mere conviction might not always do. This is the same intuition that is behind the words of Mother Theresa: 'If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will'.<sup>281</sup>

The existence of the identifiable victim effect I think shows that empathy has the potential to motivate us, since empathy is the kind of activity that focuses our attention on the experience of one particular individual. As just mentioned, there is evidence suggesting that when presented with an identifiable victim people are more likely to act than if not presented with such information. Note that I am not claiming that in these cases people who donate to charities are

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<sup>278</sup> Slovic, 2007, p.88.

<sup>279</sup> Slovic, 2007.

<sup>280</sup> Bloom, 2016, p.59.

<sup>281</sup> Slovic, 2007, p.79.

empathising with the individuals – in fact I think that most of the people donating to charities are probably not empathising. My point is that if being presented with an identifiable individual motivates us to act, then empathising with an individual would also motivate us to act, since empathy by definition involves focussing our attention on the experience of one individual.

Therefore my claim here is that empathy is motivational because it is a way of making salient to us the experiences of particular individuals, and empirical evidence, as well as common sense, suggest that we are more likely to be motivated to act in a situation if we are aware of how identifiable people would be affected by our actions.

The implicit contrast here is between cases where I apprehend a situation without focusing my attention on how a particular individual is affected by that situation, and cases where I do focus my attention on the way a particular individual is affected by that situation. Empathy is not the only way for me to focus my attention on an individual's experience. I might consider this experience without empathising with the individual. So empathy is one way of apprehending the world via making salient the experiences of particular individuals; since evidence suggests that making salient such experiences is motivational, then empathy is motivational.

One might wonder whether empathy motivates us strongly when our attention is already focused on the experience of a particular individual; in other words, whether there is any additional strength that our motivation to act might obtain if we empathise with someone. For example imagine that I see you coming up the stairwell struggling with a heavy suitcase. It seems pretty obvious that a good thing to do here would be to help you with the suitcase and I might be motivated to help you in various ways, for example out of habit (I was brought up to help people with heavy suitcases) or out of eagerness to produce a good impression. It is also possible, however, that I empathise with you and imagine what it is like to be struggling with the luggage, and to be experiencing any or a combination of the following: muscle tension, despair, pain, tiredness, frustration, or even humiliation due to your inability to reach your destination



with the luggage. Of course given that helping with your suitcase is such an obvious thing to do, it seems that re-creating your experience in my mind would be mostly a waste of energy and effort in relation to the final outcome – my helping you with the suitcase. My purpose in considering this example is not to advise whether empathy in this particular situation would be desirable; rather it is to try and consider what, if anything, would be different in the *motivation* resulting from empathy when compared to the non-empathic motivation to give you a hand with the suitcase. In the suitcase scenario, no matter whether I empathise or not, it will be obvious to me that my action (or inaction) will affect one particular, salient individual – you. The question is whether the motivation to help if I empathise with you be in any way different, or maybe even stronger, than if I do not?

I am posing this question because I have an intuition that indeed motivation resulting from empathy will have a particularly gripping character: that I would feel it ‘in my veins’ as it were, that I want to help you, which means that in the case of empathy I would be somehow more engaged in the prospect of helping you.

I think that this intuition can be justified; since empathy engages many dimensions of my imagination, I would be aware of your experience in a more gripping way than if I registered it without re-creating it in my imagination. In particular, empathy would be therefore very likely to evoke my feelings, and feelings have a large motivational force.

Empathy is likely to evoke my feelings because it is a re-creative activity of imagination which engages various dimensions of experience, including ones with an affective feel such as physiological states, emotions, and feelings. In other words, when empathising I am engaging with your situation in an affective way. It can be argued that it is precisely the feelings evoked by being presented with an identifiable individual that can explain the identifiable victim effect. Slovic has argued that in cases of plights involving big numbers of people, our failure to act is explainable by a failure of our feelings to be activated in

ways similar to the ways in which they tend to be activated in the case of the plight of a single identifiable individual.<sup>282</sup>

The idea that affect can prompt us to do things that merely rational convincing might not is ancient. Hu recently argued that on Mencius' account of moral motivation an important step of cultivating someone's morality is to get them to feel an emotion. Hu discusses a famous passage in the Mencius, *Mencius 1A7*, where Mengzi takes up the challenge of making King Xuan care for his people. Mengzi learns that the king once spared an ox that was to be sacrificed in a ritual ceremony; the King says that he could not bear its frightened appearance, 'like an innocent going to the execution ground'.<sup>283</sup> Mengzi (after telling King Xuan that 'this heart is sufficient to become King'<sup>284</sup>) encourages the King to expand his circle of caring by encouraging him to feel towards his people the same emotion of compassion that he had felt towards the ox. Importantly, Hu argues that this process of moral cultivation involves not only reflecting on analogies between the plight of the ox and the plight of the people, but putting the king in a certain emotional state; 'instead of urging the king to intellectually acknowledge his obligations as a ruler, Mencius makes the king emotionally *feel* such an obligation'.<sup>285</sup> Hu argues that Mencian moral cultivation is 'not merely a matter of verbal debate but an embodied process that involves evoking the king's emotions'.<sup>286</sup> The king probably already knows that he *should* care about his subjects; therefore, Hu argues, a crucial step in Mencian moral cultivation is to make the king's 'heart move' since it is this affective dimension that could make the king actually care about his people. This I take as an example of the intuition that affective feel can be motivational in a way in which pure reasoning cannot always be.

Here is one reason why engaging with your experience in an affective way has the potential to motivate me. In cases where I am considering your situation in

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<sup>282</sup> Slovic, 2007.

<sup>283</sup> Hu, 2018, p.354.

<sup>284</sup> Hu, 2018, p.354.

<sup>285</sup> Hu, 2018, p.357.

