



On the Power and Limits of Empathy

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PREFACE

That empathy is in some way intrinsically connected with morality (and especially with moral behaviour) is such a widespread and common conviction nowadays, that to deny it seems *prima facie* either a joke or a provocation. How could it be? Empathy seems to be at the base of altruism and, as the lifelong research of Batson and colleagues appears to demonstrate,¹ it is an essential part of the sociality and solidarity present in primates and other animals.² For some, empathy has the potential to change economic and social relationships on a global scale.³ Empathy's irresistible charm has even managed to infect important politicians, heads of state, religious authorities.⁴ There is no denying that empathy in the last 20 to 30 years has been viewed increasingly as a miraculous

¹ See, i.a., Batson (1991, 2011) and Batson et al. (2003, 2005).

² See, for example, De Waal (2009).

³ See Rifkin (2009).

⁴ These are, for example, the words of the ex-president of the USA, Barack Obama, after a meeting in 2014 with Pope Francis: 'I think the theme that stitched our conversation together was a belief that in politics and in life the quality of empathy [...] is critical. It's the lack of empathy that makes it very easy for us to plunge into wars. It's the lack of empathy that allows us to ignore the homeless on the streets.' Obama in particular has always talked about empathy since his early speeches and sees in it a kind of antidote to the egoism, which appears to be for him the primary cause of all the evils in the world, as it instigates hatred, lust for money, disregard for the environment, the weak, the future generations: 'The world doesn't just revolve around you. – Says Obama in a speech of the year 2006 – There's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit.' These two quotes and many others on the subject of empathy can be found on: <http://cultureofempathy.com/Obama/Quotes.htm>

panacea for all of the world's evils: it has been considered a cure for war, poverty, exploitation, and viewed as fundamental for an increase of social solidarity.

But predictably, all this excitement about the infinite potentialities of empathy could not last forever, and from the start of 2010, the first anti-empathists (as I label the critics of empathy) began to appear. Today, the most famous among these, with regard to criticisms of empathy's moral dimension, are undoubtedly the philosopher Jesse Prinz and the psychologist Paul Bloom. Now, if these (and other) critics of empathy had limited themselves to highlighting some of empathy's notable shortcomings concerning the moral sphere, this move might have been welcomed as astute, even necessary. Indeed, in this respect I regard myself as an 'anti-empathist': I am similarly convinced that the enthusiasm for empathy is to a large extent unwarranted and that empathy has, especially in the moral domain, many flaws that should not be too easily overlooked. If, in fact, this had been the position sustained by the anti-empathists, this particular book would have no reason to exist. However, the writing of such a work became necessary, in my eyes, due to the reflections of anti-empathists who, probably in an attempt to react to what they perceived as extreme pro-empathist positions, finished on the opposite side of the spectrum. Empathy, for thinkers like Bloom and Prinz, is dangerous at the moral level, biased at the epistemological one, and ultimately to be avoided in favour of rational considerations, as well as of other emotions seen as more adequate to guide moral behaviour. To use Bloom's trenchant and paradigmatic words: 'On balance, empathy is negative in human affairs. It's cholesterol. It's sugary soda, tempting and delicious and bad for us.'⁵ I think that charging empathy with these accusations is misguided and that the rift that emerged between convinced supporters and harsh critics of empathy has tended to polarise the discussion into two extreme camps, ultimately frustrating each endeavour to reach a neutral conclusion about the moral potential of empathy.

This work is born from the intention of finding a middle ground. I do not think that empathy is (or ought to be) at the base of morals. Morality is not to be founded entirely on empathy. Nevertheless, I do believe that

⁵Bloom (2016, p. 13).

empathy has a central role to play in morality and that a morality without empathy is a mutilated morality. In the following chapters we are going to see why. However, first, let us consider some epistemological clarifications.

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PART I

What Is Empathy?



CHAPTER 1

A Brief Historical Reconstruction

Few concepts have received the same immense amount of attention as that obtained by empathy in the last four or five decades. Empathy was literally everywhere to be found: in the popular press,¹ in the mouth of world-leaders,² and of course in the research on different topics and disciplines such as psychopathy,³ autism spectrum disorders,⁴ medical care,⁵ ethics

¹ See, i.a., articles in the *Time* (Nash, 2007); *New York Times* (Blakeslee, 2006); *Scientific American* (Giacomo et al., 2006).

² See footnote 4.

³ Richell et al. (2003), Blair et al. (2005), King et al. (2006), Decety and Moriguchi (2007), Blair (2006, 2008), Shirtcliff et al. (2009).

⁴ Baron-Cohen (2003, 2009), Iacoboni and Dapretto (2006), Gallese (2006), Clark et al. (2008), Blair (2008).

⁵ Halpern (2001, 2007, 2009), Pedersen (2010).

and moral development,⁶ justice and the law,⁷ art and the media,⁸ clinical psychology,⁹ neurosciences,¹⁰ and the theory of mind.¹¹

At the beginning of our inquiry on empathy, it will pay to spend some time trying to retrace the complex history of this concept. For those who are familiar with ancient Greek, the term ‘empathy’ reveals a clear etymology: it is the union of the Greek *en* ‘inside’ and *pathos*, which means ‘pain’, ‘suffering’, but also ‘feeling’. Therefore, the term can be translated as ‘feeling inside’ or ‘feeling into’. In spite of this clearly Greek etymology, the term ‘empathy’ was coined by a British psychologist and philosopher named Edward Titchener¹² in order to convey the semantic load of a German word that had rapidly become very popular in psychological and philosophical discussions between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, namely, the term *Einfühlung*. Many scholars think that the first appearance of this concept is to be found in the work of Theodor Lipps,¹³ a German philosopher and psychologist famous for his contributions in the field of psychology of aesthetics. Actually, it should be noted that at least the verb *empfinden* was already present in the work of Herder¹⁴ and Novalis,¹⁵ as well as in that of Robert Vischer.¹⁶ However, Lipps was certainly the first to use this concept in a very systematic way, giving it considerable importance in his theory. In a few words,

⁶Hoffman (2000, 2011), Eisenberg et al. (1994), Eisenberg et al. (2006), Batson et al. (1987), Batson (1991, 2011), Batson et al. (2003), Slote (2007, 2010).

⁷Hoffman (1987), and the already cited Hoffman (2000, 2011).

⁸Feagin (1996), Walton (1990, 1997, 1999), Smith (1995), Currie and Ravenscroft (2002), Currie (2004), Coplan (2004, 2006, 2009), Kaplan (2005, 2011), Carroll (2008, 2011).

⁹Kohut (1977, 1982, 1984), Gladstein and Brennan (1987), Orange (1995), Bohart and Greenberg (1997), Kahn and Rachman (2000), Clark (2007), Geist (2009).

¹⁰Gallese and Goldman (1998), Iacoboni (2008, 2009), Keysers (2009), Keysers and Fadiga (2009).

¹¹Goldman (1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 2006), Gordon (1986, 1995, 2009), Goldman and Ripada (2005), Hurley (2008), Stueber (2006, 2008).

¹²See Titchener (1909).

¹³See, for example, Lipps (1903, 1905).

¹⁴Herder (1885). He understood empathy as a quasi-perceptual process, strictly distinguished from other inferential processes, such as syllogisms, or else, a peculiar capacity of humankind to ‘feel into everything’ and to recognize everything in analogy to oneself.

¹⁵Novalis (1997). In his poetic vision, empathy had to be a phenomenon with the capability of freeing us from the cold, detached, analytic attitude of science and giving us the capacity to recognize a degree of friendly nature innate in human beings, as well as to grasp the spiritual unity that tied both men and nature in a unique absolute.

¹⁶Vischer (1873).

Lipps saw in empathy the basic mechanism for the understanding of expressive phenomena. He started from the presupposition that we do not have any experiential access to the minds of others, since the only mind we have direct access to is our own, and that only thanks to an imaginative enactment of other people's experience (provided by empathy) is it possible to get to know something of the psychic lives of these people. Thus, Lipps harked back to what David Hume asserted 150 years before¹⁷ about *sympathy*, the conceptual ancestor of empathy.

However, whereas Hume was interested in both the ethical and the epistemic role of empathy, Lipps gave this phenomenon a fundamental role to play only at the epistemic level. In this regard, his contribution also managed to further develop considerations on the matter of another famous and extremely influential British philosopher, John Stuart Mill, particularly with reference to an argument which gradually became a classic in the circle of the philosophy of mind: the so-called Argument from Analogy.¹⁸ Irrespective of the fact that this argument, traditionally attributed to Mill, does not reflect Mill's¹⁹ opinion and should with all probability be ascribed to Bertrand Russell,²⁰ the argument can be described as follows. If we take as prerequisite that human beings are in relevant aspects similar to each other, then it seems reasonable to suppose that others have thoughts and feelings, for the very good reason that I am aware, in my own case, of having them. Lipps, surely influenced from the phenomenological tradition (Husserl in particular), goes beyond the extent of this argument and sees in empathy the base for interpersonal understanding, describing it as an original, primordial, not further derivable act.²¹ Is it enough to make of him a follower of the phenomenological views on empathy? The answer should be negative, as Lipps' position diverged from that of the phenomenologists on one essential point: in Lipps' opinion, in fact, we have an experiential access only to our own mental states and, as a consequence, we can get an idea of what others think or feel only thanks to a projective mechanism. In particular, Lipps thought that as we see a gesture, or an expression made by someone, we immediately have the tendency to reproduce it interiorly and this tendency evokes in us the feeling normally associated with this expression. On

¹⁷See Hume (1960).

¹⁸See Mill (1979).

¹⁹For an insightful analysis of this issue see Thomas (2001).

²⁰Russell (1948). See especially pp. 208–209 and pp. 501–504.

²¹Lipps (1907, pp. 697–698, 710).

Lipps' account, human beings have a general *instinct of empathy*, and this instinct has a twofold drive: a drive directed towards imitation and a drive directed towards expression.²² Basically, when I see someone making a certain expression, I have a natural inclination to imitate this expression, which in turn evokes in me a feeling that I attribute to the other through projection. As it is presupposed that humans are under many aspects similar to each other, we can presume with a certain degree of probability that the feeling we are projecting is, if not identical, akin to the feeling the other (the target of our empathising) is experiencing. This is the fundamental mechanism allowing for the interpersonal understanding.²³

Of course, one may wonder why we should resort to a mechanism of imitation plus projection in order to understand what other people feel or think. The answer is that for Lipps, as we have said, the only mind we have access to is our own, consequently, the mental states of other individuals can be inferred only in analogy with our own mental occurrences.

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²²Lipps (1907, p. 713).

²³Lipps (1907, pp. 717–719).

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CHAPTER 2

The Way to a Definition

It is not the aim of this work to offer an in-depth analysis of the philosophy of Lipps, but it was important to start our investigation of empathy with a brief report of his view on the matter, primarily for the reason that he was the first to talk about empathy (not sympathy) and to use this concept in a systematic way central to his own theory and, secondly, because more than hundred years after Lipps' book, there is still no agreement among the scholars both on the definition of empathy and on the precise role it can play. In other words, although Lipps' desire was to clarify the concept and use it consistently, his objective is nowadays still far from being achieved. As a matter of fact, for the young academic approaching the subject area of empathy, the landscape can be quite disorienting and distressing: empathy is a 'hot topic' nowadays, and it has managed to enter the field of inquiry of disciplines ranging from philosophy to the neurosciences, from psychology to zoology, and from anthropology to economics. Of course, given the incredible amount of work made during the years by scholars with such different backgrounds and opinions on the matter, it cannot be surprising to see how blurred the definition of empathy is. Just to give two concrete examples of the terminological, semantical, and content-affecting chaos which exists in the literature, we can take into consideration the works of Coplan (2011) and Batson (2011). In the first, the philosopher Amy Coplan defines empathy as: '[A] complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated

psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation',¹ however, she also notes that the empathic phenomenon has been described as involving one or more of the following features:

- (A) Feeling what someone else feels;
- (B) Caring about someone else;
- (C) Being emotionally affected by someone else's emotions and experiences, though not necessarily experiencing the same emotions;
- (D) Imagining oneself in another's situation;
- (E) Imagining being another in that other's situation;
- (F) Making inferences about another's mental states;
- (G) Some combination of the processes described in (A)–(F).²

The famous psychologist Daniel Batson refers to empathy using these words: 'I shall use *empathic concern* and, as a shorthand, *empathy* to refer to *other-oriented emotion elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need*'.³ Nevertheless, he then adds that there are at least seven other states which can be called (and have been called) empathy, which are the following:

- (A) Knowing another person's internal state, including his or her thoughts and feelings;
- (B) Adopting the posture or matching the neural response of an observed other;
- (C) Coming to feel as another person feels;
- (D) Intuiting or projecting oneself into another's situation;
- (E) Imagining how another is thinking and feeling;
- (F) Imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place;
- (G) Feeling distress at witnessing another person's suffering.⁴

It is quite easy to understand that this incredible range of different and competing conceptualisations in the literature has created (and still creates) countless difficulties for anyone willing to coherently investigate the phenomenon of empathy. Actually, we have reached the point in which a

¹ Coplan (2011, p. 5).

² Coplan (2011, p. 4).

³ Batson (2011, p. 11), emphasis in original.

⁴ Batson (2011, pp. 12–19).

researcher using the name ‘empathy’ or the corresponding verb ‘to empathise’ is not communicating anything at all if they are unable to provide an unambiguous description of it. Therefore, any good work on empathy should start with a clear-cut definition and the fact that this definition will under some aspects be ‘stipulative’ should not be an issue. As the already cited researcher on empathy Daniel Batson once wrote: ‘In spite of frequent claims that one’s own use of these terms is best, I know no clear basis [...] for favoring one labeling scheme over another. In such circumstances, I believe the best one can do is recognize the different phenomena, make clear the labeling scheme one is adopting, and use it consistently.’⁵ This is in fact the strategy used by the vast majority of researchers on empathy and I will make no exception. However, I do not want my definition of empathy to be arbitrary, in fact, I would like the definition offered in this work of mine to be attractive and convincing for other scholars as well as for ‘normal’, laypeople. That is why I want my definition to maintain important insights stemming from traditional researchers on the subject (Adam Smith, Edith Stein, Max Scheler, etc.) and, at the same time, to be in line with both the latest characterisations of empathy and with the normal use people in general make of this concept. This will also help to highlight a coherent evolution of the discussion around this phenomenon that, despite becoming more and more problematised and problematic, revolves nonetheless around the same features.

