

THE SELF-OTHER DISTINCTION IN EMPATHY

Abstract:

An empathic emotion is supposed to be an emotion of the same type as the one the target experiences, but also be one in which there is a sharp self-other distinction. I show that these two *desiderata* are difficult to satisfy at the same time. Instead, what makes an emotion empathic is nothing intrinsic to that emotion. Instead, it is the person's *attitude* towards what they are feeling that matters, I suggest. A person's attitude towards other people – namely whether they care about their welfare – determines not only how likely they are to catch the emotions the other person is experiencing, but also how likely they are to empathize with them.

*Keywords:* Empathy, Empathic Person, Distress, Self-Other Distinction, Sympathy

Empathy is thought to have two fundamental features. When we empathize, we experience an emotion, and an emotion like the one someone else is experiencing because they are experiencing it, but not directly, as we normally do, but *for* them in some sense. At one and the same time, there is a shared emotion and a clear self-other distinction. For my sadness to be empathic sadness, I cannot simply be sad without that sadness bearing an important relationship to the target's sadness. But what that relation is turns out to be a complicated issue, and one that is underexplored in the philosophy of empathy. In this paper, I address how we distinguish between empathy and other similar emotions, focusing on the idea that it is by distinguishing between self and other, in some important sense.

I argue that what makes an emotion empathic isn't the fact that it is differentiated internally from a directly experienced emotion, but is a result of the more general attitude the empathizer takes towards the emotion she experiences. This means that a person's *receptivity* is only part of what matters in empathy. In addition, the person must relate to her emotion in a particular other-directed way. Without this latter attitude, the emotion is experienced as personal, or direct. To understand empathy better, we should start exploring in greater detail what makes *a person* empathic.

1. *What is the problem?*

The question of what, exactly, empathy is, is vexed. The confusion arises from the fact that the term is used very broadly to refer to a cognitive activity (as in mindreading, theory of mind, folk psychology, psychological attribution, perhaps even affective *recognition*), perspective taking (perspective taking or seeing things from another's point of view), sympathizing (sympathy, compassion, pity, or feeling for someone), experiencing consonant affect (feeling what someone else is feeling, empathy, or emotional contagion) and identifying with another to some extent (projective identification, synergy, or imagining-self perspective taking).

What I am concerned with in this paper is what is sometimes called affective empathy. An example of affective empathy is the following. My sister is sad because her cat has just died of cancer. I feel sad because she feels sad. Frankly, I also feel sad directly for the cat because I knew it and liked it, but let us focus on my attitude towards *her*. When I feel sad in this way, we say that I empathize with her sadness or experience empathic sadness. Another example is being empathically angry for someone because a close friend of theirs betrayed them.

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In both these cases, I could be experiencing either sadness for the death of the cat or anger because of the betrayal in a direct, non-empathic manner.

Emotions are typically understood as propositional attitudes and directly experienced anger or sadness are different attitudes than empathic anger or sadness. Nonetheless, the features of an empathic and a directly experienced emotion overlap to a large extent. For instance, whether I am directly sad about the cat having died or empathically sad that this is so, the phenomenology is very similar (that of sadness), my body undergoes similar changes (psychological changes), my attention becomes narrowed and focused in on the sad event (attention) in both cases, the eliciting event can be the same (e.g. for me to be sad for your loss, all I need to know is of your loss and not your reaction to your loss), and the object of my emotion seems to be the same (the cat being dead). However, it is usually thought that at least the motivation will differ in the two cases. If I am empathically sad for you, I should not self-soothe, for instance. Instead, I should try to soothe you!

But it is rare to see people distinguish affective empathy from directly experienced emotions purely in terms of its other-directed motivation. This may be because empathic sadness may not be as other-directed as such an account requires. In experiments carried out by Dan Batson and his colleagues, people who report feeling distressed for another person regularly soothed their distress by leaving the situation in which they were exposed to the other person's distress. One way to explain this is, of course, in terms of competing motivations. They were *motivated* to alleviate the other person's suffering, we might say, but they also didn't want to spend the time, take the shocks instead of the other person, or whatever the helping would amount to. Psychologists, though, tend to interpret the distress as *personal*, as evidenced by its motivational consequences. They maintain that the person was not motivated to alleviate the other person's distress at all, but merely their own, meaning that their distress could not have been truly empathic. The problem with this explanation, of course, is that people who escape a distressing situation *know* that they are distressed because of the other person's distress – or because of what is happening to that person – and they often claim that they are distressed *for* the other person. It is therefore not likely that their distress is entirely personal.