<sup>286</sup> Hu, 2018, p.356.

a detached way, my emotional capacities are busy engaging with *my own* situation; by contrast, if I empathise with you, they will be, for a few moments at least, engaged in yours. If I see you struggling with a suitcase when I enter the building, and I am annoyed that they failed to give me the correct change in the bakery, even if I detect that you are struggling and that helping you would be a good thing to do, I would be concerned with my own ‘plight’ so emotionally I will be unavailable to get motivated to help you. By contrast, if I empathised with you at this moment, I would for a moment stop engaging with my own ‘plight’ and would get ‘out of my head’ as it were, and I would for a moment engage emotionally with your situation instead. Even if the end result is the same both in cases when I empathise with you and when I do not, there will be a difference in the phenomenal feel of the motivation which, in the case where I empathise, can be felt somehow more strongly, due to the fact that affective dimensions of my being are engaged with your situation.

In conclusion, empathy is motivational because we tend to respond to an individual’s plight (‘identifiable victim’ effect) more than we respond to unidentified individuals and empathy focuses our attention on an identified individual’s experience. Also, empathy is motivational because it usually engages the emotions, and emotions are motivational. This suggests that an ‘empathic person’ – i.e. someone who empathises often – would often tend to be motivated to act as a result of their empathy. Therefore, if we want to be the kind of people who act, then cultivating our empathy can be of help.

### 5.2.2. Empathy motivates us to bring about the good to the person we empathise with.

Here I will argue that it makes sense to think that empathy motivates us to bring about the *good* to the person we empathise with. The claim is that, all things being equal, empathising with you would motivate me to do that thing which would increase your well-being, rather than that thing which would decrease it, or would leave it at the same level.

In general, the claim that empathy motivates me to do the good for the person I empathise with seems to be a part of common sense. The invitation to empathise with another is usually seen not merely as an invitation to expand your intellectual horizons, but also as a step with a near-certain guaranteed result that this would make you want the good for that other. Also, as we saw in [Chapter 4](#), some of the criticisms of empathy<sup>287</sup> depend on the claim that empathy motivates us to do good things for people we empathise with, resulting in the worry that has been raised by critics, that this motivation might be so overwhelming as to cloud our judgment, and to make us pursue a course of action which, even if benefiting the parties we empathise with, might otherwise be unjust towards other people. The hypothesis that there is a link between empathy and ‘pro-social behaviour’ has been subject to empirical studies, most notably the ones by Batson et al.<sup>288</sup> These studies show that empathy gives rise to motivation ‘to promote another’s well-being purely for that person’s sake’<sup>289</sup> rather than some other reason.

All this evidence perhaps shows that indeed empathy goes *hand in hand* with good-doing, but barring any model as to why this might be so, it does not show that empathy *leads* to good-doing. Perhaps one might explain the correlation by arguing that this merely seems to be the case, because the urge to empathise in the first place would be more likely to arise for people who already mean the good to others; in other words, if I do not care about your well-being, there is little reason to expect that I would pay you the attention which empathy requires. Of course, this is not always the case; but it seems plausible to suggest that if I am indifferent to your well-being, I would most likely be disinclined to empathise with you. Therefore, the fact that I empathised with you shows that, at least in a minimal sense, I was not completely disinterested in your well-being. I paid you attention, I expended some of my cognitive and emotional resources in order to understand and appreciate your experience and from the fact that I was ready to do that it means that I was probably more inclined to

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<sup>287</sup> Prinz, 2011b; Bloom, 2016.

<sup>288</sup> C Batson et al., 2002.

<sup>289</sup> Song, 2015. Footnote 4.

bring you about good rather than bad from the start anyway. And if this is true, someone might argue that there is no reason to believe that empathy *itself* brings about the motivation to do the good for you. It might seem like empathy motivates me to bring about the good to you, but in reality maybe there is a selection bias going on: people empathise only if they already want to bring about the good to others. So the fact that empathy and good-doing go hand in hand, even if independently established by other means, does not necessarily speak volumes about whether empathy itself *makes* one more likely to bring about the good.

Therefore, despite common-sense, and some of the studies suggesting a correlation between empathy and good-doing, I still need to address the question of *why* the experience of empathising with you would make me want to bring about good to you.<sup>290</sup>

The intuition behind my answer to this question is that when I empathise with you, your experience is made somehow more palpable and more real to me, than it otherwise would have been. When I empathise with you, I am able to appreciate in a palpable way that you are *yourself* a subject of experience *just as I am*. And just as I feel generally, unquestioningly, motivated to bring about the good to myself, in a similar way, when my imagination is centred on your being rather than mine, I will feel the urge of motivation to bring about the good to you. Since I am motivated to bring good to myself not through any reasons, but immediately and spontaneously out of my very being me, then when in my imagination I transport myself to the being of another person, I would be just as spontaneously and immediately inclined to do them good, to want that good to obtain.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Perhaps one way to approach this question is to look for explanation at the neurological-psychological level; perhaps mirror neurons prompt one to do for the other person what one would do oneself. If I see you nailing your finger with a hammer, I might flinch instantaneously. This might well be explained by some mirroring mechanism. However, what I am interested in here is the high-order explanation of the phenomenon.

<sup>291</sup> Someone might point out that there are cases where people are inclined to desire the bad for themselves; a starting point on literature on this might be Stocker's essay. Stocker, 1979. However, when I claim that most of us are inclined to desire the good for themselves this is not a claim about any high-order desire. Rather, it is a claim about a spontaneous, and

This I hope shows why it makes sense for there to be a benevolent impulse associated with empathy. The reason is that if I, in my imagination, experience your experience, then part of what I experience would be the motivation to bring good to myself (as you) the desire for well-being of the person that I am empathising with. Therefore, empathy would leave us, all things being equal, want to desire the good of another person.

It is relatively unlikely that before I empathised with you I have actively desired you harm; rather, it seems most likely that before I empathised with you I was at most indifferent to your well-being. Therefore empathy, by bringing your well-being *into focus*, is likely to make me care about it, since a desire to promote your well-being does not generally clash with my own attitudes. Empathy is pointing my attention to your well-being, making me aware that it is a thing in the world that I could care about. It is only necessary to hold a weak claim – that most of us care (in a very minimal sense) about other people’s well-being – in order to hold that empathy would increase our motivation to do good to others. It just makes others’ well-being more salient to us.