Now, the greatest and most important difference there is between the interpretation of Smith, the already summarised theory of Lipps, and the phenomenological view on the matter, is the function attributed to the faculty of imagination. In fact, imagination was surely crucial for Smith, who unambiguously wrote:

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other

⁵ Batson (2011, pp. 19–20).

way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. [...] By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.⁶

Smith is crystal-clear here: senses cannot tell us how other human beings are feeling. The only means we have available to experience what others are experiencing at a given moment is by placing ourselves in their situation thanks to imagination and, through this process, imagine what we would feel. Notice that this process, though imaginative, has the practical effect to make us feel the emotion we imagine. Indeed, Smith writes: ‘For as to be in pain or distress of any kind excites the most excessive sorrow, so to conceive or to imagine that we are in it, excites some degree of the same emotion, in proportion to the vivacity or dullness of the conception.’⁷

The central role attributed to imagination (that is itself part of the bigger mechanism of empathy) brings Smith close to Hume’s theory on sympathy, but marks a difference with regard to the position held by Lipps, who, as we have seen, thought that empathy was something spontaneous and based on an automatic mechanism of imitation. For Lipps, empathy was fundamentally a conceptually poor process. However, the two of them shared the belief that only our own mental states are transparent to us and that those of others have, on the contrary, to be in some way inferred.

Nonetheless, the real problem with Lipps’ conception of empathy was what he called *Trieb der Nachahmung*.⁸ For Lipps, all human beings have the tendency to internally imitate the observed expressions of other people (gestures, mimicry, facial expressions, etc.), but these imitations are not always visible from the outside, for the very good reason that this kind of proclivity activates impulses in us which are nevertheless not carried out at any time. In fact, human beings have learnt to suppress these impulses. Thus, for instance, every time I see a person yawning, even though I can decide to not yawn in reply, I will still internally imitate this expression.⁹ For Lipps, this mechanism is in place from the most basic forms of

⁶Smith (1984, I.i.1., p. 9).

⁷Ibidem.

⁸See Lipps (1903, p. 191 and ff).

⁹Lipps (1903, p. 124).

emotional contagion and imitation to the highest and most complex forms of empathy.

I think that Lipps' theory suffers from many weaknesses. Firstly, it seems rather odd to affirm that we always resort to a mechanism of imitation when empathising. There are in fact a great number of cases in which imitation does not occur and to say that it occurs internally and unconsciously certainly appears as a poor explanation. Furthermore, as Edith Stein rightly noticed, if the theory of Theodor Lipps were true, we would 'not arrive at the phenomenon of foreign experience, but at an experience of my own that arouses in me the foreign gestures witnessed'.¹⁰ This means that by means of imitation we would not grasp the experience of other subjects, but only our own experience, awakened by the observation of the expressions of others.¹¹ For this reason, Stein concludes (and I cannot but agree with her) that Lipps' theory of imitation cannot serve as a genetic explanation of empathy.¹² We will see now in the next chapter how some of the greatest exponents of the phenomenological tradition define empathy.

2.1 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL VIEW ON EMPATHY

The description Edith Stein gives of empathy has numerous points common with the definition I will offer. This is not surprising, as I think that Stein, together with Max Scheler (whose theory of empathy has influenced me a great deal, but is one which I cannot support in its entirety, in particular as it has too many distinctions between very similar phenomena like *Einsfühlen*, *Mitfühlen*, and *Nachfühlen* that often occur together, thereby risking muddying the waters, instead of clarifying the problem), was capable of grasping the real essence of the empathic phenomenon. To quote Stein:

When it arises before me all at once [the experience of the other person, ed.] it faces me as an object (such as the sadness I 'read in another's face'). But when I inquire into its implied tendencies (try to bring another's mood to clear givenness to myself), the content, having pulled me into it, is no longer really an object. I am now no longer turned to the content but to the object of it, am at the subject of the content in the original subject's place. And

¹⁰ Stein (1989, p. 23).

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 25.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 24.

only after successfully executed clarification, does the content again face me as an object.¹³

By analysing this passage, it is possible to identify three different phases: (1) the emergence of the experience, (2) the fulfilling explication, and (3) the comprehensive objectification of the explained experience.¹⁴ In the first phase, we perceive the experience of the other person thanks to their ‘movements of expression’, which are (for Stein as well as for Scheler, Merleau-Ponty and for modern phenomenologists like Zahavi or Overgaard) the direct behavioural expression (and integral part) of their experience. In the second phase, it is the turn of perspective-taking. Notice that for Stein the perspective-taking is different from projection (although in the modern literature ‘projective empathy’ and ‘perspective taking’ are often conflated). In fact, she uses the term *hineingezogen*, which means something like ‘dragged’ or ‘drawn’. The empathiser is therefore ‘dragged’, as it were, in the other’s experience. While this occurs (and because this occurs) the empathiser tries to ‘presentify’ what the target experiences. This is an intentional and conscious process, in which also imagination plays a crucial role.¹⁵ In order to understand the third and last phase of the empathic process according to Stein, we have to briefly sketch a difference essential in her reflections on empathy: that between *primordial* and *non-primordial*.

For Stein, primordial and non-primordial are the qualities of all our experiences, that is, all our acts can be either ‘primordial’ or not. In particular, primordial are all acts which are carried out at a precise moment and at that same moment are experienced by the agent who is doing them, and non-primordial are the contents of cognitive acts at the actual moment in which they are carried out. What does this mean, exactly? A practical example might help to shed some light on the issue.

Imagine the following situation: suppose that I find myself in Lucerne (where I actually am, writing these lines), waiting for the bus. It is winter, and I have the impression that the cold and damp air that pervades the Swiss city is actually penetrating my own bones. Suddenly, I start to think

¹³ *Ivi*, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ This marks another difference with Lipps’ theory, given that he conceived this phase (and empathy on the whole) as a rather passive phenomenon, in which, thanks to a spontaneous imitation, the experience of the other could almost be ‘transfused’ to the empathiser, regardless of whether the empathiser wanted it or not.

of my summer holidays in Tuscany, where I come from. I remember the sweet hills full of cypresses, olive trees, and vineyards in the Florentine countryside, kissed by the strong Mediterranean sun. I remember that day on the beach south of Livorno and the smell of brackish water. Now, the sensation of coldness I feel is ‘primordial’; primordial is also the perception I have of the bus finally approaching, and primordial is the remembering of my holidays in Tuscany. What is non-primordial is, instead, the content of my remembrance: the hot weather, the hills, the sea, and that joyful mood in which I was and I no longer am, while waiting for that slow bus. Thus, we can state that for Stein, empathy, memory, and fantasy are all primordial acts in which facts are non-primordially represented.

Subsequent to this account, we should be able to understand the third phase of the empathic process. In the second phase, Stein says explicitly that the empathiser is not directed towards the target anymore: they are, as it were, *in* the target, in their position and they are directed towards the same object the subject is directed to. This also means that the empathiser’s experience of the target here is original. However, and this is crucial, in phase three the target becomes once again an object, the object the empathiser is directed towards. This means to say that the primordial experience the empathiser has at phase two is only a stage in the process: that is, at the end of the process, in what we might want to call the ‘attribution phase’, this experience becomes non-primordial, for the good reason that the empathiser knows that this is in fact the experience of another and consciously understands that what they feel is not primordial. This is the reason why Stein describes empathy as an original act with non-primordial content.

As we have seen, whilst for some authors, like Adam Smith and Edith Stein, imagination is of central importance for carrying out the empathic process, it is not so for Lipps, who instead argues in his texts for an immediate, direct, and conceptually poor process.¹⁶ This creates a tension that remains unsolved even in the works of authors all belonging to a tradition that is far from being unitary like the phenomenological one. In fact, as we are going to observe later in the book, a modern and very influential phenomenologist, such as Dan Zahavi, tends to adhere to a philosophical interpretation of empathy that departs from that of Stein and has much more in common with the reflections of Merleau-Ponty. Following this reading, the mind of others does not have to be considered as something

¹⁶ See Lipps (1903, 1905, 1907).

alien to this world and that for this reason must be inferred. The mind, in fact, expresses itself in behaviour, gestures, vocalisations, and facial expressions. Empathy does not have to, in this sense, bridge a gap, thanks to imagination, from the visible to the invisible, from what can be observed to what cannot be observed, because everything can be observed. Mental states are not cut off the world; they exist in it and can be examined by means of the common context of experience. To use the words of Merleau-Ponty:

In so far as I have sensory functions [...] I am already in communication with others [...] No sooner has my gaze fallen upon a living body in process of acting that the objects surrounding it immediately take on a fresh layer of significance; they are no longer simply what I myself could make of them, they are what this other pattern of behaviour is about to make of them.¹⁷

And, especially:

We must reject this prejudice which makes “inner realities” out of love, hate, or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness: they are types of behaviour or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist on this face or in those gestures, not hidden behind them.¹⁸

2.2 OUR WORKING DEFINITION

As you can see, there is a rift between the scholars who tend to see empathy as a conceptually rich and imaginative process and those that conceive it as an immediate and conceptually poor mechanism. Of course, I could choose to give my preference to one of these positions and reject the other, however, my intention is to do something different. My aim is to offer a definition of empathy that can accommodate both positions in its formulation. Later, we will see how this description of empathy is able to describe correctly both the conceptually poor and unmediated kind of empathy theorised by some phenomenologists (what I will call *Low-level empathy*) and the conceptually rich and imaginative variation typical of

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 353).

¹⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 52–53.

approaches valuing the phenomenon of the *perspective-taking*, namely, *High-level empathy*.

Empathy, according to my definition, is an other-directed psychological process which allows us to tune into others and thereby understand and feel with a variable degree of approximation mental states and emotions that we deem consonant with those experienced by them, while maintaining a sense of self-other differentiation.

This definition entails a few important consequences that it is imperative to highlight. Let us begin with the first adjective I have used: ‘other-directed’. With this I want to imply that when we empathise we always empathise with another (a human being or an animal), therefore, our focus is directed to the other and not turned to ourselves. Empathy is an other-centred mechanism, and not an egocentric mechanism.

I have also labelled empathy as a ‘psychological capability’ and not as an emotion. In truth, empathy cannot be considered an emotion among others, as, for example, compassion. On the contrary, empathy allows us in principle to feel all kinds of emotions the others can feel; thus, its effects will not follow a fixed characteristic pattern, but will vary, depending on which sort of emotion we have come to feel thanks to it. As a consequence, empathy can be said to possess only one of the three main characteristics of emotions, namely, the *intentionality*, whereas it lacks a specific *phenomenology* and it makes no sense to talk about *epistemological standards* and *standards of correctness* in relation to its *epistemology*.¹⁹

Coming back to our definition, empathy, I have also asserted, ‘allows us to understand and feel with a variable degree of approximation the mental states of another subject’. This sentence involves a complex cluster of different elements; hence, it will pay to spend some time explaining it. It is usual among researchers on empathy to make a fundamental (and now classical) distinction: that between *cognitive* and *affective* (or *emotional*) *empathy*. This distinction aims to clearly identify and correctly describe what they have rightly taken to be two different phenomena: cognitive empathy indicates the experience we undergo when we *grasp* or *understand* what another subject thinks or feels in a certain moment,²⁰ whereas affective or emotional empathy denotes the state we are in when we not

¹⁹ I owe this classification to Deonna and Teroni (2012), Chapter I.

²⁰ In this regard, cognitive empathy can be taken as a synonym of ‘mindreading’ and be compared to phenomena like ‘mentalising’ or ‘theory of mind’. For further reading, see, for example, Baron-Cohen (2003), Eslinger (1998), Zahn-Waxler et al. (1992).

only understand the emotions of another person, but we also *feel* them, as it were, ‘on our own skin’.²¹ This clarification involves other related matters and requires further analysis. Indeed, if we agree on the fact that there exists a kind of empathy which implies a mere cognitive understanding of the emotions of others, and another one which makes us feel what other subjects are feeling at an affective level, then we are forced to conclude that the first one will also be compatible with a certain distance and ‘coldness’ on the part of the empathiser. After all, the mere understanding that someone is suffering does not lead us, *ipso facto*, to suffer with them. On the contrary, the second type of empathy would take us, so to say, ‘nearer’ to the inner emotional world of the target,²² making us undergo feelings that are more difficult to handle ‘at a distance’. However, the question we should ask ourselves is: does it really make sense to speak of ‘cognitive empathy’? In order to find an answer to this question, a few clarifications are needed. Whereas I agree on the fact that it is very useful to distinguish between the *sharing* of an emotion and the mere *understanding* of the emotion another person may be feeling, I am not willing to label this second kind of phenomenon as empathy *tout court*. Doing this would mean running against some characteristics which form an integral part not only of the definition of empathy I propose and examine in the present book, but also of what lay people think of as empathy, of what the common usage of the term indicates. In some sense, speaking of ‘cognitive empathy’ contradicts the very etymology of the term ‘empathy’ insofar as it deprives it both of the ‘*pathos*’ condition and of the ‘*en*’ condition. The ‘*pathos*’ condition requires that the emotions of the other must be *felt* by the empathiser (the word *pathos* comes from the Greek verb *paschein*, which means ‘to feel’, ‘to suffer’, ‘to be emoted’), so that in order to empathise with another, one needs to be in an emotional state caused by the empathy experienced for the other. That means to say the ‘understanding dimension’ is not enough without a corresponding ‘feeling dimension’. The ‘*en*’ condition entails that the empathiser feels the (vicarious) emotions and generally the other’s mental states, as it were, *on their own skin*, or, in other words, *from the inside*. As I have said above, this view

²¹ See, for example, Rogers et al. (2007), Shamay-Tsoory et al. (2009), Zahn-Waxler et al. (1992).

²² I use the word ‘target’ as a synonym for ‘empathised subject’, as it is in all respects the target of our empathy.

of empathy is also shared by lay people and it is unambiguously revealed in our normal, everyday usage of the term.

Furthermore, considering the mere *understanding-the-emotions-and-thoughts-of-others*,²³ a case of empathy *tout court* would conflict with the fact that empathy does not only involve feeling some kind of emotion as it were our own, but the fact that this emotion has to be *consonant* with the emotion the target of our empathy is experiencing.²⁴ For this reason, the famous figures of the ‘empathic torturer’ or of empathy as consistent with the ‘cruelty of sadism’, described by scholars like Stephen Darwall,²⁵ Michael Stocker,²⁶ Martha Nussbaum,²⁷ or Fritz Breithaupt,²⁸ should not be taken seriously: it is no more than a contradiction in terms. But I am going to analyse this issue in more depth in the section dedicated to the critics of empathy. For now, it suffices to say that if a human being feels pleasure at the sight of another person who is suffering, then this is indeed the opposite of empathy. The feeling one experiences in this negative situation is in fact poles apart from the feeling endured by the sufferer.