However, suppose we assume that the motivational element is the *only* thing that differentiates an empathic emotion from a directly experienced one, then that is itself a puzzle. After all, the motivation elicited by, or forming part of, an emotion is supposed to be related to it. In particular, it is supposed to help ameliorate or sustain the situation that occasions it. Suppose I am angry that my friend betrayed me. That anger motivates me to, say, confront her and, with luck, receive some restitution from her. But this desired end is related to what the anger is about. If I am sad that your cat is dead (but not under that description), there is no clear reason why I should console you rather than look for support for my own sorrow. Your sorrow would need to figure in what the sadness is about in order for this to be the case.

For reasons such as these, it is important to provide an account of empathy where the person with whom one empathizes figures in the intentional content or the aboutness of the emotion. That is, it must somehow be clear that the source of the emotion is the other person wherefore the motivational force of the empathic emotion ought to be directed at that person also. The usual suggestion is that a strong self-other distinction is operative while we empathize<sup>1</sup>. But what does that mean? Below, I will go through some of the main candidates. Doing so isn't just an exercise in distinction mongering, as it were. It is rather revealing about empathy.

## 2. The intentional object of empathy

Assuming that the self-other distinction amounts to our knowing that it is *the other person* who experiences sadness, say, is one way of explicating what the self-other distinction in

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Coplan (2011).

empathy amounts to. The simplest version of this claim is that we *know* in some interesting sense of “know” that it is the other person whose emotion is primary. Perhaps they are crying while we are sad or perhaps they have suffered a loss the likes of which would make anybody sad. The content or intentional object in the case of an empathic emotion is not simply the object of the target’s emotion, but also include the target’s experiencing the relevant emotion. For instance, your empathic anger has as its object my anger that my friend betrayed me and not simply the betrayal of my friend, which is all that would be required from direct anger.

This possibility raises a number of issues. First of all, it is not very clear how this form of anger is different from the anger, which most people would call “reactive”, in which I become angry *with you* because you are angry with your boss. After all, I am angry with you because you are angry with your boss. Hence, it seems like the intentional object in reactive anger can be the same as that in empathic anger. But it is exactly this type of self-centered emotion that empathy is supposed to be different from. We therefore need another way of capturing what is special about an empathic emotion.

Second, it seems that many instances of empathy are ones in which I am apprised of *the situation* of someone is in but have no information about their emotional reaction to it. I can feel sad for you because your grandmother has died, it seems. After all, I know how much you care for her and have some sense of the impact it will have on your life. You, however, are still in shock or denial. Should we suppose that I cannot feel empathically sad for you because you don’t happen to feel sad right now? This doesn’t seem quite right either.

But we don’t have to rely on anecdotal evidence to create problems for this way of explicating the self-other distinction in empathy. Because empirical research shows that empathic emotions can be induced by photos of people or people parts, say an arm or a hand, in certain situations<sup>2</sup>. In these photos the only clue to how the person is feeling or is about to feel is in the situation they are in. In other words, we are given no bodily expressive information about their emotions. For instance, a photo that is often used to induce empathic distress is one of a hand caught in a car door<sup>3</sup>. Here, the empathizer feels distress without knowing that the other person feels distress and, presumably, without the person pictured experiencing distress (because the photo is staged).

We might suppose that an empathic emotion being directed *at the target*, it is primarily directed at *the situation the target is in*. When I get (directly, or reactively) angry with you because your anger makes me angry, the target of my anger is you more than your situation, even if your situation may figure in my anger somewhere down the line. In empathic anger, however, the target of my anger is primarily the situation you are in and only secondarily the mere fact that you are angry. This rephrasing also takes care of the second issue just raised because it does not require that the target’s emotional reaction figure in the empathic emotion. It also fits with Hoffman’s well-known definition of empathizing, which he says is experiencing an emotion that is more appropriate to someone else’s situation than to our own<sup>4</sup>.