One might worry that this view is at odds with my claim that empathy is a morally neutral instrument which could in principle be used for bad as well as good purposes. But the two claims are not incompatible; on the present account the connection between empathy and benevolence is neither indefeasible, nor necessary. It is possible that I am very skilled at empathy, and use my understanding of your experience for non-benign purposes, such as actively harming you.<sup>292</sup>

My claim is not the strong claim that empathy is incompatible with a non-benign response – I consider this to be wrong. But I want to claim that empathy results in a certain barrier that needs to be overcome if one is to harm, or be indifferent, to another. Just because empathy makes your experience palpable

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immediate, almost reflexive response out of the depths of one’s being, about something more akin to the instinct of self-preservation (e.g. flinching when something flies towards you) than anything else. And it seems to me a plausible assumption to hold that in this basic sense we all desire our own good.

<sup>292</sup> Someone else who explicitly makes the point that empathy is consistent with non-benign responses is Goldie, 2002, p.215.

and salient to me, in most cases, most of the time, the prospect of my reducing your well-being either actively or through my indifference, would be unwelcome to me in an emotionally palpable way. In this sense empathy would tend to provide me with a minimal motivation to bring about the good to you, and this minimal motivation is something I need to overcome if I am to act against it. Overcoming this motivation might be fairly easy; but all other things being equal, empathy tends to motivate me to do the good rather than the bad or neutral to you.

I would suggest that the intuition behind the claim I am making is similar to the intuition behind another claim which is sometimes made for empathy: the claim that something that occurs during empathy – the apprehension of the other as an independent locus of existence – is somehow at the core of morality. For example, Schopenhauer famously claimed that compassion (which is very similar to what here is understood as empathy) is the only non-egoistic, and so ‘genuinely moral’ motive.<sup>293</sup> According to Schopenhauer, morality is based on

the everyday phenomenon of compassion, [...] the immediate participation, independent of all ulterior considerations, primarily in the suffering of another, and thus in the prevention or elimination of it [...]. Only insofar as an action has sprung from compassion does it have moral value; and every action resulting from any other motives has none.<sup>294</sup>

More recently, a claim of empathy’s centrality in morality, has been made by contemporary moral sentimentalists, and in general the claim that empathy is central for morality seems to be common in moral sentimentalist theories.<sup>295</sup> For example, according to Slote empathic concern is fundamental to morality<sup>296</sup> and Sherman claims that it is only through empathy that we can cultivate the virtues of benevolence, generosity, compassion, and pity, since they presuppose empathic engagement.<sup>297</sup> What is seen to be at the core of morality in these

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<sup>293</sup> Schopenhauer, 1903.

<sup>294</sup> Schopenhauer, 1903.

<sup>295</sup> For a notable exception, i.e. a moral sentimentalist who *does not* accord empathy a central, or even an overwhelmingly positive role in morality, see Prinz.

<sup>296</sup> Slote, 2013.

<sup>297</sup> Sherman, 1998.

cases is some kind of affective, spontaneous apprehension of the other person as a subject of experience. However, even if such an apprehension has a central role in morality, this does not mean that empathy as understood in this thesis does, since empathy is here understood as an involved, conscious activity of the imagination. Still, empathy necessarily involves this kind of immediate affective apprehension of the other as a subject of experience, and I take it that if one believes this apprehension to be a cause of moral action, then one would have reason to think that empathy can be so too.

In conclusion, in this section I argued that all other things being equal, empathy results in our having a basic urge to promote another's well-being.

### 5.2.3. Empathy increases our moral perceptivity.

Here I will argue that empathy is morally valuable because it can help us detect occasions to act morally, which otherwise would not have been easy to detect. In this sense, empathy can increase what I will here call our 'moral perceptivity'.

It seems hard to deny that a crucial aspect of the moral achievement of a person is the ability to detect when situations have a moral dimension even if this is not immediately obvious. In the real world critical situations do not come labelled with 'morally relevant' sign and it is up to a person to decide whether a situation has a moral dimension or not. It must be hard to deny that the perfectly moral agent does not only somehow effortlessly follow standards set out by some moral system but also is able to navigate the social space and new situations in ways which correctly alert them to when a particular situation should be treated as a moral, and when as a merely 'conventional' one.

I will call this ability to differentiate which cases call for moral action, and which do not, moral perceptivity. Perhaps it is easiest to illustrate the importance of moral perceptivity by thinking about cases where one lacks such perceptivity. Maybe the ultimate example of lacking the ability to differentiate between when a situation has a moral dimension and when it has not, is committing crimes of thoughtlessness. The case of the person in the Milgram experiment



following the instructions despite the obvious damage and danger to a person's life is a good example of someone manifestly lacking moral perceptivity.<sup>298</sup>

What I call 'moral perceptivity' here is different from what is sometimes referred to as 'moral sense'. The latter usually refers to the way in which we seem able to spontaneously evaluate what is good or not.<sup>299</sup> Another take on the moral sense is to see it as the ability 'in something like a perceptual way to detect the moral goodness/virtue or moral badness/vice of other people'.<sup>300</sup> Slote has recently argued that empathy is the moral sense, since good actions, acts of benevolence, are accompanied by a certain warmth, which warmth we can catch on when we empathise with the actor. Similarly bad actions are accompanied by a sense of chill or cold-heartedness which we can catch on when we empathise with the actor. Therefore, by empathising with a person committing a deed, we are going to feel warmth or cold-heartedness, and this is a way via which we can come to be sensitive about whether the person or action are morally good or bad.<sup>301</sup> However, as Hardy and Kauppinen independently note, Slote's claim that acts of benevolence are accompanied by a certain warmth is in need of defence<sup>302</sup>, and according to Hardy, Slote's view of empathy as a moral sense can be interpreted in at least one other way, according to which we feel kinship with those people who feel the same way about some action, which then gives us a feeling of warmth.<sup>303</sup>

Instead what I call moral perceptivity is the ability to distinguish the morally relevant features of situations. My claim is that empathy can enhance our moral perceptivity because re-creating another's experience can alert us to the moral dimensions of a situation: it might be easier to see how certain feature of a situation is morally relevant if we can occupy another's point of view. In this

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<sup>298</sup> Milgram, 1963.