However, even if cognitive empathy should not be seen as empathy, so to say, *par excellence*, it nonetheless needs to be considered as the most basic and fundamental part of it. There is no true empathy without cognitive empathy and, inasmuch as it makes us understand what kind of emotions the other is feeling, it suits our definition of empathy (even though at its barest). Having said that, there is one crucial thing that must be highlighted, and it is the following: whereas I find the distinction between cognitive and affective empathy to be a useful one for the sake of clearly distinguishing the two phenomena *theoretically* (after all,

²³I take it to be a succinct and comprehensible description of what ‘cognitive empathy’ involves.

²⁴That empathy entails the feeling of a similar, akin, or congruent emotion is emphasised by several scholars. See, for example, Albiero et al. (2009), Barnett and Mann (2013), Batson et al. (2005), Batson et al. (1987), Decety (2015), Decety and Jackson (2004), Eisenberg et al. (2006), Hoffman (2000), Preston (2007). See especially Eisenberg & Strayer (1987, p. 5) for the definition that perhaps most of any other has inspired the abovementioned studies: ‘[Empathy is] an emotional response that stems from another’s emotional state or condition and that is congruent with the other’s emotional state or situation.’

²⁵Darwall (1998, p. 261).

²⁶Stocker (1996, pp. 214–217).

²⁷Nussbaum (2001, p. 323).

²⁸Breithaupt (2017). See especially Chapter 4: *Empathischer Sadismus*.

understanding and sharing a feeling are not one and the same thing), these two kinds of empathy very often occur together *in the praxis*. In other words, the boundaries between these mental phenomena are blurred and it can be quite difficult to tell where cognitive empathy ends and where affective empathy begins.²⁹ Sometimes, in fact, the emotion the other is expressing is so clear and so powerful that we affectively empathise with this person immediately and then, on reflection, we become aware of having comprehended what she or he has felt. On other occasions, the conscious process of trying to understand the perspective of the other by placing ourselves in their position is what triggers consonant feelings in us and shake us from apathy.

Therefore, while it can be fruitful to discuss whether cognitive and affective empathy may diverge in special cases (think of the ongoing debates about psychopathy on the one side and autism on the other),³⁰ I claim that in that part of the population that does not include the autistic spectrum disorder and does not suffer from psychopathy, affective and cognitive empathy are very often intertwined.

In the abovementioned definition of empathy appears the term ‘mental states’. With this I want to designate typical mental contents, such as beliefs, emotions, and desires. More specifically, mental states should be considered in terms of *propositional attitudes*, namely, in attitudes that one can take towards a given proposition. In other words, mental states have a propositional content, or, to put it differently: propositions constitute the mental content of our mental states. So, for example, in the case of belief, if Paul believes that his wife is cheating on him, his mental content is the proposition ‘my wife is sleeping with another man’ (or something similar); in the case of desire, if Lucy wants an ice cream, her mental state is ‘the ice cream is (for some reason) desirable’, and so on. Hence, when we assert that thanks to empathy it is possible to understand the mental states of another subject, we wish to claim that by means of our empathic faculty we can construe in our mind mental states with a similar or even the same

²⁹ See also Hoffman (2011, especially p. 231).

³⁰ We will come back to that later in the book.

propositional content of those belonging to another person.³¹ This means also that empathy—at least the ‘high-level’³² one—is partly a matter of attributing mental states to other subjects.

Finally, it should be noted that empathy always involves, as already mentioned, ‘a variable degree of approximation’, which means to say that other people’s minds (and related mental states) are never completely transparent to the empathiser and that the empathiser will in any case always differ from the target of their empathy. As a consequence, cognitive and affective contents stemming from an empathic process will at best *resemble* the original mental contents of the target, but they will never be *identical* to them. This is an intrinsic shortcoming—or, perhaps better said, an intrinsic limit—of empathy that should not be overlooked. The ‘approximation matter’, moreover, uncovers another crucial issue, namely, what I will call the *performative nature* of empathy. What I mean by this is that empathy is a capacity that must be actualised through a process that has a certain outcome, and in that sense, it can be compared to a performance. Take the case of playing football, for instance. In order to play this sport, one needs to possess certain capacities (among others, the capacity to walk, jump, and run in a coordinated way)³³ that can be further developed and become skills (one player can be more skilled than others in running quickly, others can have a particular skill in dribbling opponents, for example), which are fundamental in achieving the best possible outcome. Analogously, the natural empathic capacity most people have³⁴ can be developed and become more refined (we can become skilled at empathy) and thus help us to reach better outcomes in our empathic processes. In summary:

1. Empathy—like emotions—comes in different degrees (it can be more or less strong and more or less accurate in its understanding and feeling of the others’ mental states).

³¹ This line of reasoning applies to both cognitive and affective empathy. However, in the case of affective empathy there is more than the mere conceptualising of propositional attitudes: here is also present a sharing of feelings and emotions, so it is not a ‘cold’ process, but a ‘hot’ one. For instance, the propositional attitude ‘Bob is angry at Jim’ is empathically shared not by a mere conceptualisation of the sentence, but by the sharing or by some emotional representation of the anger, too.

³² Further explications about this labelling will follow.

³³ For the sake of simplicity, I consider here only the football played by people without disabilities.

³⁴ It is still debated in the literature if we should grant this capacity to psychopaths as well.

2. Different people have different empathy levels (they are not, in other words, all equally skilled).

Specifying all that is of crucial importance, since it helps us to clearly delineate what is a case of empathy and what is not and to answer some questions regarding the extent of empathy. So, for example, imagine the following situation. Suppose Ryan tries to empathise with his friend Josh, who is disappointed and sad. And suppose that Ryan believes Josh is angry, so he goes to him and says: 'I know how angry you feel at this moment. I can understand if you want some kind of retaliation and I totally share this sentiment!'. As you can imagine, Josh would look at Ryan with an expression of surprise and confusion on his face and tell him that he does not feel angry at all, but rather sad and disappointed. Now, would you be ready to affirm that Ryan has really empathised with Josh?

In order to answer this question, we should first ask ourselves what, inherently, empathy is. Is empathy constituted and defined by its *outcome* (i.e. the actual reaching of a feeling consonant with that of the target) or rather by its *process* (i.e. by the fact that we engage in an empathic process by projecting ourselves in the target's position, trying to feel what they might be feeling)? Arguably, the majority of people (both scholars and laypeople) would agree on judging empathy by its outcome: it seems rather odd to affirm that Ryan has really empathised with Josh and that, for instance, someone who constantly draws the wrong conclusions about the mental states of others (but who nevertheless always tries) is a good empathiser. However, it seems also unfair to say that someone who has made all the correct moves to empathise with a subject, but who fails to reach the right conclusion, has not empathised at all. This is a complex dilemma, and many academics have decided either to follow one of the two horns of the dilemma by highlighting, respectively, the 'outcome dimension' or the 'process dimension',³⁵ or else by widening their

³⁵ For the first case see, for instance, De Vignemont and Singer (2006), who defined empathy as the capacity to vicariously share another person's emotion, in particular, see their condition of 'isomorphism' (p. 435) according to which the empathised emotion must be isomorphic to the emotion experienced by the target. For the second one, see, for example, Coplan (2011, p. 5), who described empathy as 'a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation', where the emphasis is set on the process of simulation.

definition of empathy, thereby simply avoiding the dilemma altogether.³⁶ In light of these considerations, I think that the model I propose can be a valid way, not of bypassing the problem, nor of capitulating to one of the two options, but of providing a solution to the impasse entirely.

Following my model, empathy cannot depend just on its *outcome*, or we would be forced to label as acts of empathy all those cases in which there is only a mere isomorphism regarding the emotions of both the empathiser and the target (e.g. the cases of emotional contagion, in which, inter alia, there is no self-other distinction and thus—as we will see in the next chapter—cannot count as empathy). But empathy cannot depend solely on the undertaken *process* either, or we ought to accept that a person who genuinely thinks and feels that another is happy when they are actually sad has really empathised, because he or she undertook all the “right steps” (e.g. imaginative enactment, clear self-other distinction). So, how do we solve this dilemma? Think again about the analogy with football. One can play football masterfully, as Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo do, or rather mediocrely, as I do, for instance. Are Messi, Ronaldo, and I doing the same thing when we play football? It seems that in some sense we are, and in some sense we are not, but generally, we tend to agree that we are all playing football. Only, we are inclined to make an important difference that we stress using two thin concepts: we say that Messi and Ronaldo play football *well* (even very well) and that I play football *badly* (even very badly). This means that although we are carrying out the same performative act (pro forma), I do it at a certain level and with a certain outcome, and they do it at a whole other level with entirely different outcomes. However, imagine that I start to use my hands to take the ball (outside of the box and without being a goalkeeper) and shoot a goal, or imagine that I am simply too incompetent to even control the ball with my feet and defend it with my body, or to make a run. Would it still be possible to agree that I am really playing football? Arguably not.

Why so? The point is that for all performative acts the rule applies that there is a certain boundary within which a performance can still be considered *valid*, that is, it can still be considered as a valid instance of a given performative act, although it is not a good or a perfect one; on the contrary, all actions falling outside of this range cannot be judged ‘fitting’ with regard to the undertaken performance. My argument is that the same

³⁶ It is the case, i.a., of Martin Hoffman (2000), who famously referred to empathy as ‘an affective response more appropriate to another’s situation than one’s own’ (p. 4).

goes for empathy. To a certain degree, instances of empathy in which the empathiser does not perfectly match the target's mental states can still be considered cases of empathy. Yet, above a certain threshold, they cannot.³⁷ So, for example, the person who says to feel 'the happiness of the other' when the other one is actually sad does not meet the minimal requirements of the consonance condition (the incongruence is too great), whereas the empathiser who feels the other is sad when the target of their empathy is depressed has (although not perfectly) met those minimal requirements. Of course, this also entails that there will be 'borderline cases' in which judging if a certain act counts as empathy or not will be harder than in others (e.g. academics might debate as to whether Ryan has really empathised with Josh), but since matters of emotions are rarely simple and clear-cut,³⁸ this inherent difficulty cannot be taken as sufficient to reject this view. On the contrary, I think that this view can help to solve complex cases, such as that of Ryan and Josh, without resorting to dogmatisms (like that of isomorphism). A possible solution (for the 'Ryan and Josh case' could be the following: is there in the mixture of sadness and disappointment experienced by Josh an element of (maybe not entirely conscious) anger? If there is, then we could agree on the fact that Ryan has, to some extent, empathised. Otherwise, we can deem his act as a mere attempt at empathy (like a failed performance).

I think that the choice to be more flexible regarding the 'isomorphism condition', making it an issue of 'consonance' and not of perfect equality, not only makes our concept of empathy more similar to that of David Hume and Adam Smith, but it can make the discussion about empathy more productive, since requiring perfect equality would be a non-starter,

³⁷ Of course, the view I am defending—as already mentioned *supra*—is not the only one to be found in the literature. Controversy still exists concerning the degree to which the empathic response needs to be isomorphic to the original affective state. Does a coarse-grained congruency (e.g. only the same emotional valence) suffice, or is there need for a more fine-grained equivalence (e.g. same valence, intensity, and components)? My suggestion is that isomorphism must allow for a certain flexibility, otherwise, if taken *stricto sensu*, it is just a utopic condition. In other words, there has to be *Spielraum* for nuances. This is why I refrain to talk about 'isomorphism' (which seems to imply an equivalence, a perfect and implausible match of feelings between the empathiser and her target) and I prefer to use the word 'consonance', which depicts the case where the feeling obtained through empathy must be in accordance with the feeling of the target.

³⁸ After all, if the psychoanalytical research has showed us anything it is that we often cannot be sure even as to which emotions we are truly feeling.

as it is for Peter Goldie's concept of empathy.³⁹ In one of his latest articles before his death, in fact, Goldie defended an intransigent position for which empathy ('empathetic perspective-shifting', to be exact) was unable to operate with the appropriately 'full-blooded notion of first-personal agency' that is involved in deliberation.⁴⁰ His argument is complex and well-described and it is not easy to summarise it in a few words. But, to put it as succinctly as possible, since it is impossible for the empathetic person A to take on the full-blooded notion which is typical of the first-personal agency and deliberation of B in conditions of confusion and conflict (when, i.e. decisions are not easy to be made), then either A is forced to usurp B's agency or they have to conceive of it in an unrepresentative 'double-minded' way. It is not my aim to deepen this issue here, because this will take us far away from our primary focus, but it suffices to say that the concept of empathy held by Goldie is uselessly restrictive. No one requires from empathy to be that accurate and to give us the complete full-blooded access to the first-personal agency of the other. To believe it is to ask too much from a notion that is widely used to describe a more modest understanding and sharing of the other's mental states. Thus, Goldie's criticisms can be tackled by refusing to expect from empathy outcomes and effects that it simply cannot deliver.

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³⁹ See Goldie (2011).

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 303.

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A Taxonomy of Empathy

3.1 LOW-LEVEL EMPATHY

Offering at the very beginning of this work the definition of empathy that will be used coherently in the following pages has hopefully helped to better highlight some important characteristics of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, not all that matters has of yet received due attention. Simply asserting that empathy is a way to understand and feel the mental states of others will not take us far in the analysis, as there are many different modes available to attain this: we can do it by contagion, by intuition, by talking to another, by simulation, and more. Do all of these mechanisms constitute different forms of empathy? Is it correct to speak of different ‘kinds’ of empathy? In this section I am going to address those questions by describing which phenomena are to be considered as empathic and by outlining a taxonomy of the different existing types of empathy. Let us begin with the first issue: what counts as empathy and what not.

The concept of empathy I am examining is sufficiently large to entail all the cases in which the empathiser has come to understand and feel the mental states of the targeted individual by reasoning, imagining, or by simply being receptive towards the other.¹ What I am going to argue here is rather that empathy is a uniform and clearly identifiable phenomenon, but that there are various methods we can use to empathise with others,

¹We will see later what these verbs really imply.

and these methods can be applied to categorise the multifaceted psychological mechanism of empathy. In other words, it is on the bases of these several different approaches, which are used to arrive at the same condition (an empathic condition), that the taxonomy outlined in the following pages is built. I will start my analysis with the most rudimentary forms of empathy and then gradually move towards to the more sophisticated ones.

Let us again take into account the example of the angry individual, but this time try to substantiate it with more details and give it a specific context. Think of this situation: a man—call him Paul—is driving on a road on the outskirts of town. He sees the traffic lights in front of him turning yellow and then red and he consequently stops the car. Paul sighs heavily: it was a hard day at work, his back hurts a bit, but he is glad he can finally arrive home, have a warm shower, and chill on the couch watching his favourite TV-series. He absent-mindedly looks at the surroundings through the windows of his car, then takes a look in the rear-view mirror. A car is approaching at a remarkably high speed considering the light is red. As the car gets nearer, Paul notices that the driver is typing on his mobile without watching the road. He sounds the horn, but it is too late. All of a sudden, there is an impact: Paul feels a strong bump from the back, which moves his car forward, and then hears the sound of broken glass and the crunching of metal. He feverishly unfastens the seat belt and gets out of the car. For a moment, he looks in disbelief at the dent in the rear of his car, then he hears a stammering voice: ‘I am so sorry about that, sir! My fault. I was... I’m sorry.’ Paul feels a gush of blood go to his head and nearly all the muscles of his body (starting from those of the neck and shoulders) tensing up. He clenches his fists, looks back at the man talking to him, and confronts him aggressively, yelling with rage.