That being said, this type of solution comes up against the opposite problem. And that is that often we empathize with a person who evidently experiences a certain emotion but without having any idea of their situation. As I just pointed out above, being presented with a headshot of people who facially express an emotion is sufficient to cause emotional contagion or empathy. It is pretty obvious, then, that in such cases, the observer cannot possibly know what has happened to make the other person feel what they (appear to) do. We must therefore take another tack. One is to begin by looking at one of the emotions that is closest to being empathic, without quite being so, namely emotional contagion.

<sup>2</sup> Hsee et al. (1990); Deng & Hu (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Decety, Skelly, Kiehl (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Hoffman (2000).

### 3. Emotional contagion and the elusive intentional object

Emotional contagion is a very close cousin of empathy. It describes our tendency to “catch” emotions other people experience. A typical example of emotional contagion is walking into a room and picking up on the jovial atmosphere. I feel happy as a result of the other people appearing to be happy. What is characteristic about emotional contagion is that it is primarily geared towards spreading the affective qualities of an emotion. I don’t need to know why someone is happy for their happiness to be contagious. I might find myself feeling quite happy having caught the mirth of the company I am in, but which was the result of a joke at my expense before I arrived. Had I known the *content* of that mirth, it might not have been so contagious! What causes vicarious emotions is often different from what causes directly experienced emotion. I am usually amused if I have found something amusing. But when I catch your amusement, I don’t need to find *you* or your amusement amusing. I can just find myself feeling amused.

Emotional contagion is not limited to just catching happy feelings. In principle, we can catch any emotion, although in practice it is quite likely that the range of emotions we generally catch is quite limited. But I can certainly feel the tension in a room or smell, as it turns out, someone’s fear<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless, catching the feeling doesn’t mean I also catch its intentional object. Emotional contagion isn’t magic. It might turn out that a contentious issue is being discussed, and I can ascribe the tense anxiety I have caught to that. But even if there is little sign of *why* people are tense and anxious, when I catch these feelings, I *also* catch the attendant *valuation* of whatever the emotion is directed at. If I catch anxiety, for instance, I tend to think of what’s going on around me as more threatening, uncertain, and problematic, for instance. I also seem to catch all the other aspects of an emotion, such as the way it focuses the attention on certain features of a situation over others, its motivational tendency (vigilance, for instance), styles of thinking, or the changes of the body associated with that feeling. What is missing is often what caused the emotion or its object.

When we first catch someone’s emotion, it need not be clear to us that this is what has happened. Instead, we merely find ourselves experiencing it. In fact, there are good reasons to think that most of the time when we catch other people’s feelings, we do so without realizing it; below the level of consciousness. The interesting question is how this process works. If we accept the standard view and suppose that emotions are propositional attitudes, they are composed of an attitude and a proposition towards which it is directed. The latter is what I have described as the intentional object. If emotions by necessity have intentional objects, it seems reasonable to suppose that when we are aware of experiencing one, we are thereby also aware of its intentional object. Think of the two prototypical propositional attitudes, namely belief and desire. If I have a (conscious) belief, I am aware of its intentional object. If I have a (conscious) desire, I am aware of the intentional object of that desire. *But* emotional contagion doesn’t work that way. Just because I am aware of *feeling* sad, say, doesn’t mean that I know what I am sad *about* or even *why* I am sad (supposing that the two don’t always come to the same thing). I just find myself feeling sad.

Many feelings behave the way just described. I can find myself at a random point of the day feeling quite happy without any idea why. Some insist that these are *moods*, not emotions. But when I narrow in on a cause for irritation, for instance, I relate to my irritation as *an emotion*, not a mood. I think: I am irritated because now I have one more bureaucratic nightmare on my hands. Although we are not infallible when it comes to identifying our psychological states, it is surely desirable not to rule out, on theoretical grounds, that what we think of as emotions are emotions<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Prehn-Christensen et al. (2009).