<sup>299</sup> E.g. according to Hutcheson the moral sense is 'a determination of our minds to receive amiable or disagreeable ideas of Actions, when they occur to observation, antecedent to any opinions of advantage or loss to redound to ourselves from them.' Hutcheson et al., 1726, p.135; Kauppinen, 2017b.

<sup>300</sup> Slote, 2017, p.845.

<sup>301</sup> Kauppinen, 2017a.

<sup>302</sup> Hardy, 2017; Kauppinen, 2017a.

<sup>303</sup> Hardy, 2017.

sense sometimes it can be our empathy for the people involved in a situation what makes us recognise a situation as having a moral dimension.

Of course I am not claiming that empathy is always, or even often, necessary to apprehend morally relevant features of a situation. For instance, in the suitcase example discussed above it seems easy for me to detect without empathising with you that helping you with your suitcase is a good thing to do. In some cases such as this it is 'obvious' or easy to detect morally relevant features of a situation. Another example would be the more drastic cases of acts that are universally thought of as morally transgressory – such as the cases of murder or torture. We can just learn – e.g., by being told – that murder is bad, and then – even if we do not apprehend *why* it is bad – we would be able to be aware that in any situation that involves murder, that there is something moral at stake. Therefore in many cases we do not need to exercise any empathic ability in order to become aware of certain morally relevant features of situations.

However, there are also cases where it is not so straightforward to figure out morally relevant features of situations. I would like to argue that in such cases empathy can be especially helpful for alerting us to the moral features of a situation.

For example, it might not be obvious that I should reply to your message to go out this weekend if I am not interested in going out with you. After all, you will eventually 'get the message' either way, even if I do not reply, since the fact that I did not reply would itself 'send a message' as it were, that I am not interested. Perhaps there are even certain costs associated with replying to your message, because it is *some* effort (even if fairly minimal) and I certainly do not have any *obligation* to reply. Even further I might not fancy being 'rude' by telling you directly that I am not interested in you, and that you should stop inviting me to things. Because of these considerations, if I do not empathise with you, I probably would ignore your message without thinking twice about it, and I would not even consider my texting habits as something that *could* be seen as morally good or bad, I would just read your message and not reply, because I am not interested in the offer. However, if I empathise with you, I will realise

that providing no response might be disrespectful or even devastating to you, and therefore I would simply reply negatively, informing you that I am not interested, as I would be able to see that this would be for your benefit. If I see things from your perspective, it would be clear to me that it would be better for you to be on the same page with me regarding my feelings, and not to hope to go out with me, nor make plans which would be ruined. In this way, my empathy has alerted me to the moral dimension of a situation which seems to be to certain people not obvious.<sup>304</sup> In short, if I am not empathic, I might not even realise that my behaviour might be hurting you, but if I imagine what you are going through, I might become more considerate of the things I do. Therefore empathy can alert me to moral features of the situation.

In particular, empathy would be especially helpful for enhancing our moral perceptivity in situations where the reasons to act morally have to do with another's experience or psychological state. In these cases some of the morally relevant features of the situation would be made especially salient via recreating the other's experience. In the suitcase example, if the reason I should help you has anything to do with your present experience – e.g. your experiencing tiredness and frustration – then recreating your experience would make me directly aware of morally relevant features of the situation. By contrast, using cold judgment alone in this case might leave me less directly in touch with the reason why I should help you. So the claim here is that in cases such as the suitcase one, where my reasons to act ultimately have to do with your experience, empathy might get me more directly in touch with these reasons. If I empathise with you I would be able to think of the impact of my acts in palpable terms – you are going to feel like *this* if I help you – and this would make me value my acts in a different way than I would had I not empathised.

There is some empirical evidence which could perhaps be brought in support of the claim that empathy enhances our moral perceptivity. This is a much discussed set of experiments conducted by Blair in the nineties, which allegedly

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<sup>304</sup> The practice of ceasing all contact with the other person and ignoring their attempts to reach out is also known as 'ghosting' and it has been suggested that it is becoming increasingly more prominent, e.g. LeFebvre, 2017; Freedman et al., 2018.

found that psychopaths have difficulty differentiating between moral rules, like the rule that you should not hit another person, and conventional rules, like the rule that you should wear a uniform to school.<sup>305</sup> The ability to draw the conventional/ moral distinction seems to be an important tenet of what I here call moral perceptivity since a reduced ability to draw the distinction suggests a reduced ability to be aware of morally relevant features of situations. Hence a reduced ability to draw the distinction entails a reduced moral perceptivity.

Three dimensions were thought to represent the conventional/ moral distinction in Blair's experiments: permissibility, seriousness, and authority-dependence,<sup>306</sup> and psychopaths were found less likely than healthy controls to be able to distinguish between moral and conventional scenarios on all three dimensions. Blair's hypothesis was that psychopaths think of all transgressions as conventional rather than moral. Since characteristic of psychopaths is their lack of empathy towards others, one possible explanation of Blair's finding is that empathy might be what helps us to become aware of the conventional/ moral distinction of situations.

It is worth noting that the credibility of Blair's experiments has been questioned. Baxter notes that only in Blair's second study involving children the results directly confirm the hypothesis; in the first study which involved imprisoned psychopaths, the subjects tended to treat all transgressions as moral rather than conventional, and Blair explains this with the imprisoned psychopaths' motivation to appear virtuous.<sup>307</sup> Since this interpretation is only one possibility, one can reasonably wonder whether the data actually corroborates Blair's hypothesis. But even if we do not agree with Blair that psychopaths tend to see the moral as conventional, there still seems to be something amiss with psychopaths' ability to make the conventional/ moral

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<sup>305</sup> Blair, 1995; Blair, 1997.