Now, imagine having attended this scene from the sidewalk and having observed the entire incident from the very beginning. What are you doing if you feel, in some sense, ‘the same anger’ that Paul feels? Or, suppose that you were not present at the scene, but that you are Paul’s brother and that Paul told you everything that happened when he eventually came back home. Once again, you find yourself sharing in Paul’s anger. Or else, suppose that I am the teacher of a psychology course while you are one of my students and, after having described this fictional example, I ask you to envisage what kind of emotions might Paul be experiencing in such a circumstance. I would anticipate that your answer, in each of these cases, would be, not surprisingly: ‘Well, if I were him, I would certainly feel angry!’

What ties all of these different cases together are two conditions:

1. In all three cases, your attention is directed towards Paul's mental states, that is, what he might be thinking or feeling.
2. In all three cases, you manage to understand and feel (to a certain degree) the same mental states that Paul has.

However, there is also another important element that is present in the last two cases and absent in the first one: the use of imagination. In fact, in the second case you did not personally witness the scene and in the third one you have to construe the whole situation in your mind: in both instances imagination is needed.²

We know from our previous definition of empathy that the first two conditions, that is, the *intentionality/other-directedness* and the *consonance*³ of mental states between empathiser and empathised are both necessary conditions of the empathic phenomenon. I will argue in what follows that although imagination can be very useful to carry out an empathic process (almost all the contemporary researchers on empathy, with the exception of the representatives of the 'modern' phenomenological tradition⁴ agree in this regard), it should not be taken as an integral part of it. Imagination is a fundamental component of what I call *High-level empathy*, but there exists another, more basic and unmediated form of empathy: *Low-level empathy*.⁵ The differences between these two forms

² Notice that the use of imagination is not at all excluded in the first case, but there it is not strictly necessary as it is in the second and third cases.

³ With this word I want to imply, as already mentioned, that the emotions felt thanks to empathy, do not have to be identical to those of the target, but rather 'congruent'. There has to be a match of feelings, but not identification. I will investigate this position further in the book. For similar views on the matter, see Barnett (1987), d'Arms (2000), and Hoffman (2000).

⁴ See, for example, Gallagher and Zahavi (2012), Zahavi (2011), Zahavi and Overgaard (2011), and Zahavi (2014).

⁵ I am not the only researcher on empathy to make this distinction. Other scholars have also felt the necessity to divide empathy into at least two different kinds. See, for example, Goldman (2006, 2011), Stueber (2006), Goldie (2011). My terminology resembles much more that of Goldman (who used the term 'lower-level empathy') than that of Stueber (who employed the words 'basic empathy'). Interestingly, these and other academics tend to connect the phenomenon of basic/low-level empathy with the research on neuroscience and see in the activity of mirror neuron, the neurological foundation of our capability of grasping other people's emotions. See, for example, the already cited Stueber (2006), Goldman (2006, 2011), Iacoboni (2008).

of empathy can be detected at a phenomenological level, but they are also traceable in experiments conducted in the fields of psychology and of the neurosciences. Let us go step by step and begin with phenomenology: what happens when we empathise in a ‘low-level’ way? Suppose you are the passer-by on the sidewalk, observing the rear-end collision in which Paul was involved, or—if we want to change the example and add an extra-layer of interaction on your part—suppose you are in the company of a friend who has just been left by his beloved partner. In both cases you do not have to construct any story: you are part of the story, part of the *narrative*, you are in the situation and able to interact with it and with its protagonists. The crucial feature in both these circumstances is that you directly experience what the others do and say: their gestures, mimicry, facial expressions, and of course their words and acts. To put it simply, you are able to experience their *behaviour*. This layer of perceivable interaction that subjects have with the world and with others is what modern-day phenomenologists call *embodied-being-in-the-world*.⁶ Our mind—so the position of the phenomenologists—has an original, natural tendency to express itself in (embodied) behaviour. The mind (and its states) must not be thought of as something hidden from the world and locked in our heads, but as continuously revealing itself to the world. That is the reason why imagination is not involved in what I call low-level empathy; what we need is rather the direct observation of the target of our empathy and some general knowledge of the context (after all, behaviour always expresses itself in a shared context of experience): once we have all these elements, empathy will follow automatically.⁷ Take the example of your

⁶ Compare Gallagher and Zahavi (2012, p. 206): ‘we should recognize that the expressive relation between mental phenomena and behaviour is stronger than that of a mere contingent causal connection, though weaker than that of identity.’

⁷ Recent discoveries in the neurosciences conducted with functional magnetic resonance imaging, especially in the field of the research on mirror neurons, confirm the automaticity of at least some forms of empathy. Authors like Keysers and Perrett (2004) and Brass and Heyes (2005), in particular, have suggested that shared circuits might result from associations between simultaneously activated neurons. The suggestion sounds roughly like this: whenever a given perceptual cue (e.g., the sight of an angry face) or even a symbolic one (e.g., the mere word ‘pain’) is accompanied by a certain somatosensory activation (emotional, visceral, physical), a connection between the cue and the neural representation of this internally felt sensation is made. Once this connection is formed, the simple presentation of these cues can elicit the bodily, emotional, or sensorimotor representation that the brain has associated with it. What this means is that the mere perception of certain cues will automatically trigger certain empathic responses.

friend left by his partner. You do not need any kind of simulation or of imaginative enactment to understand and (granted that you are ‘open’⁸ enough) to also feel his sadness: his emotions are already clear to you. They arise from the tears in his eyes, from the sound of his voice breaking while telling you what happened, and from the way in which he sighs.

This primitive, basic, and ‘conceptually poor’⁹ form of empathy has a long history. The first to analyse it in a systematic way was David Hume. He described ‘sympathy’ (what we would nowadays call ‘empathy’) as a kind of mirroring of feelings: ‘The human countenance’, asserts Hume, quoting from Horace,¹⁰ ‘borrows smile or tears from the human countenance’. ‘Reduce a person to solitude, and he loses all enjoyment [...] because the movements of his heart are not forwarded by correspondent movements in his fellow creatures.’¹¹ Empathy seems to him to be a phenomenon in which an emotional state is transmitted from the target to the observer: ‘a propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to, our own’.¹²

Now, almost every scholar with an interest in empathy has begun their research either by saying that the concept of empathy they endorse is the direct heir of that of Hume (or a development of it) or by asserting that they will criticise the Humean argumentation to support something completely different. Both the methodologies have their *raison d’être*, but I will not adhere to either of them. Rather, the claim I am trying to defend is the following: philosophers have, for a very long time, identified and described with similar emphasis, a phenomenon where it is possible for a subject to understand and feel the mental states of another subject in a direct, unmediated, and conceptually poor way. This phenomenon can—so I claim—be correctly characterised with the help of the classic and

⁸We will come back to this concept later in the book.

⁹In the sense that it does not imply the use of cognising, mentalising, and of consciously deployed conceptual capabilities.

¹⁰The original citation from Horace (2010) (*Uti ridentibus arrident, ita flentibus adflent*) is to be found in Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, lines 101–102. Just to give an idea of how old this concept is, the term *sympatheia* had already appeared in (pseudo?) Aristotle, *Problemata*, 886a25–887b6. See, for instance, Aristotle (2011).

¹¹Hume (1983, p. 43).

¹²Hume (1960, p. 316).

modern phenomenological tradition and takes the aforementioned name of ‘low-level empathy’.¹³

The fundamental assumption of phenomenology, in this regard, is a clear rejection of any form of Cartesian solipsism, according to which the mental states of a subject remain substantially ‘hidden’ and cannot be directly experienced by others. Following this Cartesian idea, we have to postulate that which I have referred to elsewhere as an ‘inner world’ made of mental states accessible uniquely to the person who is having those states and an ‘external world’ made of perceptual inputs and which is accessible to anyone. This being the case, the only method we have in order to understand the mental states of others is first by perceiving their bodily behaviour to then pass, thanks to an inference¹⁴ or simulation,¹⁵ to the hypothesising of some kind of cognitive and emotional content. However, not all occurrences of empathy are conceptually rich and need inferences or simulations. We saw with the example of Paul, and with that of the friend left by his partner, that we are able to empathise in a direct and unmediated fashion. We experience incidences of LLE every day. Actually, I would go so far as to claim that LLE is not only the most basic form of empathy, but also the most usually employed form. Normally, we switch to more complex and conceptually richer kinds of empathy only if LLE fails or if—for some reason—it is not enough.

However, in order to point out that LLE is not just a mere postulation, a *petitio principii*, we need to give it a solid conceptual foundation, in other words we have to show how and why it works. Therefore, over the next few pages I am going to defend my position at both a phenomenological and a psychological level. Nonetheless, before moving on, a brief explanation is needed. In the following arguments regarding LLE, I will frequently use the expression ‘understand the other’s feelings/emotions/mental states’ or something similar, whereas I will not refer a great deal to ‘feeling the other’s feelings/emotions’. There is a reason for this. In fact, except for individuals who have specific impairments (take the case of those with autism and Aspergers), understanding the emotions of another person is usually easier than feeling them. Feeling what another feels implies more than just a receptive attitude towards the other; in particular, I claim that the following elements must be taken into account:

¹³From now on I will often refer to it with the abbreviation ‘LLE’.

¹⁴As in the case of ‘Theory-theory’.

¹⁵As in the case of ‘Simulation theory’.

1. the characters of the two subjects (empathiser and target);
2. the presence (or absence) of a common history between the two;
3. the relationship they share (or not);
4. the mental states of the observer at the moment of empathising;
5. the correct identification of the context on the part of the observer;
6. the information the observer has about the target.

Every single one of these features has an influence on the *consonance condition*. Notice, also, that not one of them is—taken per se—necessary or sufficient for the emotional consonance, but each one of them can tip the balance towards or away from it. Some simple and concise examples will help to illustrate this point. My aim is to show how affective empathy can be impeded or improved, depending on the presence or absence of each one of these elements.

Take the first element: *character*. The proud person would typically find more difficulty in empathising with the emotion of sadness on the part of a person by whom they believe they have been offended or humiliated in the past.¹⁶ Or, to choose another example, a person who has not experienced jealousy at all will find it hard to empathise with the emotion of jealousy felt intensively by another subject.

As for the second element, think of the empathy that may exist between an older couple after decades of happy marriage (the meaningful glances that say it all without the need for words, the perfect knowledge of the partner's gestures, expressions, tones of voice, and so on, that permit an almost perfect 'synchrony of feelings', so to say) versus the often odd and awkward situation of having to reassure someone one barely knows, without having the slightest idea of what one should say. Empathy will come very easily in the first kind of situation, not so much in the second one.

The concept of a *shared relationship* seems at a first glance to be strictly connected with that of a *common history*, and in part it does. However, by using the term 'relationship' I want to imply something different¹⁷: as Aristoteles would say, we are 'social animals' and in our lives we share various kinds of relationships with each other: romantic relationships, working relationships, and so on. These relationships inevitably have an

¹⁶Not to mention the fact that a person who often feels offended or humiliated is usually a person with a considerable ego.

¹⁷This element was strangely frequently overlooked by the literature on empathy, nonetheless I am persuaded that it plays an important role.

impact on our capacity to empathise. For instance: how much empathy would a man show to his now ex-wife when dealing with the children's custody after having to make monthly payments to her? How much empathy would the young female boss have for the elder male worker who she knows wanted that job as badly as she did and now finds himself in the uncomfortable position of being her subordinate? As you can see, the kind of relationship one shares with another has a huge impact on one's capability for empathy.

The influence of mental states at the moment of empathising is perhaps most immediately comprehensible among these elements: most likely we all are aware of the fact that certain emotions, especially when felt very strongly, can hinder empathy, that is, stress, shame, grief, self-pity. So, for example, the usually friendly and empathic high-school teacher will not be able to empathise as usual with his weaker students if he is worried about the health of his only beloved daughter suffering from Crohn's disease.

Another central element is the correct identification of the context. Empathy never happens, so to say, in an 'empty space'; rather the opposite, it is always contextual, and contexts have to be interpreted. Suppose I see from afar two men fighting. As I come nearer to the scene, I notice that one of the two men (the taller one) seems to shake and suffocate the other from behind. At this point in time (call it 'moment A') I imagine that the man has probably attacked the other from behind and wants in some way to hurt him. Worried, I get even closer and suddenly I see (call it 'moment B') that the shorter man spits a piece of food out of his mouth and takes a huge gasp. 'Oh, now I see!' I tell to myself, 'The shorter man was suffocating and the taller one was only trying to save him, using the Heimlich manoeuvre!' It is clear enough that if I had tried to empathise with the shorter man at 'moment A' I would have totally failed to identify the emotions he might have been having, not because of an error in my sensory perception or because of a deficit in empathy, but because of my mistaken interpretation of the context.

The sixth element might appear as another formulation of the second, but actually it is not. In fact, the information we possess about another person does not have to come from the sharing of certain *tranches de vie*, but they can stem from various sources: I can gather information about person A thanks to the reports of another person who knows them well, or thanks to an autobiography they might have written, or (in the case where they are a public figure) thanks to the news, and so on. The more

extensive and precise the information is, the more the empathising process will be facilitated.¹⁸

After this *excursus* about the conditioners of empathy, it is now time to go back to our previous questions regarding the psychological and phenomenological foundation of LLE.

The phenomenon that I have named ‘Low-level empathy’ should be considered as opposed to any philosophical and psychological position which sees empathy essentially as an indirect and conceptually rich mechanism, involving a two-stage process in which firstly the bodily behaviour of another person is observed and then is followed by an interpretation of it based on either a theoretical inference (and it is the case of Theory-theory) or a simulation (and it is the case of Simulation-theory). On the contrary, as already mentioned previously, LLE is traceable in the work made by various phenomenologists on empathy. LLE is also a direct and conceptually poor mechanism. In Low-level empathy, that is, we experience the other individual as an intentional being and their bodily behaviour (expressions, gestures, actions, and more) as immediately expressive of their mental states. The subjectivity of the other is present (and presented) to us, thanks to empathy, from a first-person perspective. This is a position which can be deduced from the work of Max Scheler.