<sup>6</sup> In this I have some support from Andrea Scarantino and Ronald de Sousa (2018) who, in their survey article on emotions, explicitly refer to objectless *emotions*. In other words, they acknowledge that some emotions appear to lack intentional objects. Scarantino and de Sousa (2018) use depression or elation as

If what is supposed to distinguish direct and empathic emotions are their intentional objects, then emotional contagion is *neither* a directly, *nor* an empathically experienced emotion. Imagine the following. At the end of a luncheon with a friend, you leave irritated. You wonder why you are irritated. You might: (a) think of all the things you are behind on and the people bugging you to get your work to them, or (b) reflect on the fact that your friend was rather irritated during your luncheon and you probably caught your irritation from him, (c) conclude that your friend's irritation about a nasty review of one of his papers and the annoying topic (nasty reviews) has made *you* irritated, or (d) determine that your irritation is due to your empathizing with your friend's irritation about the editorial process (say), which is making it impossible for him to publish his controversial paper in a decent journal.

In the first case (a), you *own* the irritation. You make it your own and you can easily provide self-involved content to it. There are surely plenty of things going on in your life that are irritating. In the second case (b), you are regarding your friend's irritation merely as a cause of your own, but not otherwise engaging with it. It might turn out to be a useful way of down-regulating your irritation. Properly noting that the irritation, at the end of the day, is *his*, you can liberate yourself from it. After all, your friend's being irritated is surely not sufficient reason for *you* to be irritated also. The empirical literature on empathic emotion regulation supports the idea that people frequently deploy cognitive reevaluations like this one to regulate the negative empathy derived from being exposed to another's negative affect<sup>7</sup>. As a result, they come to experience little, or no, empathy. In the third example (c), you don't think you *caught* the irritation from your friend. Instead he *made* you irritated by being irritating about being irritated. This is known as *reactive* irritation. Only the last case (d) counts as empathy proper. Here you notice your irritation, you assign its cause to your friend's irritation and, moreover, you find that the *object* of your irritation is the same as the object of your friend's irritation while at the same time your friend's irritation seemingly forming part of the object too.

This example of emotion transfer indicates that emotion contagion rarely, if ever, is a self-standing emotion. It always forms part of an emotional process. And it might end up being self-directed, other-directed, or other-reactive. This is a result of reflecting on the emotion, its causes, its target, and so on. *This*, then, modulates the emotional response. But the most important part of this modulation seems to be the allocation of the source emotion: is it mine or yours? This suggests that contagious affect does not present itself clearly as either mine or yours.

But there is something else going on too. What is it that makes the fourth case one of empathic irritation rather than direct or personal irritation? It is not simply the fact that it is *caused* by the other person's irritation. Nor is it the fact that the person *recognizes* the provenance of the emotion (namely the other person's irritation). It can't be the fact that the object of the irritation is shared either. Because the object can be shared whether you are simply irritated as a result of your friend's irritation and the annoying subject, or whether you are *empathically* irritated. What seems to distinguish the empathic case is a recognition that the situation the other person is in is, in fact, irritating, as well as a pro-attitude towards the other person. I am, as it were, *both* irritated that your review was so nasty (directly) *and* irritated *for you*.

We could imagine a fifth situation too, in which you catch the irritation from your friend, you recognize what the object of the irritation is for your friend, and *then* you fully identify

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examples of this kind. The problem with objectless emotions, Fabrice Teroni (2007) has argued, is that if they have no object, they must also lack correctness conditions. And yet it certainly seems that a contagious emotion is appropriate as long as it is appropriately "caught" from another person. This brings us back to the discussion about what object, exactly, a contagious emotion is supposed to have. An alternative, explored by Peter Goldie (2000), is to say that such seemingly objectless emotions do, in fact, have an object. Only the object is the world *as a whole*. This is closely related to the idea of existential feelings, explored by the phenomenologists and the French existentialists (Heidegger, Sartre).

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Cameron (2019); Zaki (2014); for a discussion see Maibom (2019).

with the other to such an extent that you are now irritated with the editorial process and *your friend's situation* or irritation is no longer in view. This is what we might call *overidentification*. Empathy seems to lie in the mean between that sort of overidentification and the situation where you solidly ascribe the irritation to your friend and therefore cease to be irritated yourself. What this suggests is that if we draw too firm a distinction between our own emotional reaction and that of the other person, empathy dissipates.

#### 4. Empathy and Agreement

It doesn't take much to see that we are now back at the problematic discussed in the first section. If we require that we share the intentional object of the person we empathize with, then what do we say when we empathize with someone purely based on the affect they express? It does rather seem that we can empathize sometimes with someone without having to identify with them or agree that their emotional reaction is appropriate. This fact might then be used to argue that exposure to someone's affect is sufficient to experience empathy.

