

What Empathy Isn't

or

Why Empaths Don't Empathize

1. Introduction

Empathy is supposed to be a good thing. It is widely assumed both that people who empathize with others become as a result better people, and more generally, that the world would be better if more people empathized with more other people. But what *is* empathy? For a while, the website www.empathy.com consisted simply of the definition from the American Heritage Dictionary, which runs as follows:

1. Identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives. See synonyms at *pity*.
2. The attribution of one's own feelings to an object.

Ignoring the second, non-standard definition, as well as the perplexing claim of synonymy with the obviously distinct *pity*,¹ what should we make of what remains? One problem with this definition's use of the terms "situation," "motives" and "understanding," is that they suffer from a subjective/objective ambiguity, and the objective sense is redundant to empathy. That is, first, a person's *situation* in the normal sense of the circumstances she is in fact in is only relevant to empathy if she is aware of them. Knowing these facts about another would in no way help me empathize with her if she were unconscious or mistaken. Second, although in one sense of "motives", an agent must be consciously aware of them (they are her reasons for acting), there is also a sense

in which, *pace* Sartre, one can have motives of which one is not consciously aware: I vote on the grants committee to turn down your application because I am jealous of your success and not, as I tell myself, because of the flaws in your application. Another person would have to know these motives to *understand* my action, but knowing them is not necessary to *empathize* with me, because, again, empathizing with me requires capturing how I view the world, however delusionally. For that reason, the only way “understanding” could be part of a definition of empathy is in a perspectival sense, as when we say we share the empathee’s understanding of her own situation. In fact, the given definition conflates empathy with *understanding someone’s behavior*.² Empathy is not necessary for understanding: the hunter can understand the game animals very well without in any way empathizing with them. One might think that empathy is *sufficient* for understanding an individual’s actions, but again, to the extent that self-delusion is possible, this need not be the case.

The core of what remains is *identification*. Empathizing with a person seems to require some kind of access to her consciousness. The tempting idea that the ideal of this process would be *direct, first person* access to her consciousness is behind the notion of *empaths*, which began as creatures of science fiction, but, as Google reveals, have for some people become more than that.³ Empaths are beings who can directly experience what others feel.

The assumption, then, is that empaths experience the quintessence of empathy. Let us press that assumption in our pursuit of empathy, and analyze what it would be like to be an empath. I will assume that materialism is true and that, were empaths to exist, they would be registering the brain states of other people from a first person perspective.

(Perhaps technology will allow such a thing to be possible at some point, through the use of those Neurotransmitters that enable Daniel Dennett to perform his brave missile recovery attempts.⁴)

2. Empaths

Let us say that when an empath exercises her ability, she is *empathing*, and each person other than herself whose emotions or experiences (let us use *feelings* to cover both) she is experiencing is an *empathee*.

Whether or not empathing would be an ability that was controllable, like paying attention, or non-voluntary, like feeling pain, and over what range it would operate, are complications that we cannot examine here. Those complications aside, two clear alternatives for what it would be like to be an empath present themselves. On what I will call the *assimilation* model, it could be just like feeling more emotions and sensations: yours, plus those of the person or persons with whom you are empathing. On this view, if the empathee dropped a brick on his foot, the empath would feel a stabbing pain in *her own* foot.

The alternative would be for there to be a particular feature of the experience acquired through empathing that marked it as not one's own: perhaps it could be like having an extra body, not to be confused with one's original body. Just as one does not confuse a pain in one's right foot with a pain in one's left foot, one would not confuse a pain in the other person's right foot with a pain in one's own. Let us call this the *multiconsciousness* model.