<sup>306</sup> Baxter (2017) convincingly argues that the authority dimension is problematic in at least two ways: first, many conventional transgressions cannot be related to authority; and second, one can reasonably suggest that even among non-psychopaths the failure to recognise that some transgressions are not authority-dependent might be common.

<sup>307</sup> Baxter, 2017.

distinction.

There is one more thing that has to be kept in mind. As noted by Vargas and Nichols, the experiments do not show that psychopaths are *unable*, but merely that they are *less likely* than ‘normal’ subjects, to draw the conventional/ moral distinction.<sup>308</sup> Hence if psychopaths are not empathic, it would seem that at most these experiments can show that empathy might *aid* the drawing the contours of the moral, but they definitely cannot be taken to show that empathy is *necessary* for it. Since at least some psychopaths some of the time are able to successfully draw this distinction, it would be unlikely that empathy is necessary for one to be able to perceive a situation as moral.

One might wonder if, even if a psychopath is reasonably able to categorise situations as belonging to either the ‘moral’ or ‘conventional’ domain, there is not a sense in which they are not able to fully understand what *makes* a situation moral. As Baxter argues, an ability to categorise situations as moral is not sufficient for moral understanding, and without a certain kind of understanding ‘we are left with a sense of ‘should’ that is prudential, rather than moral’.<sup>309</sup> This is so because:

The kinds of reason presented by an infraction of ‘the rules’, while pressing, are much less pressing than the kinds of reason that are salient to normal agents when considering an action that will cause harm to others. If psychopaths can indeed only recognise and respond to these kinds of reason, then they are missing an important piece of the normal agent’s psychological repertoire [...].<sup>310</sup>

A handy simile used by Elliott to capture this intuition is that of someone who is able to describe in correct terms why a certain composer is great, yet who is ‘clearly and unquestionably tone deaf’.<sup>311</sup> In a similar way Elliott suggests that psychopaths might have some understanding of moral rules, but this does not

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<sup>308</sup> Vargas and Nichols, 2007.

<sup>309</sup> Baxter, 2017, p.114.

<sup>310</sup> Baxter, 2017, p.117.

<sup>311</sup> Elliott, 1996, p.78.

mean they do not lack ‘any sort of deep engagement with morality’.<sup>312</sup> Using a somewhat similar analogy, Baxter compares the psychopath to a person who is unable to see a work of art as valuable, even if they are aware that other people see something of value in the artwork. In a similar way, Baxter argues, psychopaths are unable to ascribe value to other people and non-egocentric considerations ‘simply do not occur to psychopaths as something of which they should take account or by which they should be motivated’.<sup>313</sup>

Overall Blair’s experiments show that reduced empathy correlates with a reduced ability to draw the conventional/ moral distinction. It can also be argued that reduced empathy correlates with a reduced understanding of what makes a situation moral. However, from neither of these it can be inferred that empathy is what aids one to draw this distinction, or what aids one to understand what makes a situation moral; for example it could be the case that that which makes one capable of drawing the conventional/ moral distinction (and/or understanding what makes a situation moral) is also that which makes one capable of empathising. However, if levels of empathy correlate with levels of ability to draw the conventional/ moral distinction, one can reasonably wonder whether cultivating one’s empathy does not aid one in increasing one’s ability to draw the distinction. For example, if the same capacity underlies both our ability to empathise and to draw the distinction, then cultivating our empathy, in so far as it results in strengthening of the same capacity, might aid us in increasing our ability to draw the distinction.

For example Baxter argues that the reduced ability of psychopaths to draw the conventional/ moral distinction is a result of them failing to see others as sources of value, which failure Baxter attributes to psychopaths’ lacking ‘the intensity of full-blooded emotional experience’.<sup>314</sup> A core characteristics of psychopathy is ‘the profound emotional absence’<sup>315</sup> and according to Baxter it is precisely the ‘general shallowness of emotional experience’ – referring to a

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<sup>312</sup> Elliott, 1996, p.78.

<sup>313</sup> Baxter, 2017, p.125.

<sup>314</sup> Baxter, 2017, pp.192–193.

<sup>315</sup> Baxter, 2017, p.124.

lack of or a reduced embodied feeling element in emotional experience – which ‘interferes profoundly with the psychopath’s experience of value’.<sup>316</sup> On the present account the ability to have a full-blooded emotional experience would be a prerequisite for a full-fledged kind of empathy. On Baxter’s hypothesis it is the inability to have full-blooded emotional experience which causes psychopaths’ reduced ability to draw the conventional/ moral distinction. Such a lack of full-blooded emotional experience would cause reduced ability to empathise. Therefore, if a hypothesis such as the one Baxter defends is right, it would explain why reduced levels of empathy correlate with reduced ability to draw the conventional/ moral distinction without it being the case that empathy is that which *makes* one able to draw this distinction. Nevertheless, even on such an account it seems plausible to suggest that cultivating one’s empathy would be likely to aid one in cultivating one’s ability to draw the conventional/ moral distinction, in so far, at least, that it is possible that cultivating empathy might result in one’s becoming more capable of having full-blooded emotional experiences. At least in non-pathological cases where having a full-blooded emotional experience is at least a possibility, it seems that my making an effort to empathise, since it would involve making an effort to have a full-blooded emotional experience, could aid me in understanding what makes a situation moral.

In conclusion, it seems plausible to suggest that cultivating my empathy might, via engaging in me that same capacity which is responsible for my ability to draw the conventional/ moral distinction, could aid me in my understanding of what makes a situation moral, hence in increasing my moral perceptivity. Also, as I showed earlier, empathy can directly increase my moral perceptivity, by making me aware of moral dimensions of a situation which might be more easily accessible via re-creating the experience of another person. These are two ways to show that cultivating our empathy would make us overall more morally perceptive, i.e., more capable of becoming aware of morally relevant features of situations.

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<sup>316</sup> Baxter, 2017, p.148.