The first thing to ask ourselves is what the self-other distinction amount to when we empathize with a person purely in virtue of recognizing that they experience as a certain emotion? Why, for instance, am I not experiencing the emotion *directly*? I see a picture of a crying child and feel sad, just like I might do upon seeing images of a bombed village. Why am I *directly* sad in the second case, but not in the first? Why is my sadness empathic? Hoffman would say that my sadness is more appropriate to the situation of the child than to my own. But I have no idea what the child's situation is. One might say that there is nothing to make *me* sad, although clearly something has made *the child* sad. To which I might counter that the suffering of a child is certainly enough to make me sad. Why shouldn't it be?

Another difficulty with situations like this is, of course, that *the content* of my sadness is not the content of the child's sadness, because I'm sad that the child is sad and the child is sad about something else entirely. So, the emotions are not the same *except* in the type of emotion experienced. Moreover, when we empathize in the absence of information about why the other person feels as they feel, the object of our emotion *has to be* the other person's experiencing the emotion they're expressing. But why, now, are we feeling sad *for* them?

It might be argued that I've misconstrued instances of empathy where our empathy encompasses the emotion *and* the situation the other person is in. When I empathize with my friend's irritation about nasty reviewers, the content of my empathy simply is "my friend is irritated about nasty reviewers". Of course, if we put this in a classical propositional format, it reads: "I'm irritated that my friend is irritated about nasty reviewers", which is perfectly compatible with several readings ((c) and (d) above), only one of which is empathic. On the empathic reading, I'm *also* not experiencing the emotion the other person experiences. I'm experiencing irritation, but it does not have the same target.

The reason, then, that one might insist, like Adam Smith (1776/2022), that to empathize with someone you have to agree, in some sense, with their emotional assessment of the situation they are in is because *you* have to feel what they feel, meaning that *you* have to be irritated at nasty reviewers, in the case above. You have to *directly* experience the emotion. What, then, makes a case like this empathic? It has to be because there is some counterfactual dependence of the empathic emotion on the target's emotion or situation.

At a first pass we might say that *the reason* I am irritated with nasty reviewers is because *you* are irritated with nasty reviewers. The problem now is that without your irritation, I would have no reason to be irritated myself. That doesn't seem enough. So perhaps what we should say that is my irritation is *causally* dependent on yours, so that if you had not been irritated, I would not have been irritated. The reason I am irritated, however, is not *merely* that you are irritated but also because I accept the reasons you are irritated, or,

possibly, some adjacent ones. In other words, the intentional object of my irritation is the same as yours.

### 5. *Empathy with emotion types*

What now do we say of cases where I appear to empathize with your distress simply because I see that you are distressed, but I do not know why? Is it a bona fide example of empathy? Or should we posit *two* forms of empathy, one which merely extends to emotional resonance with the emotion the other person's experiences, and another where the resonance is fuller in that we accept that the situation the other is in calls for the emotional reaction they are having (because we find ourselves *directly* experiencing the relevant emotion also, when contemplating their situation)?

But doesn't it seem kind of funny that I should be upset merely because another person is upset? They might be upset for all sorts of reasons, not all of them good. It strikes me rather that when the object of their distress is unknown to me, I am implicitly assuming that the cause of their distress is reasonable. I am not distressed merely because the other person is distressed, but rather distressed that something distressing has happened to them (which has made them, understandably, distressed). The latter is something I infer from their expressed affect.

There is another reason, this time backed by empirical evidence, that we should take seriously the claim that I do not empathize merely with emotions, but with emotional reactions to *situations*. And that is that when young children are exposed to people expressing distress that seems plain unreasonable, they do not appear to sympathize and they express no concordant distress<sup>8</sup>. Note that I am here taking the evidence from sympathy to apply to empathy also. Because of the difficulties of fully distinguishing sympathy from empathy in children, I don't think this is too problematic.

One might object that we expect a good friend to empathize with us even if our distress is silly. There is some truth to this, though not as much as you might think. After all, we also expect our friends to help modulate our emotions by providing a calmer assessment of the situation. What we *do* and *should* expect, however, is that a friend *puts herself in our situation*. She should not simply view the situation from her own point of view and assess our reaction accordingly. But when she has put herself in our situation and still fails to see why we are as distressed as we are, for instance, it is surely reason for us to reassess our own reaction.