A puzzle with the assimilation model is how an empath would know *whose* sensations or emotions she was feeling. If an empath witnesses a distraught person and becomes sad, is that sadness the sadness of the empath that the empath is picking up, or the empath's own sadness that results from seeing someone sad? If the experience itself does not reveal the difference then, ironically, an empath would be in the same "other minds" boat as the rest of us, unable to tell if the supposedly sad person was *really* sad, or just faking it, and thereby making her sad in the same way a person is saddened by an effective tragic performance.⁵

A related problem for the empath on the assimilation model (particularly to the degree that empathizing is not optional and over a wider range) is the threat that the empath's own sense of self could be undermined. We gain an understanding of how the world can affect both our sensations and our emotions through the experience of having it do so over a lifetime. If we were perpetually subject to the feelings of others, each having his or her own idiosyncratic response to various stimuli, we would not have such confidence in our own character or identity.

This worry is exacerbated by a problem that affects empaths on either model, that empathizing by itself does not give one access to the *objects* of many emotions that one would pick up. That is, many emotions have an intensional and cognitive aspect – I am jealous *of someone*, I am sad *about something* – that is not part of their raw feel. Although non-empaths are sometimes unaware of the true object of their emotions⁶ this is much less often true than it would be for an empath.

An empath on the multiconsciousness model, on the other hand, would always be able to keep straight which feelings were *really* her own, and which were the

empathes's.⁷ However, paradoxically, were an empath to be *too* adept at keeping distinct her own feelings and the feelings of her empath, we might also question whether or not she is empathizing. Returning to the case of a happy empath encountering a sad empath: suppose the empath reports "I empathize with your sadness, and feel it fully, but I myself am feeling particularly chipper today." Would we agree that she can really be feeling the sadness of the other? What if she really dislikes the empath and in fact, part of the reason she is happy is *schadenfreude* at his misery? While this seems conceptually possible for an empath on the multiconsciousness model, it does not seem to be empathy.

A further difficulty is that, given the vast variety of possible neuron arrangements in the human brain, it seems likely that an empath, encountering a new person, would either (a) not be able to recognize his feelings, or (b) contest the empath's own interpretation of the feeling. For example, suppose you, a person whom I have never met before, are tasting an olive. Perhaps your brain has developed so that the reaction of olive chemistry with your taste buds produces a brain state quite different from the one that results in my brain after I put an olive on my tongue. Would I, on exercising my empathic powers on you, recognize that brain state as "taste of an olive"? Perhaps over time, watching you eat an olive and noticing that you have a recognizably similar brain state every time, I will infer that *that experience* is your taste-of-olives experience. But, if I have my own taste-of-olives experience that is distinct, I don't think I will ever truly *empathize* with you tasting olives, because it will always lack the immediacy the experience has for you. I might even be tempted to belittle your experience, particularly if, instead of olive tastes, we are comparing emotions: "I know what love/grief/object

terror is, I've felt it, and what you're experiencing is not that." If so, once again, empathizing would be, if anything, a barrier to empathizing.

There are further complications if our preferences differ. What if you adore olives but I can't stand them? Should I then be having the raw experience of the flavor of olives, and as a result, a feeling of disgust that is uniquely mine, or should I be feeling the pleasure that you experience? Conceptually we can distinguish the simple taste-of-olive experience from the attitude of the experiencer to it, which itself has a raw-feel aspect (most simply either pain or pleasure), but are the two in fact distinct? Is my experience of olives separable from my disgust for them: I experience (i) the taste, which causes (ii) the second-level attitudinal feeling of disgust; or is the experience an unanalyzable compound of flavor and disgust? If the latter is the case, that would add to the difficulty of my recognizing your taste-of-olives as such. If the former, would I, the olive-hating empath experience both taste-of-olives and pleasure, but not be aware of a causal connection between them?

This is a prosaic example, but just such cases of unfamiliar combinations of experiences and reactions are supposed to be what empathy enables us to experience. It has become a commonplace in fiction to have a police profiler empathize *a little too well* with a serial killer, so that the profiler starts to enjoy the sadistic killing that previously disgusted him or her.