### 5. 3. Empathy allows us to be together with others in a special way.

I will now argue that empathy can be of value because it brings about a special togetherness between two people allowing us to *be with* another person in a unique way. This connection can be felt by both parties, the target of empathy, and the empathiser themselves, and it can be particularly valued by the person we empathised with. That empathy can bring about such a sense of togetherness can be evidenced by the way empathy is sometimes appreciated by the person empathised with, which is perhaps most obvious in the encounter with someone struggling with a mental difficulty. Before I examine this scenario, however, I will argue that togetherness, or connectedness, is important for human well-being.

The value of togetherness for human well-being is not, as far as I am aware, feverishly discussed among philosophers. I take togetherness to be a state in which one feels like one is together with someone in the sense of being somehow ‘connected’ with them. When claiming that togetherness is good for human well-being, I do not mean merely that, say, it is good to be physically co-present with other people. Even though I believe there is little reason to doubt that this kind of co-presence is of crucial importance for human well-being, what I am interested in here is a more psychological kind of togetherness – togetherness as in bridging psychological aloneness. One might be in a crowd of people, yet do not feel togetherness; similarly, one might experience togetherness with someone even if they are not physically co-present. I will focus here on this more psychological sense of being together<sup>317</sup> because I think that it is this kind of togetherness which empathy can help us bring about.

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<sup>317</sup> I hope that in an age of technologically mediated communication, separating the ‘physical’ togetherness, and the more ‘psychological’ togetherness would not raise conceptual difficulties.



It seems hard to deny that togetherness, in this more encompassing sense in which it is more than physical co-presence with another, is an important aspect of human well-being. In psychology, it is recognised that the need to belong is ‘one of the most basic and pervasive human drives’<sup>318</sup> and feeling connected to others is seen as essential to well-being, a feeling often conceptualised in terms of love and care.<sup>319</sup> Different from that, speaking in a more encompassing sense of connectedness, Fromm claims that we all have a need for union, and separateness is the fundamental feature of human existence, and the fundamental problem of people.<sup>320</sup> There is hardly anyone who would not agree that psychological isolation is usually a terrible thing. One fact that can be brought in evidence of the fact that people desire to bridge psychological isolation is the simple fact that people ‘share’ things. That sharing is an important aspect of what people find valuable is in our day and age particularly easily recognisable from the rise of a social media culture where people are encouraged to share their experiences online.

In the philosophy of well-being literature there have been some efforts to highlight the social nature of people, but I am personally not aware of anything that is a direct statement of the value of togetherness itself. Some of the closest claims seem to be, for example, Nussbaum’s speaking of affiliation as one of the core human capabilities.<sup>321</sup> But this is not completely overlapping with what I am interested in, since I might feel affiliated to an institution, but that would not bring me the sense of togetherness that I want to argue empathy can bring me.<sup>322</sup> Griffin comes closer, claiming that having ‘deep personal relations’ is a prudential value and it is these relations that ‘contribute to making one’s life fulfilled’ and without such relations ‘an adult will suffer [...] an altogether less experiential, more contentious sense of “suffering”’.<sup>323</sup> I take it that on at least

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<sup>318</sup> Baumeister and Vohs, 2007.

<sup>319</sup> E.g., ‘to feel connected to others – to love and care, and to be loved and cared for’ in Deci and Ryan, 2000, p.229.

<sup>320</sup> Fromm, 1995.

<sup>321</sup> Nussbaum, 2001.

<sup>322</sup> Although, interestingly, an element of affiliation seems to be ‘to be able to imagine the situation of another’, p.79.

<sup>323</sup> Griffin, 1998. He argues that one cannot reduce prudential values to natural facts.

one interpretation what makes a personal relation 'deep' has something to do with a greater sense of connectedness between two people.

Other fields like that of clinical psychology have paid more attention to how important a sense of connection can be for a person's well-being. Perhaps one of the most dramatic claims about the importance of togetherness for human well-being is Berg's claim that loneliness is the fundamental cause of *all* mental illness:

The variations are endless but the essence is always the same: the psychiatric patient stands apart from the rest of the world. This is why he has a world of his own [...] Thus, loneliness is the nucleus of psychiatry. If loneliness did not exist, we could reasonably assume that psychiatric illness could not occur either.<sup>324</sup>

One does not need to agree with the stronger claim that loneliness is at the heart of many psychiatric illnesses in order to appreciate that it is a terrible thing that can be truly devastating and that it is something that people with mental illness suffer from. The sufferer stands 'apart from the rest of the world' which is easy to observe with there being a certain lack of understanding between the sufferer and other people, the 'sane' ones. Thus it is almost as if the patient inhabits a different world, even if they move in the same physical space as other people.

What breaks this isolation is a sense of connection with other people. One way this connection can manifest, I take it, is in a sense of 'being on the same page' with others, and of them 'being on the same page' with you; the sense of sharing one and the same reality. If you are suffering from a lack of connect in this sense, and if there is someone who knows what it is like to be experiencing what you are experiencing, your awareness of this person who knows would almost tautologically bring about this connectedness, it would relieve you from your isolation. In this sense, then, empathy is a powerful tool to bridge the isolation

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<sup>324</sup> Jan Hendrik Berg, *A Different Existence: Principles of Phenomenological Psychopathology* (Duchesne University Press, 1972).

of someone who is suffering from a lack of connectedness, irrespective of whether they suffer from a mental illness or not.

I also take it that another way in which this connectedness can manifest is in a less concrete way; perhaps it is not necessary that someone actually *is* on the same page as you regarding your experiences, but rather it needs to seem like a *possibility* – or even better, as something that cannot be doubted – that another person *could* be on the same page as you regarding your experiences. Empathy is valuable in this case too, for in order for me to believe in the possibility of being on the same page with others, I need to have experienced empathy – either as an empathiser or as a target of empathy – and I need to experience it regularly enough. In this sense it is valuable for well-being not just to be surrounded with people often – that alone might not cure isolation. What is even more valuable is to have people around you who are empathising with you often enough, so you can be prevented from suffering this profound isolation.