### 6. *Might emotions always be directly experienced?*

It is time to rehearse where we are. Two things are usually thought central to empathizing with someone; the fact that we share their emotion, or experience an emotion that it would be reasonable for them to experience in their situation, and that we, at the same time, make as solid self-other distinction. The most obvious contrast to that might be emotional contagion, where we "catch" an emotion from another. Here we may be unsure whether we are experiencing the emotion directly or as a result of catching it from another. Only if we *also* make a strong self-other distinction does our contagiously caught emotion turn into empathy.

But, as we have seen, any sharp distinction between, for instance, mirth that I experience and mirth that you experience is liable to raise issues about what it means to say that we are experiencing *the same emotion*. Because if I become giggly *merely* because you are giggly, and not for the same reason *you* are giggly, it is unclear whether we want to say that my mirth is empathic. It might simply be direct. People doubled up in laughter are just funny! To solve this problem, I suggested that it must seem to me, in that moment of empathy, that the situation that occasioned the emotion merited it (alternatively: that

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<sup>8</sup> Fink, Heather, de Rosnay (2015); Hepach, Vaish, Tomasello (2013).

the emotion is fitting). In other words, to feel empathic mirth, I must find the situation that caused your mirth funny. Here I am feeling mirth directly.

That cannot, of course, be the whole story. For if it were, it could simply be an episode of *directly experienced* mirth. For the mirth to be empathic, it can't just be that we are both experiencing mirth directed at the same object. *Your mirth* has to figure somehow in my mirth. But if we make it part of the intentional object of my emotion, we end up with the problem we had before. My mirth is now different from your mirth, so although we both experience mirth, it is not clear that my mirth is empathic. To solve the problem, we can assume that the intentional object of *both* our mirth is the same. But in this case, *I* have to find what you think is funny, funny. And now we might ask why my mirth is empathic and not simply direct.

A solution, I suggested above, is that when we *empathize*, we must at least understand the causal provenance of our mirth. There must be some sense in which your mirth is the cause of mine. We might say that *unless* you were amused about whatever it is you are amused about, *I* wouldn't be amused about it either. This can't quite work, however, because I can empathize with you just knowing the situation you are in without also being sure that you are having the emotional reaction I am having to the situation or that I think is appropriate. So, we must at least say that unless you were in the situation you were in, I wouldn't be amused.

At first blush, this seems alright. But on closer examination, this proposed solution has a problem too. *Of course*, I wouldn't be amused if you were not in the situation that you are in because there would be no reason for me to be amused, then. In other words, part of the reason for me being either empathically or directly amused is your being in the situation you are in. So that won't help ensure that my mirth is empathic. What will then? What makes the emotion truly *empathic*?

At this point, it may be time to reevaluate the idea that there are two ways to experience emotions, one direct and the other empathic. Perhaps emotions are always experienced one way, namely directly. What makes an emotion empathic rather than direct is not any distinction in its intentional object but, rather, the general attitude of the person who experiences it. Max Scheler might have had something in like this in mind when he insists that in when we empathize with others, the emotion that we experience is *always our own*<sup>9</sup>.

This proposal takes some unpacking. Consider first that the assumption underlying most emotion theory is that emotions are almost invariably egocentric. If I experience sadness, something sad has happened *to me*. The reason my mind and body are activated as they are in sadness is because something has happened that affects my wellbeing negatively, for instance a loss. A typical example would be that I am sad that my cat has died. This, of course, makes it obvious why *I* should be especially affected by the it. It is *my* loss, and my sadness is about that. If our basic assumption about emotions is that we only experience them when something affects *our* wellbeing, it seems natural to see *empathic* emotions as an exception, and something that requires special explanation. After all, the ultimate target in empathy is how the situation affects *the other person's welfare*, not our own.

What is characteristic about empathy, however, is that the other person's situation affects us *as if* that situation affected *our* welfare the way it affects hers. The most straightforward way to make sense of this situation is surely to assume that *my* welfare is affected by what happens to this other person. This amounts to denying that only what affects me personally can affect my welfare. Instead, it allows that my sphere of concern expands well beyond my own boundaries.