Following Scheler, the point is that the consciousness of the *Mitwelt*, of the ‘world of others’ is not a secondary phenomenon, but an original one. Every person before and independently from a pragmatic experience of the other has a transcendental structure of their own personality and that we could call ‘sociality’, through which they can intentionally interrelate with others. Using a term of a famous American philosopher, John Searle, we could say that there is a kind of transcendental ‘background’ of potential relations prior to any attempt of empathising with others. This immediately presents the others to us as independent *Ich* or *Ichindividuen*, different from our *Ich*, and, *ipso facto*, precisely because of their separateness and independence from us—for the fact of being *Ich* different from my *Ich*—capable of intentional relations with us.¹⁹ Modern-day phenomenologists like Dan Zahavi, Søren Overgaard, but also Shaun Gallagher or

¹⁸There is a *caveat*, though. We should always keep in mind that empathy is never really simple. Even people with whom we are very familiar can surprise us, and in contrast, we can easily deceive ourselves when we believe we know others like the back of our hand. More often than we think, we see the others not as they actually are, but as we would like them to be.

¹⁹See Scheler (1973, pp. 50–51).

Daniel Ratcliffe often use the concept of ‘intersubjectivity’. We could say that this concept is the grandchild of a much older concept, the Schelerian concept of ‘sociability’. For Scheler, sociability has an a priori connotation, meaning that it is internally (*innerlich*) present in every person. The person is part of the society, and, in turn, the society is part of the person. Like the *Ich* is part of the *Wir*, so the *Wir* is part of the *Ich*. With a literary analogy, we could say that Robinson Crusoe, while he is alone in the desert island and before his encounter with Man Friday, has already in himself the potentiality (of which he is fully aware) to become a member of a society. That is to say, that even the individual who does not actually live in the society nevertheless lives in it intentionally, even those who have never had a direct experience of community would however participate in it through the *Mangelbewusstsein* and through the *Nichterfüllungsbewusstsein*, that is, thanks to the ‘consciousness of the lack’ of it and to the resulting feeling of ‘dissatisfaction’.²⁰

Long before Lévinas, Scheler wrote that the perception of the other always precedes the perception of the *Ich*. Our most basic and primary form of knowledge is, for Scheler, always a knowledge of expressive phenomena. That is why, anticipating, in addition to Lévinas, even Sartre, he could assert that we see the fury, the sadness, the hostility, the love, the shame, or whatever other emotion is in the gaze of others, long before we can specify the colour or the size of their eyes.²¹ Max Scheler is, in my perspective, the putative father of LLE. Following his concept, we are not only able to experience the other’s mind from a first-person standpoint and in a perceptual (or perception-like) way, but this experience of others is primary, original, and even prior to the experience of ourselves.²² We cannot understand ourselves as *Ich*, before having understood the other as *Ich*. Using the German words employed by Scheler, we could say that we never live in a simple *Welt*, that is, in a world in which I am the only ‘minded’ inhabitant, for the reason that I am the only subject provided with a mind that I am able to know, whereas the existence of others, and in particular of other minds, must necessarily be in some way inferred. On

²⁰ See Scheler (1966).

²¹ Scheler (1973, p. 238).

²² See also Heidegger (1962), H118, which proves the proximity of Heidegger’s position to Scheler’s, and their estrangement from their common teacher, Husserl: ‘By “others” we do not mean everyone else but me—those over against whom the “I” stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself—those among whom one is too.’

the contrary, I always find myself in a *Mitwelt* (literally, a ‘with-world’), namely, a world in which I am an *Ich* among other *Ichs*. As Heidegger once noticed, the *Ich* has never to come out from itself, to break out, since it is already outside, nor does it have to get into others, into their minds, for the good reason that it already encounters the others outside.²³ Quoting from Gallagher and Zahavi (2012, p. 207) we could affirm: ‘No inference to a hidden set of mental states is necessary. Expressive behaviour is saturated with the meaning of the mind; it reveals the mind to us’ and also:

Before we are in a position to theorize, simulate, explain, or predict mental states in others, we are already interacting with them and understanding them in terms of their expressions, gestures, intentions and emotions, and how they act towards us and others. Importantly, primary intersubjectivity is not primary simply in developmental terms. Rather, it remains primary throughout the life span, across all face-to-face intersubjective experiences, and it underpins those developmentally later practices that may involve explaining or predicting mental states in others.²⁴

This last quote is very important, as it highlights the special role of LLE. Low-level empathy is not just the primary empathic mechanism we develop, but it remains the fundamental one even once we have developed the faculty to utilise HLE, which means to say that: (1) even when performing HLE, LLE usually occurs before it; (2) consequently, LLE *informs* HLE by providing it with the epistemic basis it needs (a basis that can later be discarded, but that nevertheless constitutes its first foundation).

All this said, one might wonder what we need HLE for if we primarily rely on LLE for our empathic attempts? The answer is twofold: on the one hand, there are circumstances in which we simply cannot use LLE, for example, when I try to empathise with a person I do not know or who is not present at that moment. Indeed, LLE works at its best as a *hic et nunc* mechanism, which means that the other person must be present and share with me a given context of experience. On the other hand, LLE works immediately and directly as a kind of intuition; through LLE we *grasp* what the other might be thinking and feeling, and we know by experience that we are often not happy with a simple intuition: we want to understand the (psychological) reasons for the subject doing this action, and we want

²³ Heidegger (2001, p. 145).

²⁴ Gallagher and Zahavi (2012, p. 210).

to really know ‘how it feels’ to be that way. Sometimes we want, in a sense, to *stay with* the other, to *dwell* in their thoughts and emotions, to let them flow in us, in order to better empathise with them.²⁵ However, this issue will be explored more extensively later in the book.

Let us now go back to our concept of LLE. We said that this mechanism is grounded on a behavioural and contextual understanding, thanks to which we can grasp in a rather ‘sketchy way’ the other’s mental states. It is not a deep understanding of them, but a superficial one. Nevertheless, it constitutes our basic compass for intersubjective understanding. Resorting to HLE all the time would be exhausting, whereas LLE occupies our intellectual and emotional faculties only for a small percentage of the time. Think, for instance, of the situation when you see two teenagers interacting from a distance: the boy offers the girl a bunch of flowers, and, although you are not able to hear what they say, you grasp the embarrassment and the shyness of the boy, thanks to his facial expression and to his blushing, and the joy of the girl, thanks to her smile and the movement of her hands. Think, too, of two men on the street, talking in a language you cannot speak but who—you understand—are clearly arguing about something. Consider all the situations you will probably face while simply strolling around in a big city. You could not possibly empathise at a high level with all these different subjects, but LLE offers you a useful basic intersubjective and interrelational orientation, a psychological compass.

Some authors, like those already cited representatives of the phenomenological tradition, would call what I have labelled ‘Low-level empathy’ as empathy plain and simple and would deny the existence of other forms. However, a whole series of scholars, simply too long to be listed extensively, as well as our normal everyday experience, teach us that there are other ways of empathising. In what follows, I will offer a brief list of the different forms of ‘High-level empathy’ and thereby complete the taxonomy of empathy I will make use of in this work.²⁶

²⁵ This is a concept I will call *lingering* and that will have a key role in my theory.

²⁶ This taxonomy is not only useful for the purposes of this essay. Indeed, I also consider this categorisation to be extremely advantageous as a way to succinctly (yet productively) systematise the vast literature on empathic mechanisms.

3.2 HIGH-LEVEL EMPATHY

The first form of High-level empathy implies putting ourselves in the shoes of another subject and thereby imagining being in this subject's situation. This phenomenon has various names,²⁷ but in order to define it unambiguously we can employ the useful terminology of Amy Coplan, who brands it *Self-Oriented Perspective-Taking*. Similar to this is another kind of phenomenon, which must, however, be sharply distinguished from the first: *Other-Oriented Perspective-Taking*. An example will help to shed light on the difference between the two phenomena. Imagine that I meet with a friend of mine—call him Mark—who is usually in a cheerful, sunny mood almost every single day, but this time something is different: his face seems clouded, his voice does not have the same energy, his smile is gone. I ask him what is wrong and he tells me that he has broken up with his girlfriend. Now, suppose that I hated his girlfriend, and that I had found her bad-tempered, arrogant, tactless, and simply unfitting for my friend. It is quite easy to understand that a part of me is glad to hear news of the break-up. I may very well think: 'Finally he is free from the bad influence of that witch!' or something of the kind. Nonetheless, I know that I would not be a good friend if I simply tried to cheer up Mark by feeding him banalities such as 'Life goes on'; 'There's plenty more fish in the sea', or something similar. And of course, I cannot tell him what I really think about his ex-girlfriend; not that day and not in that way, certainly. On the contrary, I know that my task as a friend is to be there for him, not simply to say: 'I know how you feel', but to really mean it. Therefore, I try to take his perspective on the matter, to walk in his shoes. I try to imagine what it feels like when someone whom you care about, someone you even love with all your heart comes to leave you. I ask him to tell me how it happened, looking for details which not only help me to understand the story, but to experience it imaginatively. My goal is to provoke in myself feelings which resemble those that Mark might be having at the moment, something that—to cite Smith—'though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them'.²⁸

²⁷ Confront, for example, the different nomenclatures of Goldie (2011), Batson (2011), Stueber (2006).

²⁸ The quote, which deserves to be cited in its entirety, is the following: 'By the imagination we place ourselves in the other's situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, enter, as I 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.' Smith (1984, p. 9).

Already from this simple example it is possible to point out an intrinsic difficulty of the self-oriented perspective-taking, and it is the issue of what we can call ‘egocentric biases’. Self-oriented perspective-taking is intrinsically biased because, on closer look, it is not really the perspective of the other that we take into account, but ours in appreciation of hers. We just consider the situation in which the other is, but we never contemplate the other as a subject with their own peculiarities and characterisations, with their particular personality, with their ideas and values. We simply project on the target what we would think or feel if we found ourselves in their circumstances. For that reason, if this mechanism surely tells me what *I* would feel in certain situations, it cannot always help me to understand what *the other* might feel in these same situations. This approach can only work well when both the empathiser and the person empathised with are very similar, however, if there are some significant differences between the two of them, then it becomes very unreliable.

The other-oriented perspective-taking seems on the contrary a much more reliable method. Here, the empathiser does not only imagine what is like to be in the other’s situation, instead, they also try to imagine *being* the other.²⁹ The answer that the other-perspective taker poses to themselves is not: ‘What would I feel if I were in Christy’s situation?’, but ‘What would I do if I were Christy and I were in her situation?’ Formulating the question in that way permits a higher level of accuracy, thereby overcoming the egocentric biases. However, another kind of issue should soon become evident: the preciseness of the conclusions about the other’s mental states reached, thanks to this mechanism, depends on the information the empathiser has about this other subject and about the context.³⁰ The more exact the information, the more precise the outcome of the perspective-taking will be.³¹

²⁹In order to do this, various capabilities are required. Among those we find a certain mental elasticity, as well as the ability to regulate our level of affective arousal and restrain our own perspective. For a more extended discussion of the phenomenon, see i.a. Decety and Sommerville (2003), Decety and Jackson (2004), Decety and Hodges (2006), Goldman (2006), Lamm et al. (2010), and Decety and Meltzoff (2011). On emotion regulation in general, see Gross (1998), Bargh and Williams (2007), Ochsner and Gross (2008), Guyrak et al. (2011), and Campos et al. (2011).

³⁰See, for example, Goldie (1999, 2000, 2011).

³¹Notice that I am by no means taking a stand in the long debate between theory-theory and simulation-theory. I believe in fact that what I am asserting in relation to perspective-taking and more generally regarding HLE can be shared by the supporters of both theories.

3.2.1 *A Special Case of High-Level Empathy: Narrative Empathy*

The great majority of the authors tend to identify these two mechanisms as the only forms of perspective-taking. Nevertheless, my claim is that there is another approach that can be used to take the perspective of another subject, which has been too often overlooked in the literature on empathy and that we can call *narrative perspective-taking*. This method is usually employed when we do not personally know the person whose perspective we want to take. Nonetheless, it can be used (and it is often used) in conjunction with the other two methods, as well.³² Given the importance of this method, it is quite surprisingly to notice the extent to which it seems to have been overlooked in the traditional literature on empathy. The amount of work done analysing the connection between narratives and empathy does not, in fact, get even close to the efforts made in developing the two most famous forms of perspective-taking, namely, simulation-theory and theory-theory. It is not my aim here to follow a precise view on the phenomenon which I have called ‘narrative perspective-taking’ and to defend the theory of a certain philosopher against the opposite views of others. On the contrary, my purpose is to briefly describe how *narrative empathy* can function and why it should be taken into account when talking about empathy and perspective-taking.

I mentioned above that narrative empathy is often employed when we want to empathise with people we do know little about (since we normally do not need to resort to narratives when the target of our empathy is a person we know very well). One of the typical cases is empathy felt for fictional characters, such as figures in a film or a novel.³³ In these cases, in fact, I have to completely rely on the information given, respectively, by the director or the novelist, in order to empathise with a character. Indeed, much of the skill of the novelist consists typically in offering an accurate and realistic depiction of the characters of his or her story, and the same

³² In fact, very rarely are these methods used singularly. Most of the times we tend to rely on a mixture of approaches and take the perspective of another subject by way of all these procedures.

³³ Of course, I could have mentioned the case of a piece of theatre as well, but for the sake of simplicity, the two examples given will suffice.

applies to a film director.³⁴ With regard to the latter, the role of the actors in providing psychological depth to the figures they are impersonating is as crucial as that of the director. When we read a novel or watch a film, it is very common to get involved in empathic and empathy-related mechanisms with the characters represented: we *feel with* a character, we try to anticipate his or her future actions or intentions, and we imagine what we would feel in their situation. For this reason, it is not surprising that many of the studies about narrative empathy were conducted, in addition to psychology, in the fields of aesthetics and literary critique.³⁵ In the case of fictional characters, indeed, all we have as a basis for our empathy is precisely the narrative information that is offered to us from the author of the story (be it a written novel, a film, or something similar).

Take, for example, one of the most paradigmatic scenes of a universally acclaimed film shot by a director who is famous for the extraordinary psychological introspection of his characters. The film referred to is *The Godfather* by Francis Ford Coppola, and the scene under scrutiny is that in which Michael Corleone (interpreted by Al Pacino) pays a visit to Carlo Rizzi, together with some of his men (among them his trusted counsellor Tom Hagen). At this point in the film we have a substantial amount of information about each character in the scene: some is in regard to the psychology of the various characters, other details are in relation to family ties, trust, and the internal rules of a criminal organisation like the Italian-American mob that we get to know during the movie. Despite the volume and the complexity of the information at hand, the spectator does not find any difficulty in complying it into a narrative that makes sense (also thanks to the ability of the director) and in empathising with the various characters. Indeed, it is exactly the capability of the viewer to carry out this empathic process that ultimately constitutes the profound emotional tension in this

³⁴ Needless to say, this does not apply in cases of films or novels in which the author seeks to elicit an effect of estrangement in the spectator or the reader. To give two examples of this, the psychological introspection and description of the characters in a film by David Lynch will be totally different from that offered by a film by Ridley Scott. In a similar way, a novel by Charles Dickens usually offers a depiction of its characters which is far removed from that offered by, say, Franz Kafka.