If, on the other hand, one *could* isolate experiences from reactions, a crucial element of empathy would be undercut. For example, rape victims sometimes achieve orgasm. Could an empath be called on to attest that this meant that the rape victim

enjoyed the rape? Technically, this would be true in a narrow sense, if we can divorce the disgust that the victim felt about his or her own orgasm.

3. Would it be a good thing if there were empaths?

We often talk as if making someone an empath would make them a better person. We wouldn't have to ask "how would you like it if someone did that to you?" or punish a bully to approximate what he has done to others if he were an empath. However, consider the following cases.

In the first, we have a masochist, in the layman's sense of someone who is driven to cause pain to herself. On being made an empath, she is motivated to become a behavioral sadist. I say behavioral rather than actual, because although she acts just as a sadist would in causing pain to others, her motivation is to experience the pain of others and draw fulfillment from that.

What this admittedly far-fetched case brings to light is that an underlying assumption behind the idea that making someone an empath would make her a better person is that of hedonistic egoism. That is, that people only care about how *they* are affected, so that the way to make people care about other people is to make them affected by what happens to others. But in fact, of course, it merely encourages the empath to use others as a means to their own ends. While this will, in most cases, be beneficial to the empathee, it does not show the empath to be a better person.

In the second case, we have a person who intended to become a doctor caring for the least fortunate, but as a result of feeling the pain of others, is driven to avoid them at all costs and becomes a complete hermit. As with the first case, the empathic ability

causes problems for others, only in this case, not because of the empath's non-standard attitudes towards herself, but rather because of a perfectly normal aversion to negative feelings.⁸

In these cases, does it matter whether or not the empathic ability is optional? It would make it a lot easier on the doctor if she could pick and choose the moments to test the pain of her patients. But, while we might have a positive result for overall utility, we do not have a case where people have been made better because of being an empath. Rather it is the case that whether or not a person's empathic powers benefit others depends on whether or not they were antecedently or anyway a good person. Furthermore, consider the potential downsides were empathing to be optional to those who had the ability. Surely most people would shield themselves from experiencing the negative emotions and experiences of others rather as people are likely to switch the channel to avoid news about homeless or starving people elsewhere. Where they would be likely to use it would be to leech off the positive experiences of others. "Laugh and the world laughs with you, cry and you cry alone" would take on a whole new meaning. This strikes me as a bit unsavory, a bit like being a voyeur. In fact, the temptation for empaths to seek out couples having sex to experience their orgasms would be very great. But even for less intimate experiences, I think one would have to come to be as guarded about one's feelings as about one's anti-establishment views in a police state.

4. Empathing and punishment

We have seen that non-optional empathic powers on the assimilation model run the risk of turning negative self-attitudes against others and driving too-sensitive potential do-

gooders away, and in this they seem like an unwelcome gift. But that very feature appears to make them an ideal tool for educative punishment. Imagine a schoolyard bully who can cause pain to others with impunity: suppose we had the power to make him an empath towards whomever is affected by him, so that, in causing pain to others he automatically causes pain to himself, thereby instantly giving him the answer to the question “how would *you* feel if someone did that to you?”

What good end would this imposition of empathic powers serve? Here are four possibilities: it could make him a better person, it could give him valuable information the absence of which was preventing him from behaving correctly, it could itself be an instance of justice being served, and finally, it could simply be an effective disincentive to harm others. In other words, four of the main justifications for punishment: reform, education, retribution and deterrence.

I think the first can be rejected for reasons already discussed: to become better you must cease to care only for yourself. Making a bully an empath does not make him care for others, it merely makes his own self-regard redound to the benefit of others.

For the second, it depends what the bully’s deficiency is. If it is a refusal to believe that his victims in fact feel pain (or fear, or whatever nasty experiences can be relayed back to him by his unwelcome new ability), then presumably this lesson might make him think twice. Some hunters and fishers, for example, make this claim about their prey. However, such a claim always smacks of implausibility, and it would be borderline ludicrous for a bully. On the contrary, bullying would lose its point if the victim was not actually suffering as a result. The bully’s deficiency is rather that he enjoys causing others to suffer: it is an affective deficiency rather than a cognitive one.