One way to see that empathy can bring about a strong sense of connectedness between two people is to observe the great value that someone who has suffered profound isolation would attach to being empathised with. This is what Ratcliffe does when he observes the value that depressed patients attribute to empathy.<sup>325</sup> As already mentioned above in [section 1.3.4.3](#) one of the core characteristics of depression is a profound sense of isolation; a common metaphor being used is that of being put underneath a glass jar, as it were, unable to connect to other people. As was also mentioned above, people with depression feel that their experience ‘cannot be successfully conveyed to others’<sup>326</sup> and that ‘other people are unable to understand the experience or just do not care’.<sup>327</sup> That is why the patient’s face ‘lights up’ when another person is

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<sup>325</sup> Ratcliffe informs us: ‘The label “depression” encompasses a range of diagnoses, but the kinds of experience I will address are all consistent with diagnosis of a major depressive episode or major depressive disorder.’ Ratcliffe, 2014.

<sup>326</sup> Ratcliffe, 2014, p.271.

<sup>327</sup> Ratcliffe, 2014, p.271.

'suddenly' present in their world.<sup>328</sup> Empathy breaks the isolation of the sufferer and thus relieves one of the major symptoms of depression.

Here important is interactive empathy – in order for you to feel connected to, I have to communicate this connect to you; it will not be enough if I simply understand your experience, or a feature of this experience, without making you aware that this is so. In order for my empathy to have some beneficial effects for *you*, I would have to somehow communicate it to you. If I empathise with you 'in secret', then this could not be any consolation to you. However, if I communicate to you my understanding (even if a partial one) or even just my effort of imagining what it is like to be you (regardless of whether it results in an understanding that is fully-fledged) this can result in a sense of connectedness.

One might agree that empathy is valuable in this context, but still doubt whether it is valuable for most people, most of the time. For example, it might be reasonable to suggest that those lucky ones who are saturated with love and friendships might need less empathy in order to flourish. For them one person more, or one person less, empathising with them would make little difference to their overall well-being. If we look to those lucky few, and ask them what is of value in life, they might not even think of mentioning togetherness. They might even think that loneliness is a luxury and believe themselves self-sufficient, and feel little but derision for those in need of togetherness. And if one has reason to think such people are not in fact few, but that many people are firmly embedded in stable social circles and would not appreciate this special sense of connection empathy provides, then perhaps achieving togetherness via empathy can only be of value to a few lonely souls. And maybe what applies to a few lonely souls does not need to tell us anything about the human condition in general.

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<sup>328</sup> The metaphor of 'lighting up' I take from Havens: 'It is a dramatic experience to share the flat timelessness of many chronically schizophrenic people, and then to watch them light up in recognition of your sudden presence in their lives.' Even though the example here is that of a chronically schizophrenic person Havens' discussion is general. Havens, 1985, p.24.

However, I would argue that it is not that connectedness is like a medicine, needed only by the sick; rather, it is like a nutrient that the healthy live on, and the sick are deficient in. Sometimes this nutrient can be so basic, as to be hardly more noticeable than the air we breathe. Above in [section 1.3.4.3](#) I already discussed what Ratcliffe calls a ‘broad kind of phenomenological change’; the fact that sometimes one can experience the world very differently from others because of an alteration of an aspect of experience ‘that is so pervasive and deeply engrained that it is seldom noticed and even more rarely discussed’.<sup>329</sup> In this extreme case, the sufferer lacks a sense of connect with others – this includes the minimal connectedness of inhabiting the same world with them. It is not that the healthy person does not need this minimal connectedness – it is just that for them this connectedness is so pervasive that they do not even notice it.

I take it that many or perhaps most people have not suffered the loss of this minimal sense of connectedness. Similarly I consider it in principle possible that there might be some people who rejoice in a permanent feeling of connectedness (and not just minimal one) to others even if there are no instances of empathy in their life. For example a strong sense of togetherness might be achieved by entertaining the same thoughts as another person – what after Heal we can call ‘co-cognition’.<sup>330</sup> From experience, it seems that many of the moments in which we feel connected with others, we do not wonder about *their* experience is, nor they do about *ours*, it is just that we looked in the same direction and shared the same thoughts about a same topic.

Still, for the lucky individuals who feel connected even without empathy, what makes for their sense of connectedness, I would argue, is that they do not even doubt that they share the same reality with others and that there are people

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<sup>329</sup> Ratcliffe, 2014, p.272.

<sup>330</sup> Heal, 1998. Heal on co-cognition: ‘Co-cognition is just a fancy name for the everyday notion of thinking about the same subject matter [...] So for example, two persons M and N co-cognize when each has the same beliefs and interests and reasons to the same further belief. [...] Or M and N may co-cognize if M actually believes what N entertains as mere fantasy, but each exercises the same grasp of the subject matter and so the same patterns and linkages are detectable in their thoughts.’ P.483.

around them to whom in principle, their own experience could be made knowable. However, it seems to me that even such a lucky person would not fail to place positive value in empathy. Most of us would evaluate positively the opportunity to share internal, private aspects of our experience; often people want others to know how they felt. For me to know how you felt, it is not enough that we share the same reality (the minimal sense of connectedness); it seems rather that I will need to explicitly try to figure out how you felt, i.e., empathise with you. Therefore, even if some people rejoice in high levels of well-being, and therefore a sense of togetherness cannot be something which restores an otherwise reduced well-being, still even in such cases empathy would in most of the cases be seen as valuable.

Also, I take it that the togetherness that empathy provides is in a way similar to the one provided by co-cognition, with the important difference that the subject of co-cognition are the experiences of one of the two people. In this sense, empathy goes one step further than co-cognition in bringing about a sense of togetherness, being the closest we can get in our imagination to another person.