³⁵ See, for example, Andringa et al. (2001), for an analysis of perspective-taking in films, and the insightful and long-lasting research of Suzanne Keen (2006, 2007, 2011a, 2011b) on narrative empathy and on the importance of narratives in general for empathy. See also Taylor et al. (2003) for an interesting study about mentalising in narrative contexts.

scene. Let us deconstruct it, in order to identify the various elements that build up the *Spannung*.

At this point, Michael Corleone has radically changed from the beginning of the film. The recent, terrible happenings that have befallen his family have led him to embrace the destiny of a Mafia-Boss, transforming his psychology in a profound way. Once an honest man, Michael is now a cold-blooded murderer and a clever, cunning plotter. His beloved brother, Santino ‘Sonny’ Corleone, was viciously killed in an ambush by a rival clan: the Barrese, and Michael knows that Carlo was the one who betrayed Sonny. Carlo is not the kind of man who elicits the sympathy of the viewer: at this point we already know that he is a violent drunkard, who beats his wife (who happens to be Michael’s sister) and now reveals himself as a traitor, too. On top of that, we also know how much Michael loves his sister and loved his brother, and how serious the violation of the trust between mobsters made by Carlo Rizzi is. That is why, already after the very first greeting given by Michael, we expect something bad to happen. Those words: ‘Hello, Carlo!’, sound like an epitaph. The look in the eyes of Michael Corleone/Al Pacino appears as an irrevocable condemnation. As spectators, we are certain: Carlo is already a dead man, he just does not know it yet. But then, surprisingly enough, Michael does not make a violent move. He reassures Carlo (who is understandably terrified, as it clearly appears from the look on his face) and makes him sit down on an armchair. He even offers Carlo a drink and tells him that he is not going to hurt him. He just wants the name of the clan who killed his brother, then he will send him to Las Vegas in eternal exile as a punishment for having betrayed the family. Carlo, after some hesitations and visibly upset, finally confesses. Michael seems to be satisfied and lets Carlo get in the car, which should take him to Las Vegas. For a moment, we almost think that Michael has found unexpected (and perhaps undeserved) mercy for Carlo. Then, the camera shifts to Carlo sitting in the car, and behind him, in the back seat, we see none other than Peter Clemenza, Michael’s right-hand man and, more importantly, Sonny’s godfather. It is at this moment that the temporary illusion breaks and we know that the writing is on the wall for Carlo. He is indeed about to die, strangled in the car by Clemenza.

All the emotional load of this scene is based on the narrative empathy we feel towards all these figures. For some moments, they stop being fictional characters and assume a real ontic consistency. We feel as if we knew these people and we were able to foresee what they would think and do; and we do not do so by simply guessing, but by empathic processes

grounded on the information we have on them provided by the narrative. We empathise with Carlo's fear, with the profound indignation, the contempt, and the rage Michael feels, with the lust for vengeance by Clemenza. We make sense of the whole scene, not by imagining what we would think, feel, or do in this situation (even if we could ask ourselves this question, too), but by empathically knowing and feeling what the characters would think, feel, or do.

This kind of empathy is frequently employed in other contexts as well, for example, when we try to empathise with historical figures. Of course, depending on the instance at hand, the narrative empathy will take the form of a mere speculation, of a direct connection. In fact, whereas with films or novels we often have detailed description of the personalities and the temperament of the various characters, this is not always the case in the historical field. As a consequence, empathising with a modern historical figure like, say, Martin Luther King will be easier than doing the same with Attila. In the first case, we possess documentation from, among other things, videos, recordings, witnesses of people who met him personally. The image we can build from these sources is consequently much richer and more fine-grained than the one we can recreate about a Hun warlord who lived about 1500 years ago. Hence, to stress the concept once again, our empathy is always dependent (in addition to our empathic skills) on our knowledge from the information we have about both the context and the target of our empathy. Put in another way, we could affirm that empathy is directly proportional to our epistemic access to both subjects and contexts of experience.

However, there is another element which is imperative to highlight. I said above that narrative empathy is used, in particular, in relation to fictional and historical contexts, for the good reason that the information we have about these frameworks is typically expressed in a narrative form. Nonetheless, the field of application is potentially much wider than that. My claim is that narrative empathy can be applied in all cases of empathy, thereby exploring new horizons and enriching our empathic process. Human beings are, in other words, wonderful storytellers: they tell stories to explain almost everything they believe and much of what they feel. Ask a person, for example, why they have fallen in love with a person, why they believe in God, how they have come to study what they are studying or have the job they occupy. You will always receive a story in response. Indeed, telling (as far as possible) coherent and consistent stories is the way human beings have to make sense of the various beliefs, decisions, and

feelings that are the foundation of their lives.³⁶ This same capability human beings have in assembling and telling narratives can work in tandem with empathy and, although the outcome of the empathic process will depend, as I have said more than once, on different sets of information, narratives always tend to constitute the bedrock on which the pillars of our empathy lie.³⁷

What is more, the possibility of constructing a reasonable and detailed narrative about one individual helps the empathiser to overcome the sense of difference, of distance, of estrangement one can feel towards an unknown person. This person ceases to be alien to us and starts, instead, to be a part of the world out of which we can make sense, a part of our world. Of course, granted that with this process we wish to gain access to the inner world of this person (we want to know them, to understand them, to feel what they feel), this process should be, as far as possible, free from previous biases we might have in relation to this person.³⁸ It is imperative to keep in mind that this act of *epoché* (with the meaning of ‘suspension of judgment’ that the Pyrrhonists and the Academic Skepticism developed) should be preliminary to all our empathic acts, otherwise we run the risk of imposing our world on the Other, instead of accommodating the Other’s world in ours. In other words, when engaging in an empathic process, we should resist both the temptation to apply our personality, our character, our way of thinking, and feeling on the Other, making them just another copy of ourselves (thereby abolishing them *qua* ‘Other’) and that to forcibly pigeonhole them in a category we are already familiar with, in a sort of *cliché* we can dominate.³⁹ What stands between the imposition of

³⁶It might be alleged that I play with the words in order to support my position, by referring to what are in fact ‘explanations’ as ‘stories’. Such objections, however, would be misplaced. Indeed, explanations are nothing but a particular subclass of stories when, by using this word, we want to designate accounts necessary to explain a fact, that is to justify it, to make clear the reasons or motivations behind it. Put in another way, not every story is an explanation, but every explanation is a story, if we agree to use this term (as I use it) in the most generic sense, that is, as a coherent report of happenings.

³⁷For the inspiration of some of the claims I make on the importance of narratives I am indebted also to the beautiful book by Peter Goldie (2012), even though I do not agree with him on the role played by empathy on this matter and this is the reason why I do not quote him explicitly or support his theory on the whole.

³⁸Of course, a complete liberation from all our biases is impossible to reach, but this must become the objective we aim for.

³⁹With this argument I do not aim to imply that all attempts of categorisation of other persons are wrong, but only that we should prevent turning them into stereotypes by means of cheap and ready-made *clichés*.

our psychology on the Other and the reduction of the rich interiority of an-Other to a stereotype is empathy.

But how is it possible to do that? Here is where the special function played by narratives becomes central. Every occurrence of high-level empathy must be embedded in a certain narrative. Narratives form the framework in which events and emotional episodes take place, in which the character and personality of a subject can become apparent, in which the context of experience can be explained. Without narratives, we are bound to the present moment in which a certain emotion arises in that facial expression, that bodily reaction, that context of experience. With narratives, on the contrary, we are able to imagine a past and a future for what we envision, we can embed the rising of that emotion in a story that provides it with meaning and that suggests a possible future development. To be more concrete, without narratives, the happiness of a girl who has finished law school is just that: an emotion of joy embodied in her smile, her laughter, and her tears. With narratives, that same emotion becomes something more and my empathy for the girl can be more accurate and richer. That happiness can become the happiness of a girl who accomplished law school although a certain high-school teacher never trusted in her ('you are not fit to be a lawyer') and thereby be mixed with a sense of revenge; it can be accompanied by gratitude towards her parents and towards their friends who were always there for her, each time she lost her courage; it can be hope at the thought of the bright future that awaits her, a future she has chosen. Hence, when I empathise using narratives, I do not empathise with the sheer token-feeling of joy, but with that precise and complex feeling of joy, a joy regarding all those elements; a joy, in one word, that is *feeling towards* (as Goldie would say) many different things. And it is exactly the concept of narrative developed by Peter Goldie that I have in mind here. Hence, it will benefit to cite a meaningful quote from him at this stage:

Our lives have a narrative structure—roughly speaking, they comprise an unfolding, structured sequence of actions, events, thoughts, and feelings, related from the individual's point of view. A narrative, of course, can be recounted in vastly varying degrees of detail: I can summarize my whole life in ten minutes; or I can take an hour to tell you what happened to me in the last twenty-four hours. [...] To make sense of one's emotional life, including its surprises, it is thus necessary to see it as part of a larger unfolding narrative,

not merely as a series of discrete episodes taken out of, and considered in abstraction from, the narrative in which they are embedded. A true narrative, as I understand it, is not simply an interpretive framework, placed, so to speak, over a person's life; it is, rather, what that life is.⁴⁰

Hence, empathising using narrative empathy permits the uncovering of more complexities pertaining to the state of mind of another subject. In particular, narratives are especially appropriate to disclose the (often very intricate) *intentionality* of emotions, and that is what emotions are about. And this takes us to another major point: if emotions are always about something, then in order to empathise with another it cannot be enough to share in the mere *phenomenology* of that emotion (i.e. to feel like the target does), one has to share in the intentionality, too. Thus, considering again the example of the girl who completed law school, there are various stages of what our empathy for her may reach: we can simply feel her happiness (and this is the first stage, in which only the same phenomenology is present); we can feel her happiness towards the same things she feels happiness for (and this is the second stage, in which also the intentionality is present); finally, we can feel her happiness towards the same things she feels happiness for, and for the same motives (and this is the third stage, in which phenomenology, intentionality, and also the cause of the emotion, or its trigger, is acknowledged and 'felt' from the inside). In other words, it is one thing to feel a generic feeling of happiness, devoid of content and outside of context, and another thing to feel happiness towards something, and because of a particular motive.

However, we need to clarify a crucial matter, or we run the risk of not only requiring from empathy more emotional and contextual information than it can provide, but of even perverting what empathy essentially is. We have already mentioned that the phenomenology of the empathised emotion does not have to be the *same* (which would be impossible), but must be *consonant*. Now we shall add that the intentionality and the acknowledgement of the emotional trigger also have to satisfy the requirements of a *consonant condition* and not of a *sameness* or *isomorphic condition*. So, concretely, it is not strictly necessary to simulate the happiness the girl might have had towards the accomplishment at law school to empathise with her (although this could help your

⁴⁰ Goldie (2000, p. 5).

perspective-taking); you could also empathise with her happiness by thinking of an achievement of a major accomplishment (one that you have had or that you imagine you could have, for instance) and of what feelings this would involve for a girl like her. In other words, very often a specific object can be substituted within the empathic procedure with a more generic one without undermining the outcome of the process and preserving the general emotional charge.

To sum up, narratives are part of the backbone of our high-level empathic processes. The success of our empathic attempts is founded on our capacity to fashion plausible and accurate stories about the targets of our empathy. Of course, since both the plausibility and accuracy of our stories are based on the information we have, or we can get access to, about the target and about the context of experience, the reliability of our narratives will depend for the most part on the correct and careful understanding of this information. On this issue, Peter Goldie stresses the importance, together with that of narratives, of the role played by *characterisation*. He defines it as follows:

[I]t also necessarily involves bringing to bear in the imaginative process a characterization of the narrator, which will include facts about the narrator—not just psychological facts about him, such as his character traits, adverbial traits, emotional dispositions, and other aspects of his personality, as well as his emotions, moods, and so forth (being kind; being punctual; being irritable; loving his wife; having a phobia about dogs; being depressed), but also other not obviously psychological facts about him (being short; being a litigation lawyer; being brought up in 1960s Alabama). This characterization serves as ‘background’ to the project of imaginative enactment of the narrative in the ‘foreground’.⁴¹

Until now, I have spoken more generally about ‘information about the target’ or about the ‘target’s character and personality’, for example. For the sake of simplicity and uniformity, we can employ the helpful vocabulary of Peter Goldie and refer to all of this as ‘characterisation’. For the British philosopher, this feature and narratives are independently necessary for empathy: ‘without the former, there is no possibility of centrally imagining another; and without the latter, there is no narrative to experience—at best

⁴¹ Goldie (2000, p. 198).

one might be able only to imagine what it is like to be that other person'. I agree with that statement, but I would like to add the importance of context and assert that this, together with narratives and the characterisation of the target, form the conceptual, epistemic basis of empathy.

What we have done in this first part of the thesis is to make clear the notion of empathy I will make use of in the main body of the work. This book aims to illustrate the kind of role empathy can play in the moral sphere, and in order to do that, it has been imperative to firstly give a clear characterisation of what empathy is and how it works at an epistemic level. Having done that, we can now examine what effects this faculty of ours has at the moral level.

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PART II

Morals Without Empathy?



Anti-empathism: Jesse Prinz

What I call ‘anti-empathism’, that is, the tendency by scholars dealing with empathy to criticise this phenomenon either at the ontological and epistemological level (by contesting that it is really possible to feel what another feels)¹ or at the ethical/moral level (by questioning the role it is supposed to play in the moral sphere or as the founding element of an ethics),² is very recent and, for this reason, it cannot yet count on many supporters. Nonetheless, as usually happens with young movements advancing a provocative thesis, the number of academics advocating this view is rapidly rising.

In what follows, I will analyse the perspective on empathy of the most representative among the ‘ethical’ anti-empathists, namely, Jesse Prinz and Paul Bloom (a perspective which is very often complementary, when not overlapping), and then criticise it in order to make room for an alternative point of view on the matter. My intention is to reject most of the criticisms made of empathy by Prinz and Bloom whilst at the same time distancing myself from empathy-enthusiasts (whom I shall label ‘pro-empathists’). As I have said more than once, my intention is to present a third alternative way of thinking about the moral dimension of empathy, which, although perhaps less provocative, and for this reason also less glamorous than the

¹ It is the case, for instance, of Goldie (2011), and Slaby (2014).