All right, but even if we have not made a better person, haven't we at least achieved *justice*? An empath-creator appears to give us a way of realizing *lex talionis* perfectly: the guilty party punishes himself to exactly the degree he causes his victim to suffer. There is even the added advantage that no third party has to dirty his or her hands by dealing out punishment: even advocates of capital punishment have worries about the kinds of people who happily volunteer to be executioners.

However, this is not the neat solution it appears to be. For one thing, the endowing of empathy would have to be preemptive: once the bully has finished causing pain it is too late. But preemptive punishment is anathema to retributivists – I should only be punished for what I have done wrong.

What if we could record the feelings that the bully causes and then relay them back to him after he has finished? If anything, this appeals more to our sense of justice, because he has revealed his true nature and has to pay the price. But suppose we are talking about a killer who tortures his victims to death. Would the person who relayed the sensations back to the killer be any better than a torturer?

Even in the preemptive case, it is misleading to suggest that all but the perpetrator have clean hands. The person enforcing empathic abilities on a subject (perhaps by implanting neurotransmitters) is in a position analogous to the doctors who apply Ludovico's Technique to Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*. She manipulates the outcomes of his actions in a way that delimits his freedom.

Furthermore, there is still the problem of equivalence. Can we ever be sure that the bully will feel the pain *exactly* as his victim does? If he feels *what* the victim does, perhaps he will not recognize it. Perhaps the victim has a lower or higher threshold.

Finally, of course, there is the benefit of deterrence. Insofar as the bully's own suffering outweighs the satisfaction that he gets out of bullying, and he is rational, this sudden affliction would stop him. But if this is the best we can get out of empathic powers, it is meager indeed: the empathizing does not achieve a goal in acting, it is instead a kind of glorified electric fence. Nobody thinks electric fences make better people or provide a lesson on walking in another's shoes.

This discussion of punishment is, of necessity, scanty. But to the extent that causing pain to those who have caused pain is supposed to be justified, and enforced empathizing is the ideal of such a procedure, doubts about its efficacy in achieving any of the four goals should give us pause.

In sum, being an empath would not make one a better person, and a world of empaths would not be a better one. So much for empathizing. And, by extension, so much for the idea that empathic powers represent the Platonic ideal of empathy, of which all actual, non-science-fiction cases fall short. Assuming empathy has genuine positive worth, it is not a stunted version of empathizing. In what follows I will try to apply the lessons we have learnt about what made empathizing deficient to list the necessary elements of the most ethically defensible conception of empathy.

5. Empathy worth the name

Let E be empathizing with subject S. While empathy requires E correctly identifying S's experiences it must avoid the flaw of empathizing that personal idiosyncrasies prohibit recognizing experience types (from tasting an olive to experiencing a complex emotion).

Thus:

emp1: E must identify S's experiences *as S does*.

To meet this condition, E must to some extent imagine S is like her: for me to empathize with your grief, I must imagine that grief for you is the same as grief for me. Thus empathy requires a certain amount of *projection* that empathizing lacks. But at the same time, I must never forget that the experiences are not mine, hence:

emp2: E must identify S's experiences as *belonging to S*.

Moreover, this projection must not extend to what I have earlier called second-level attitudes. If I have trained myself to respond to my own experience of fear with self-contempt and an aggressive stance, I would not empathize with someone less psychopathic if I projected those attitudes on her in response to the fear that I correctly identify in her.⁹ That suggests a third condition:

emp3: E must correctly identify S's second-level attitude towards S's experiences.