Try as I might, this doesn't strike me as being a particularly problematic idea. People die for their country, for their loved ones, or for an idea. Being willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for something surely shows that it is included in one's sphere of concern. Most

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<sup>9</sup> Scheler (1912/2008).



people feel a lot of empathy for people close to them but not, as empathy critics have stressed repeatedly<sup>10</sup>, for a lot of other people. If empathy simply arises as a result of considering other people's situation or by catching their affect, how are we to explain that? We can say that some people are not very susceptible to emotional contagion, for instance, therefore passing the buck to people who work on that topic. Alternatively, we can point to the person's sphere of concern. Very selfish people have very small spheres; very altruistic people have large spheres.

Incidentally, this fits with a hypothesis of Batson has forwarded. Finding that people do not invariably experience empathic concern – which I would call 'sympathy' – Batson introduces the idea of valuing another's welfare<sup>11</sup>. Empathic concern is only induced, he argues, when the person whose distress or distressing situation you are exposed to is someone whose welfare you already value. This does not mean you need to know the person intimately or even at all. He found that people reflexively empathize more with people from their own university, their countrymen, and people who are described as being morally good. By contrast, foreign soldiers, people from other universities, or people who are described as being callous, criminal, or otherwise problematic typically do not evoke empathy. This is because we do not value their welfare, Batson claims.

Batson has sympathy in mind, and not empathy. But I am willing to bet on the fact that empathy is affected the same way. After all, very similar situations evoke both empathy and sympathy—when exposed someone in need, Batson found that it evoked empathy in addition to sympathy<sup>12</sup>. Others have found the same<sup>13</sup>. Another source of support for the idea comes from psychopathy. Psychopaths, who are notoriously selfish, experience little empathy for others unless they are specifically instructed to<sup>14</sup>.

### 7. *Emotion vs. character*

One objection remains. Your average emotion theorist would presumably agree that when your cognitive evaluation changes, so can or will your emotion. When I judge that the cracking branches did not augur the presence of a predator, I go from feeling fear to feeling relief. Why should we not say the same of empathic affect? As I argued, it is difficult, if not impossible, to satisfy the demands of an emotion simultaneously being like the one the other experiences and yet being *for* her. But let me adjoin some thoughts here.

Not all our cognitive evaluations penetrate our emotions. I can be afraid of falling off a cliff even though I am safely ensconced behind a fence. And it may be a built-in feature that our emotions react to *our* sphere of concern, so that the way our empathy for others manifests itself is not by our emotion having as its content another person's affect, but by having their situation affect us as if we were in it. This need not mean that we have to consciously decide that we value another's welfare before we can empathize with their suffering, for instance. But it is very clear that when someone stands outside our sphere of concern, we experience little empathy for them.

We might wonder about whether the motivation that comes along with empathy wouldn't be sufficient to make us say that it is an emotion of a distinctly different kind from a directly experienced emotion because it aims at the situation the other person is in. That, at least, is what it ought to do. But what is the evidence?

It is simply unclear whether empathy with people in needs motivates helping. Empathic *concern*, which is sympathy not empathy, correlates with helping behavior in a range of circumstances, explored by Dan Batson and his team. However, the distress that typically accompanies being exposed to people in distress seems, if anything, to interfere with motivations to help. People who experience as much (empathic) distress as sympathy

<sup>10</sup> Prinz (2011); Bloom (2016).

<sup>11</sup> Batson et al. (2007).

<sup>12</sup> Batson, Early, Salvarini (1994).

<sup>13</sup> Carrera et al. (2013).

<sup>14</sup> Meffert et al. (2013); Singer & Tusche (2014).

(empathic concern) are less likely to help someone in need compared to people who experience more sympathy than distress<sup>15</sup>. This balance matters, not at any moment in the empathic episode, but at the end, studies suggest<sup>16</sup>. Because of empathic distress is not particularly reliable in causing altruistic helping, Batson thinks of it as *personal* distress, as if *empathy* plays no role here (but only sympathy *aka* empathic concern). Distress *does* motivate, Batson maintains, but it motivates egoistically and for the person to leave the upsetting situation.