² See especially Prinz (2011a, 2011b) and Bloom (2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2016).

two maximalist positions, will on the whole be considered—so I hope—more reasonable and plausible.

Jesse Prinz developed his anti-empathic position in two articles that appeared in 2011 and that carry the very telling names: *Is Empathy Necessary for Morality?* and, naturally, *Against Empathy*. In the first of the two articles, Prinz divides morality into three different fields, namely, moral judgement, moral development/education, and moral conduct, and he then questions the role that empathy can play in all these three areas. In the second paper, the American philosopher widens his view by being, if possible, even more critical of the real potentialities of empathy. To the question if empathy can be a precondition of moral judgement (as the theory of Hume and those of contemporary philosophers like Michael Slote seem to imply), Prinz answers that:

empathy is not a component, a necessary cause, a reliable epistemic guide, a foundation for justification, or the motivating force behind our moral judgements. In fact, empathy is prone to biases that render it potentially harmful.³

In the next chapter we are going to examine more closely what arguments he used to justify this strong conclusion.

4.1 UNNECESSITY OF EMPATHY FOR MORAL JUDGEMENT

Let us start our analysis with the first article. Here Prinz describes empathy as ‘a kind of vicarious emotion: it is feeling what one takes another person to be feeling. And the “taking” here can be a matter of automatic contagion or the result of a complicated exercise of the imagination.’⁴ Two crucial characteristics in this description should be noted: first of all, empathy is defined as *feeling what one takes another person to be feeling*. This assertion is interesting, since for Prinz it seems (although he is a little unclear on this issue) that we can empathise even when we fail in the attribution of mental states. In fact, it is not required to ‘feel what another feels’, or ‘to feel something that is congruent, similar, or similarly valenced to what the other feels’, but to ‘feel what one takes another to be feeling’. This definition appears already rather problematic to me, since it turns empathy in a process founded only on belief and not (also) on acknowledgement. It

³ Prinz (2011b, p. 214).

⁴ Prinz (2011a, p. 212).

seems, in other words, that if you believe that a certain subject 'A' is feeling 'x' and you feel 'x', too, then you are empathising with 'A'. I think that such an assumption would take empathy to be too arbitrary, but let us set this matter aside momentarily and continue with the analysis of Prinz's position.

Secondly, emotional contagion is for him a case of empathy, too. In this sense, he does not make the difference that I made between emotional contagion (which is per se not a case of empathy), low-level empathy (which is a kind of direct, unmediated, and conceptually poor empathy), and high-level empathy (which is empathy obtained thanks to what Prinz calls: 'a complicated exercise of imagination'). On the contrary, his definition seems to encompass all forms of attributions of mental states by giving them all the label of 'empathy'. This is, of course, a strategy that is totally licit to adopt. I contend, however, that my systematisation is more fruitful and, on the whole, more fitting than his. In fact, it can circumvent some important objections, it is productive in academic discussion on the topic of empathy, and it is even nearer to the usual concept employed by laypeople when discussing this phenomenon.

Once Prinz has chosen the definition of empathy with which he is going to work in the paper, he asks whether empathy can be necessary for moral judgement, moral development, and moral conduct. Finally, he also takes into account the question of whether empathy plays and/or *should* play an integral role for morality. As we are going to see, the answer to all these questions is negative.

Good sentimentalist as he is, Prinz starts his analysis with a quote from the *Treatise* of David Hume. As Prinz interprets him, the Scottish philosopher sustained the following theory: that virtuous actions provoke satisfaction in the people who receive them, that vicious actions produce uneasiness instead, and that, thanks to our empathy (what Hume calls 'sympathy') for the recipients, we can get a feeling of approbation in the first case and of disapprobation in the second. These two feelings, respectively, of approbation and disapprobation, constitute our judgements that a given action is morally right or wrong. Therefore, empathy seems to be, in Humean ethics, the very precondition for the formation of any of our moral judgements. Now, the question of whether Hume should be read

exactly in this way is still open to dispute,⁵ but in any case, this seems to be a legitimate view of the possible role played by empathy in morality and specifically in grounding our moral judgements. Is it, nonetheless, also correct? Prinz contends that it is not, and in order to make this point, he resorts to six different arguments.

The first argument Prinz uses to criticise the role empathy can play within morality is one in which, as he himself asserts, ‘deontological considerations overrule utilitarian principles’.⁶ In particular, he imagines that one might judge that it is bad to kill an innocent person even if their organs could be used to save five others who desperately need transplants, and reaching this judgement is a proof, for him, that empathy does not play a role in these kinds of considerations, as one would feel cumulatively more empathy for the five needy people than for one single healthy person. But this is a hasty (and wrong) conclusion, for two different reasons: the first is that Prinz gives the impression of arguing that empathy has a natural inclination to favour utilitarian/consequential kinds of considerations as opposed to Kantian/deontological ones; the second reason is that, contrary to what Prinz believes and to what *prima facie* might seem, we actually feel more empathy for the one single person than for the other sick people. I will start with the analysis of the second reason.

The dilemma mentioned by Prinz is very similar to the famous trolley problem, particularly in its ‘fat man’ variation: would you be ready to push one fat man onto the track, in order to stop the trolley that would otherwise kill five people? The story is well-known⁷: there is one trolley going downhill. The brakes have failed and in front of it there are two tracks: the one which it is on leads to five people who would all be killed by the impact, whereas on the other track there is only one person. In the original version of the dilemma, it is asked whether one would be ready to pull the lever and switch the track, so that the trolley will hit one person instead of five. In this scenario, the majority of people would be ready to sacrifice one life in order to save five others. But, interestingly enough, when the only way to stop the train is to push a fat man onto the track, the vast majority

⁵ An author who has recently read Hume in this way and who sees in empathy the basis of morality is Michael Slote, who wrote in his 2010 book *Moral Sentimentalism* that empathy ‘is not only the cement of the present sentimental theory but also [...] the cement of the moral life’. Cfr. Slote (2010, p. 13).

⁶ Prinz (2011a, p. 214).

⁷ If not, see Foot (1967).

of people disapprove.⁸ In other words, the majority of people have a strong tendency to act utilitarianly/consequentialistically in the first case, but then seem to apply a deontological principle in the second case, thereby showing a surprising (ethical) inconsistency. Various possible explanations have been fashioned to illuminate and justify this change of behaviour. After all, from a logical point of view, there is no apparent difference: one man should be sacrificed in order to save five others: why is almost every person ready to do it in the first case, but not in the second case?

One possible explanation appeals to a difference in the (moral) intention: in the first situation, the person who pulls the switch does not have the intention to harm anyone, therefore, the killing of one man is seen as a kind of side effect. In the second situation, on the contrary, killing one individual is an integral part of the more general intention to save five lives. In other words, the killing of one person in this case cannot be seen as a side effect, but as an exemplification of the principle that the end justifies the means, a principle that not everyone would be prepared to apply.⁹

Another possible explanation could be founded on the justification principle connected with the more passive or more active role one plays as agent in the situation. In the first case, the scenario is so construed, that someone is going to die regardless, so my choice as 'lever-puller' is 'just' to decide who, and my moral reasoning would take me, normally,¹⁰ to prefer the 'lesser evil'. To give an analogy with an example that Philippa Foot makes in her article of 1967, the circumstance which I am in as 'lever-puller' is the same as that of a pilot whose airplane is about to crash: if there is no likelihood of directing the plane to a totally unpopulated area, they will at least choose the least populated one they are able to find (e.g. a park with a few people strolling in it rather than a school).

The 'fat man scenario', on the contrary, introduces a variable that is very difficult to deal with (morally). At the end of the day, when I watch the trolley heading towards the five workers on the track, the fat man is just a bystander as I am. What authorises me to kill him (because this is a case of killing and not just of letting someone die) in order to save the workers? It seems that I may have a justification good enough to *let one*

⁸ See Singer (2005).

⁹ For a similar view see again Foot (1967) and her doctrine of the double effect and Kagan (1989) for a critique to this approach.

¹⁰ I say 'normally' because not every subject follows this consequential principle.

person die (as opposed to five people), but that I do not have one good enough to *kill one person*.

Both the possible solutions presented are unsatisfactory in several respects. The supposed inconsistency between an utilitarian and a deontological kind of moral reasoning can hardly stem from a change in intention. After all, the intention of a person who chooses to pull the lever in the first case, but to abstain from pushing a fat man onto the track in the second, remains the same: hurting as few people as possible and saving as many people as possible. If we can talk about ‘side effects’ in the first case, then why do not do it in the second? In other words, if my thoughts sound like this in the first instance: ‘I just want to save the five people and avoid a slaughter by switching the track. That there is a person on the other track who will die is merely a side effect/collateral damage’, then why cannot they sound like this in the second: ‘I just want to save the five people and avoid a slaughter. If there were any other solution to stop that trolley than pushing the fat man standing next to me on the track I would try it, but there isn’t. So, I push him.’? As you see, my intention continues to be the same, the number of lives lost would be the same, and analogous would also be my interference with the other’s subject agency/free will/right to decide (in both cases I condemn a man to death without his consent). Nevertheless, something stops me from being so consistent with my goal. What is that something?

Even using the distinction between ‘killing’ and ‘letting die’, or, put in another way, between an instantiation of ‘taking a life’ (fat man scenario) and ‘refraining from saving a life’ (man on the track scenario) as the fundamental variable which should save the ethical consistency of a person who chooses to sacrifice one life in the first situation, but refrains to do so in the second, appears to be a weak move if it remains founded in merely agential terms. My suggestion is, on the contrary, that in the fat man case, emotions make their voice heard so loudly that we simply cannot ignore them.

In the first case, I just have to pull a lever. This is a simple, neutral movement. It will have serious repercussions, and I know this when I pull it, but in some sense, I also have a certain physical and emotional distance from what happens. This permits me to treat the situation with a sort of ‘cold logic’ made by pros and cons. The lives at stake become countable, and I can adopt a more consequential perspective. In the second case the distance I had in the first situation totally disappears. My claim is that there are degrees of involvement (and of related responsibility and sense of

guilt) in the things we do to other people, and these degrees reflect the levels of our emotional proximity. That is why we find easier to let someone die by pulling a lever, than to kill them ourselves. And that is why, if forced to kill the fat man before pushing him on the track (I am imagining another possible variation to this mental experiment) I am sure everyone would prefer to shoot him in the head with a gun (maybe while he is not looking at us, so that we can avoid watching his face and so that he will not be terrorised at the thought of his imminent death) than to stab him *vis à vis* with a knife. In the second case, in fact, we would have an inevitably strong empathic involvement: we would feel his shock, his terror, his pain when stabbed. We might also project ourselves in his situation and thinking how dreadful such an experience would be. On the other hand, in the first case, our empathy would be less elicited. Hence, in this experiment, empathy is never out of the picture: it is simply partially¹¹ dormant in the ‘lever’ case and then it becomes more and more active the more my emotional involvement with the context increases.

Now that we found this directly proportional relationship between emotional involvement/personal proximity on the one side and empathy on the other, we can understand why I have asserted that it would be wrong to say, as Prinz does, that we feel cumulatively more empathy for the five people in need than for the one healthy person: this would be so only in the case in which the one single person was also dying. In that instance, all things being equal (i.e. being the one and the five in the same conditions), we would probably feel more empathy for the five. But the case so as it is described by Prinz is more similar to the fat man scenario, where we have to kill an innocent person in order to save five others. The thought of killing this man in order to harvest his organs and transplant them in other patients would horrify us and hold us back. Of course, we would be empathically sad for the five people, but this sadness would not be great enough to overcome the empathic emotions of horror, disgust, and guilt we would feel in contemplating the idea of killing an innocent

¹¹I say ‘partially’ because it can be very much present. I could, for example, empathise both for the one person on the track and then for the other five even in the ‘lever’ case and then choose.

person just for their organs.¹² By empathising with this individual, we would soon and easily discover that we could not possibly want something so terrible to happen to anyone: we would not at all wish to suffer something similar, so why do it to others?¹³

I think I have argued enough over what concerns the conclusion by Prinz in believing that we feel more cumulative empathy for the five people in need than for the one healthy person. Now it is time to briefly move to the question of whether empathy always favours consequential principles as opposed to deontological ones. As it can be seen quite clearly in the arguments hitherto made, it does not. Depending on the situation, on the moral convictions of the empathiser, and on the level of emotional involvement, empathy will foster deontological or consequential principles alternatively. Hence, in the country of morals, empathy is, so to say, an essentially stateless citizen: it does not belong to and it does not favour any specific kind of ethics. Or, to put it another way, empathy is morally neutral. As some readers may think that by stating the fundamental moral neutrality of empathy I wish to imply that empathy has no influence in

¹²Perhaps, Prinz would criticise my view by claiming that whatever emotions I might experience by contemplating this idea are not empathic emotions, since it is just a case of mental simulation. In reality, I am not killing a man, so I do not have any ‘about-to-be-murdered-person’ to empathise with. Now, who thinks that empathy can only happen in the *hic et nunc*, with a person who is present and undergoing an emotion in front of me, will certainly agree with this kind of criticism. However, this is not what the vast majority of scholars describe as empathy. Empathy is very often portrayed in terms of simulation, imagination, and as a mental process does not necessarily require the target of empathy to be present. That is why we can empathise with people in the past, in the future, or with fictive figures. The case that I have depicted is one in which we imagine the consequences of our actions. I claim that insofar as these consequences take the (imagined) form of emotions attributed to a subject—emotions that I imagine seeing expressed in their face, their gestures, and their behaviour—and insofar as these imagined emotions resonate with me, this is indeed a case of (high-level) empathy. Empathy shown, *nota bene*, not towards a present ‘emoting’ subject, but towards an imagined, ‘would be’ emoting subject. Another objection could be that the mentioned emotions of horror, disgust, guilt, and so on are all emotions that *I* as agent feel, but that are not felt by the object of my actions. However, this objection will miss the crucial point, too. Insofar as these emotions of horror and others stem from the resonating in my mind of correspondent feelings being experienced in the object (in this case, e.g. feelings of pain that are correctly identified and recognised by me as empathiser), these must be considered reactive empathic emotions.

¹³This already suggests the possible connection of empathy with the golden rule and the universal mechanism at the basis of the categorical imperative, for which I will argue later in the book.

moral matters¹⁴ (which would run against what both anti-empathists and pro-empathists, with diametrical opposite conclusions, sustain), a brief clarification at this stage is in order.