So far, however, all E has done is *identify* feelings and attitudes. These conditions could be met if E were a skilled manipulator who despised S and wished only to control him. This does not sound like empathy yet. Is the missing condition the requirement that E *feel* the feelings (and attitudes) that she has identified in S? If so, then we have something like empathizing on the multiconsciousness model. But we have seen that that lacks a crucial element and so was not sufficient for empathy, and what is more, is not *necessary* for empathy. First, the missing element:

emp4: E must *care about* S's feelings and second-level attitudes to the extent that S cares about them.

Lest it be said that “caring about” is in fact a surrogate for “feeling”, recall the example of the multiconscious empath feeling *schadenfreude*: it seems conceivable that the empath could genuinely experience the sadness, but because it is tagged as the sadness of the person she despises, she does not care about it as she would her own. “No pain, no gain” she might say.

Second, the reason why actually *having* feelings like those of one with whom one empathizes is not necessary, is that empathy as we conceive of it is a virtue, but feeling the pain of one whom one should be helping is counterproductive in ways we have canvassed above.

What kind of ability *is* this empathy? To be good at it, one must have a sensitivity to, and history of experiencing, emotions that enables one to make fine-grained distinctions among them. To meet the first and third condition, one must also presumably know the subject well. Does this preclude empathizing with strangers? It would appear to. Attempting to empathize with strangers is in fact dangerous and irresponsible. To this extent, the claim of Boazian anthropologists that understanding an individual is impossible without first immersing oneself in his form of life would also apply to empathizing. This is, perhaps disappointing. Empathy is not a route to understanding others or to caring about them; rather, the reverse is true. One cannot empathize, in the sense in which empathy is of normative weight, without prior understanding and caring.

Notes

¹ For one thing, pity can have a negative, patronizing connotation that is absent from empathy. It contains an implication of superiority on the part of the pitier. It is never a good thing to be *pitiful*, for example, and

not because one might be presumed to be suffering. Furthermore, it is often the case that person A pities person B precisely because A does not (and thinks she cannot) empathize with B. Atheists quite often find themselves the object of the pity of devout believers. See also Peter Goldie's discussion of *sympathy*, which is closer to pity than is empathy: *The Emotions – A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 180-1, 213-219.

² Goldie also distinguishes *understanding and explanation of others' emotions* from empathy. See pp. 177-8, 181-9.

³ See for example <http://www.moonchildpn.org/Empaths.html>, <http://groups.msn.com/SkilledEmpaths>, <http://www.beyondthedoors.co.uk/listenersguild/empaths.htm>.

⁴ See Dennett's much anthologized work "Where Am I?" in *Brainstorms* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981).

⁵ It is true that this difficulty would be ameliorated considerably if one's empathic experiences were optional: one would be able to find out which experiences were one's own by finding out which ones were left when one turned off one's empathic function. However, if there was such a sharp distinction between one's "real" feelings and the ones one acquires empathically, wouldn't that suggest that the empath is not *really* experiencing in the way that the empathee is? We can't simply shut off our own emotions and feelings, so if an empath is to have our feelings just as we do, she should not be able to either.

⁶ One might worry that if Freudians are right, people are practically *always* wrong about the objects of their emotions. However, we must distinguish *objects* from *causes*. Perhaps it is *because* my parents were killed by being run over by a bus that I have such an intense fear of public transport; nonetheless, it remains true that my fear is *of* public transport in general and not that particular bus or the fact that my parents were run over by it.

⁷ One can imagine that, were such individuals as empaths on the assimilation model to exist, they might respond that *all* of their emotions were their own, it's just that they had different causes. Alternatively, they might take the position that worries about authenticity of sensations are just byproducts of a bourgeois individualistic non-empath worldview, and we shouldn't impose our views on them.

⁸ In response, one could argue that, were physicians able to tough it out, their abilities would be potentially very helpful: one would imagine that an empathic anesthesiologist would be greatly in demand.

⁹ The earlier worries about the analyzability of emotions and experiences and the second-level attitudes that we had about empaths are not an issue here, because, whether or not we can separate them in experience, we can separate them conceptually, and empathizing, unlike empathing, is conceptual.