Overall, it seems hard to question that empathy can be of value in order to connect with others. Kohut<sup>331</sup> argues that empathy (understood by him as putting yourself into another's shoes) is itself 'a therapeutic action in the broadest sense, a beneficial action in the broadest sense of the word'.<sup>332</sup> He elaborates:

the presence of empathy in the surrounding milieu, whether used for compassionate, well-intentioned therapeutic, and now listen, even for utterly destructive purposes, is still an admixture of something positive. In other words, there is a step beyond an empathy-informed hatred that wants to destroy you; and an empathyless environment that just brushes you off the face of the earth.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> Kohut famously disagrees that empathy is to be recommended in the clinical setting.

<sup>332</sup> Kohut, 1981, p.126.

<sup>333</sup> Kohut, 1981, p.126.

Kohut's idea here seems to be that there is something dehumanising in the case where no empathy is present since empathy is a kind of *acknowledgement* of another's humanity and being. And this has nothing to do with any positive action that might be informed by empathy – as Kohut points out, empathy can be used for utterly destructive purposes. However, even in these cases empathy itself has certain value, because there is a sense in which *the other's being is acknowledged* by it. Perhaps another less striking example might illustrate the same intuition: an unrequited lover would clearly prefer to be despised or even ridiculed than being merely ignored since ignorance, especially from those we care about, might make us feel like we do not exist at all. An acknowledgement of the other's experience, no matter for what purpose, is in this minimal sense valuable. I am sympathetic to this point and am inclined to agree that empathising itself has, no matter for what purpose it was used, a certain kind of value for the person empathised with. There is a kind of acknowledgement of one's existence and experience that, all other things being equal, one would prefer to be there.

Finally, let me draw attention to one more thing. In this section I argued that empathy provides a valuable kind of connectedness, and even if I did not specify this explicitly, most of the discussion seems like it is centred on the target of empathy. However, I do not mean to claim that empathy provides a sense of connection only to the person who is empathised with. I was hoping to make a strong case for the *value* of this connectedness via considering the case of a sufferer of mental illness who often has to suffer from a sense of isolation since the 'sane' people cannot easily imagine what it is like to grapple with mental illness. However, I mean to claim that empathising oneself, and not merely being a target of empathy, can bring about a sense of connection as well. When I empathise with you, I might get the feeling that, in regards to certain matters, we are 'on the same page' as it were, and this would be sufficient for a kind of connect. Therefore empathy, as a means of achieving connection with another person, can be just as valuable to the person who empathises as to the target. In this sense I can also have a very 'egoistic' motive to empathise – 'merely' to

obtain that sense of connectedness with another, which would be valuable for my own well-being.

In conclusion, in this section I argued that empathy is valuable for achieving a kind of connectedness with others. I suggested that this psychological kind of togetherness is valuable and pointed to the devastating effects the lack of such connectedness can have in one's life, most clearly evidenced in the case of the sufferer of a mental condition. Then I argued that empathy can bridge this psychological isolation and bring about a sense of togetherness that is something that would be appreciated even by people who tend to experience connectedness quite often and might seem to be otherwise happily oblivious of its value.



## Conclusion.

In this thesis I have argued that empathy has epistemic and moral value. I defended a model of empathy according to which empathy is the imaginative activity of re-creating another's experience in one's imagination in an experiential way. I argued that this re-creation which involves various dimensions of experience – i.e. it is not restricted to pure thought or pure feeling – is a powerful epistemic tool for gaining insight into another's experience, and also, as a result of this insight into another's experience, empathy is a tool for learning about evaluative aspects of objects in the world. I answered some of the major challenges that face the claim that empathy has moral value, and in the last chapter I argued that empathy is morally valuable in three ways. Firstly, as an epistemic tool that guides our moral choices; secondly, as a motivator to bring about the good to others; and finally, as a mediator of a special kind of togetherness with other people.

All this I believe shows that there is value in becoming an empathic person, value both for promoting others' well-being but also one's own. I think that this feature of empathy as being valuable for the well-being of the empathiser themselves is not given much attention in the literature, which mostly engages with empathy in the context of morality or the ability to understand other minds. With the present writing I hope to have not only reaffirmed empathy's positive value for promoting the well-being of others, but more originally, to have made a case for empathy's value for promoting one's own well-being via its epistemic value and via its bringing about a sense of togetherness with others.

I think of the empathic person as someone who is skilled at empathising, but being an empathic person is more than merely possessing the skill of empathy, since one can have a skill without exercising it. The empathic person I think of as someone disposed to empathise in the right circumstances and to the right amount (i.e. without letting oneself be too overwhelmed with empathy, yet at the same time without remaining too distanced from the other person). In this

sense we can see empathy as a virtue. I am not using the word ‘virtue’ in some very specific way; I assume that it is not necessary to distinguish between virtues, excellences (of character), and good traits (of character).<sup>334</sup> I would say that one possesses the virtue of being an empathic person when one empathises spontaneously and effortlessly in the right circumstances.

This thesis has been an attempt to show that being an empathic person is beneficial in various ways. It means that one is likely to be able to bring about reliably frequently each of the good things that empathy helps one bring about: understanding of others and of the world, a well-informed judgment with regards to how particular actions would affect others, motivation to bring about the good to others, awareness of non-obvious morally relevant features of situations, and a sense of connectedness. Second, the empathic person is not just able to bring about empathic goods with a reliable frequency; the empathic person is skilled at empathy which means being able to empathise more accurately and effortlessly and being in a better position to bring about the empathic goods in any particular circumstance than a non-skilled empathiser. Also, as I argued in Chapter 2, the skill of empathy involves the skill of understanding how various dimensions of the human experience fit together, something which is independently beneficial to the empathic person in understanding not only others, but also themselves.

In conclusion, in this thesis<sup>335</sup> I hope to have made a strong case for being more empathic in our lives by showing that there is epistemic and moral value in empathising with others. It brings about epistemic benefit, informs and motivates our moral choices, and brings about a valuable connectedness to others.

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<sup>334</sup> A similar approach is used by Slote, 1983.

<sup>335</sup> A piece of writing which, after insertion of the present footnote, consists of exactly 77777 words. This includes all text on file: title, headings, references, and footnotes.

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