How might we interpret this evidence? We could take personal distress at face value as it is often discussed in the psychological literature, as an entirely self-directed emotion just like any other form of distress. The problem is that a) people are often perfectly aware that it is *the other person* who is in need, b) they *report* experiencing distress *for* the other person, as well as for themselves, and c) evidence from other groups show that more empathic distress promotes helping compared to less such distress<sup>17</sup>. This suggests that distress in response to others in distress is not simply an egoistic response and that it plays a complex role in later altruistic helping.

As I have argued, I don't think there is anything about an empathic emotion taken in isolation that is empathic. It must be caused by the affect or circumstances of other people. We must feel our distress as not being entirely about ourselves, but the intentional content can't be the other person's distress because if it is, we are no longer experiencing what the other person is experiencing. We are not experiencing empathic distress long distance, as it were, but in solidarity as if *we* were distressed. This suggests that the resulting motivation of empathic distress is likewise direct and that *other* processes direct it towards the other person. In terms of psychology, executive functioning must be at play here or, if you like, appropriate emotion regulation<sup>18</sup>. This may be what causes sympathy to become prevalent eventually.

Instead of reducing empathy to certain types of relatively atomic episodes occurring in an individual's life, I think we are forced to look beyond emotional episodes themselves and at the larger context in which they occur. That context includes both the external context – the plight of the other person – and the internal context – how is the empathizer placed with respect of the person in need, what are their views about the significance of others' welfare to her, etc.

8.

The question discussed here is not simply a terminological issue. How we understand empathic emotions has significant consequences not only for understanding the emotion itself, and the nature of emotions more generally, but also for understanding its interpersonal and moral role. Whether a person becomes empathic by experiencing many empathic emotions or whether they experience many empathic emotions because they are empathic is a chicken or egg problem. With the reductionist tendencies found in most sciences, researchers have tended to focus on *emotions*. One might then tell the story about empathy in this way. Being exposed to people in distress causes us to empathize with them, and the more we empathize with people, the more empathic people we become.

The problem with the above story is that it's likely to be false. People who are regularly exposed to war, violence or suffering others become habituated to it, and stop having the strong emotional reactions to it they used to. Consequently, they are more likely to be violent themselves<sup>19</sup>, to condone violence<sup>20</sup>, and less likely to empathize or sympathize with

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<sup>15</sup> Batson, Early, Salvarini (1994).

<sup>16</sup> Carrera et al. (2013).

<sup>17</sup> Cameron et al. (2019); see also Barraza & Zak (2009).

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Maibom (2019).

<sup>19</sup> Mrug, Madan, Windle (2016).

<sup>20</sup> Timmer et al. (2022).

victims<sup>21</sup>, or correctly estimate the degree of pain the person suffers<sup>22</sup>. More exposure to suffering does not lead to more empathy.

Another important thing to consider is that empathy appears to be motivated. That is, we empathize more with some people than others. Jamil Zaki (2014) found that when we are likely to suffer, have to spend resources helping someone in need, or are in competition with them, we are unlikely to empathize, whereas if they are persons close to us, their affect is positive, or it is socially desirable to do so, we are more likely to empathize. This belies a picture in which empathic reactions *just happen*. It is notable that people who are highly narcissistic, such as psychopaths, empathize less with people<sup>23</sup>.

Child psychology shows the positive use of so-called empathy-induction, where a parent encourages a child to empathize with others<sup>24</sup>, which suggests that empathy is nourished by supportive parenting. The idea that we can reduce empathy to an automatic and basic emotional reaction is therefore not particularly enticing given the evidence. Instead, we might want to look closer at what makes *a person* empathic.

To sum up, in this paper I have argued that empathy is not a way of experiencing an emotion parallel to directly experiencing emotions. In fact, considered in relative isolation, an empathic emotion just is a directly experienced emotion. What makes it empathic is not that it has a different intentional object than a directly experienced emotion. Instead, it is the person's *attitude* towards what they are feeling that matters. A person's attitude towards other people – namely whether they care about their welfare – determines not only how likely they are to catch the emotions the other person is experiencing, but also how likely they are to empathize with them. This suggests that we ought to turn out attention to what makes a person empathic in order to understand empathic emotions better.

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<sup>21</sup> Fanti et al. (2009).

<sup>22</sup> Seers et al. (2018).

<sup>23</sup> Hare (2004).

<sup>24</sup> Hoffman (2000).

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