With the expression ‘morally neutral’ I do not wish to intend that empathy is completely ineffective in the moral sphere, but only that its effect may vary, from positive to negative, depending on when, how, and with whom one chooses to empathise. Of course, this will also depend on how the empathising person acts on the basis of the empathised emotion. Therefore, feeling what another feels at a certain moment is not, *per se*, an intrinsic good or bad act. It is just an act. And, as it happens with any kind of act, in order to judge it as ‘moral’ or ‘immoral’, we need to analyse the action in the light of the moral principles we choose to follow. Thus, typically, a utilitarian will deem empathy as morally good if it leads to the increase of the general happiness/well-being of the greatest number of people. This also means that the moral weight of empathy varies much in the same way in which the moral value of an action can be deemed as morally good or morally bad, depending on a series of conditions which include the intention of the agent, the context in which the action occurred, and the way in which it was enacted. For example, saving the life of a person drowning in a river is usually judged as a moral thing to do, but what if that person is or will be responsible for the deaths of many more people? From a utilitarian point of view, letting that person drown appears the moral thing to do.

In the same way it seems at a first glance that empathy is subjected to the same variations within the moral spectrum. Hence, empathising with the pacifist feelings of altruism, inclusion, and solidarity of a Gandhi-like persona seems *prima facie* a moral thing to do, whereas empathising with the lust for blood of a Jack the Ripper seems not. However, the reality is more complex: further in the book we will see that what appears as a simple truism (it is good to empathise with good people and bad to empathise with bad ones) is a misleading oversimplification. We will also observe that empathy’s effects for morality in general are, on the whole, positive.

I hope that all of these considerations have made clear why the first objection of Prinz to empathy ought to be rejected. The second (very brief) argument he makes about empathy is that, from a Rawlsian veil of

¹⁴I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer whose mistaken interpretation of this concept has persuaded me of the necessity to explain my position more clearly.

ignorance, we could consider the distribution of resources to the needy as moral, because we might be needy in the future. In this case, our judgement would drive from a concern for the self and not for the needy. Here, I think that the American philosopher is probably conflating empathy with sympathy. What he demonstrated with this example is not that we do not need *empathy* to reach a Rawlsian kind of moral judgement, but that we do not need *sympathy* for it. Insofar as empathy means feeling what another feels, it can be compatible with a certain degree of egoism. In fact, it can even be argued that at least a basic form of empathy is necessary for the Rawlsian mechanism to work well: by walking in the shoes of the needy I understand that I would not want to live in those conditions, therefore, my personal interest for my future well-being would lead me to distribute my resources more equitably. Of course, it is not the aim of this book to argue for the necessity of empathy within the Rawlsian theory of justice, but it is imperative to point out that the Rawlsian idea of a veil of ignorance does not *ipso facto* divest the role empathy can play in moral judgement.

Now that we have examined two of the minor (at least in terms of length of the argumentation) objections to empathy made by Prinz, it is time to move on to the analysis of the most significant ones. As it would be quite laborious to proceed by presenting a criticism and then immediately trying to reply to it, I will instead summarise the critiques of Prinz and then answer all of them at the one time. This will help develop a more homogeneous argument in favour not of empathy *per se*, but of another way of looking at this phenomenon.¹⁵

As mentioned previously, the aim of Prinz is to show that empathy is unnecessary for all three of the main moral dimensions of morality, which are moral judgement, moral development, and moral conduct. If empathy were necessary for moral judgement, then we could not be able to express a moral verdict without making use of empathy. However, it seems that we are capable of judging something as moral or immoral without resorting to empathy. For instance, we can judge that we have been wronged, or, to put it another way, that someone treated us immorally, without the need

¹⁵ Incidentally, I find it astonishing to see how many authors claim to argue ‘in favour of’ or ‘against’ empathy. Such positions can surely be supported when it comes to judging a certain ethical, economic, social, or political idea, but it does not make sense to be favourable or unfavourable towards a psychological skill we have developed in the course of millennia of evolution. Empathy is simply an ability we have and, from a Darwinian point of view, if it is still there it means that it has been in some aspect advantageous for us as a species.

to empathise with ourselves.¹⁶ Furthermore, there are cases, such as bootlegging CDs or DVDs or evading taxes, that are commonly seen as morally wrong, even though there is no salient victim to empathise with. There is also a series of transgressions which are generally judged as immoral without thereby having grounded this judgement in empathy or compassion. Jesse Prinz offers the following list: ‘necrophilia, consensual sibling incest, destruction of (unpopulated) places in the environment, or desecration of a grave of someone who has no surviving relative.’¹⁷ In all these cases, empathy can hardly be the cause of our moral disapprobation, for we have no one to empathise with.

If we consider all these critical points, empathy turns out to be contingent upon moral judgement, since we can express moral judgements without having to rely on empathy. However, one might object, empathy turns out not to be necessary in these cases, only because they are all cases in which others are not really involved. Specifically, if we take empathy to be fundamental only for the regulation of moral behaviour between two or more individuals, then we may discover a necessary moral role for it. In other words, empathy might be necessary for a special class of moral judgements: those made in a ‘social’ situation between ‘real people’, as opposed to ‘juridical people’, like the government, or material goods, like the environment, are examples of these. However, even in this context there are some issues. Jesse Prinz has an interesting way of illustrating this. He imagines the following state of affairs: suppose that I come to eat the last delicious cookie from a packet I have been sharing with a friend of mine. After doing it, I feel a pang of guilt. Is this feeling of guilt coming from empathy for my friend? It does not seem the case. In order to feel guilty, I just have to construe my action as greedy. Quoting Prinz on this issue:

Morally significant actions can be recognized without empathy, even if those actions are ones that involve harm. We need not reflect on the harm to see that the action is bad. Perhaps you are delighted that I ate the last cookie. I recognize that, empathetically, and I still feel guilty; I still think that I should have offered the cookie to you.¹⁸

¹⁶ Prinz appears to be sceptical about the possibility of a subject empathising with themselves. We will see later if this scepticism is justified or not.

¹⁷ Prinz (2011a, p. 214).

¹⁸ Prinz (2011a, p. 215).

In other words, Prinz is persuaded that on any given occasion, our judgement that something is morally good or bad derives from a sentiment which leads to feeling the appropriate emotional response. Sentiments are in fact for Prinz ‘dispositions to have emotions’.¹⁹ Hence, if I have a sentiment of disapprobation towards greed, I will feel anger or scorn when I see someone acting greedily, and guilt and/or shame when I myself have performed a greedy action.

After having made these points regarding the unnecessary of empathy for moral judgement, Prinz asks himself whether empathy could be diachronically necessary for morality. In other words, granted that we do not need to resort to empathy every time we express a moral judgement, is empathy essential for the acquisition of the ability to judge morally? In short, is empathy necessary for moral development/education?

4.2 UNNECESSITY OF EMPATHY FOR MORAL DEVELOPMENT

This view seems *prima facie* appealing. After all, when we think of what morality essentially involves, we think of the principled regulation of our behaviour in relation to others. Therefore, empathy, which seems to many psychologists to have a strict connection with moral behaviour,²⁰ might turn out to be central. The well-known, insightful, and very influential book of 2000 by Martin Hoffman²¹ is committed exactly to proving this intuition. He claims that if a child were not empathic, they might be indifferent as to how their actions affect other people, and as a consequence, they might not come to understand and to fully appreciate when and why their actions are morally wrong. But is this really the case? Is empathy really a precondition to developing a capacity for moral judgement and, in general, for a sense of morality? There are many studies showing how children engage in empathic reasoning when making moral judgements,²² but unfortunately none of these studies was able to prove that there is a relation of causation between empathy and moral development and not only

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Probably the most famous and well-documented works are those of Hoffman (2000) and the lifelong work of Batson and his colleagues, which you find good summaries of in Batson and Shaw (1991) and especially Batson (2011).

²¹ Hoffman (2000).

²² See, for example, Eisenberg-Berg (1979).

a mere correlation. But this is exactly what is needed if we want to demonstrate that empathy is at the base of our sense of morality. In order to prove this intuition, more and more researchers have shifted their focus to the study of pathological populations taken to be completely devoid of empathy: psychopaths. These seem, in fact, to lack both empathy and compassion and, if the result were that their well-known amoral or even immoral behaviour was due to this deficit, then we would have good reason to conclude that compassion and empathy are necessary prerequisites for morality. What is needed is indeed evidence of the fact that empathy can produce moral behaviour and not that empathy and moral behaviour are merely correlated. However, Prinz believes that psychopathy does not seem (at least at the present stage) to offer this kind of evidence. In fact, even if a plethora of scholars see in a lacking or defective empathy the central characteristic for explaining all the amoral features typical of psychopathy, this view can be challenged.

Now, what does it mean to be a psychopath? Robert Hare famously takes note of the following characteristics: glibness and/or superficial charm, grandiose sense of self-worth, deceitfulness, manipulativeness, lack of remorse or guilt, shallow affect, callousness, irresponsibility, poor behavioural control, lack of realistic, long-term goals, and impulsivity.²³ Cleckley offers another very similar, classical description of the typical psychopath:

Vexation, spite, quick and labile flashes of quasi-affection, peevish resentment, shallow moods of self-pity, puerile attitudes of vanity, and absurd and showy poses of indignation are all within his emotional scale and freely sounded as the circumstances of life play upon him. But mature, whole-hearted anger, true or consistent indignation, honest, solid grief, sustaining pride, deep joy, and genuine despair are reactions not likely to be found within this scale.²⁴

Furthermore, psychophysiological studies have revealed that psychopaths generally show a very pronounced lack of responsiveness to the distress of others as well as a lack of fear, shock, or sadness in disturbing situations involving physical or psychological harm to other people.²⁵ Psychopaths also have difficulty in distinguishing between different types

²³ Hare (1991).

²⁴ Cleckley (1976, p. 364).

²⁵ See, for example, Aniskiewicz (1979), Blair et al. (1997), Patrick (1994).

of violations and to correctly evaluate their different degrees of severity. For instance, they cannot distinguish a difference between violations of moral and those of merely conventional rules.²⁶ All these various features are often explained by a common denominator, that is, the lack of what psychologists call ‘Violence Inhibition Mechanism’ or ‘VIM’.²⁷ The explanation of the term is approximately as follows: normally developing children have an innate proclivity to empathise with observed distress, so if one child causes another child to cry, the child responsible for the harm will catch the observed emotion and feel badly. These unpleasant feelings will serve as an inhibition signal which will lead the child to cease the actions causing the distress and even drive them to associate bad feelings with that sort of action in the future.²⁸ So, following the theory, violence inhibition is mediated by empathic distress that is then associated by children with moral rules, as opposed to conventional rules, the violation of which does not involve empathic distress. Hence, normally developing children can distinguish moral rules from conventional ones because the former are the only ones to be empathically grounded. Empathy constitutes therefore the emotional basis of moral rules. Psychopathic subjects lack this system of inhibition because they lack empathy for others, that is, they don’t feel any negative feelings when hurting someone else. This is—for many psychologists, including James Blair—the cause of their amorality.

At first glance, this model seems to be very attractive. However, Jesse Prinz is of a different opinion. It is not the lack of empathy that causes an individual to be a psychopath, but rather a severe deficit in moral emotions altogether. Prinz does not want to deny that empathy is absent in psychopathic individuals, nevertheless, the point is to show that this absence is not the primary cause for psychopathic amorality, but the consequence of another, more primordial, more fundamental lack. If we go back to the previously cited description of typical psychopathic individuals, we find the following features: ‘lack of remorse or guilt, shallow affect, callousness, irresponsibility, poor behavioral control, [...] and impulsivity’. Among all these various features, there are some characteristics which can be taken as primordial and which lead psychopaths to other kinds of deficits, including the lack of empathy. These characteristics are poor

²⁶ See Blair (1995).

²⁷ See the already cited Blair (1995).

²⁸ See also Hoffman (2000) and his theory about learnt ‘scripts’.

behavioural control, impulsivity, and, above all, shallow affect. Prinz's suggestion is that the constitutive impossibility for psychopaths to experience mature, wholehearted emotions brings them to be callous, irresponsible, unempathetic, and, at the end of the day, amoral. After all, empathy as we have defined it (and as Prinz describes it, too) is the capacity to experience the emotions of others, and if one is unable to be deeply moved even by their own emotions, they will remain all the more indifferent to the emotions of others. Put in another way, psychopaths do not feel empathy because they cannot feel any kind of emotion in a wholehearted manner. Being emotionally almost dead, they are also not concerned about others.

Thus, considering the *status quo* of the research on empathy and psychopathy so far, Prinz concludes that we cannot assert with certainty that empathy is necessary for moral development. On the contrary, it seems safe to affirm that in normally developing children with a normal emotionality, methods of moral education founded in punishments, love withdrawal, positive feedback, as well as the offering of positive role models, among others, appear to be both necessary and sufficient for the formation of a mature morality. However, there is another dimension of morality that could still be strictly connected to empathy, and it is that concerning moral conduct or, in other words, moral motivation.²⁹

4.3 UNNECESSITY OF EMPATHY FOR MORAL MOTIVATION AND CONDUCT

Prima facie, the connection between empathy and moral motivation appears quite natural: if I empathise with someone suffering, I might be motivated by vicarious sadness for this person to do something in order to help them. However, Prinz challenges this view: for him, empathy has a contingent connection with moral behaviour and when it effectively motivates, it does it as a motivational force among others. These other forces are simply emotions, which are very often not based on empathy. Using the words of Jesse Prinz:

²⁹ Even though the two terms (conduct and motivation) seem to imply different things, they actually do not: as a matter of fact, the question posed by Prinz here is whether empathy can *motivate* us to *act* morally. In much the same way, moral development overlaps with (and sometimes identifies with) moral education.

[...] moral judgments have an emotional basis. Token moral judgments contain emotions such as anger, disgust, guilt, and shame. Emotions are motivating states, and each of these moral emotions has a behavioral profile. Anger promotes aggression, disgust promotes withdrawal, guilt promotes reparation, and shame promotes self-concealment.³⁰

For Prinz, ‘normal’ emotions do all the job empathy is taken to be doing, they provide us with all the necessary motivation for carrying out certain actions and avoiding others and offer us explanations for our behaviour: ‘I ran away, because I was scared’; ‘She yelled at him, because she was angry’; ‘He bought him a beer, because he was happy to see him’, for example. However, there is more to be considered. Asserting that moral judgements ‘contain emotions’ means that they are intrinsically motivating: indeed, we have a natural proclivity to avoid negative, valenced emotions and to pursue positive ones. Thus, for Prinz, if we anticipate that an action will make us feel guilty, we will try to avoid that, whereas if we believe that by doing another kind of action we will feel pride or gratification, we will be motivated to carry out that action. Empathy appears to be, in this regard, a useless complication to a sentimentalist framework that works perfectly well the way it can be conceived.

Prinz then goes on with the citing of several psychological studies that demonstrate, in his words: ‘[...] that empathy is not a major player when it comes to moral motivation. Its contribution is negligible in children, modest in adults, and non-existent when costs are significant.’³¹ However, I will not analyse these examples, for many good reasons: the first is that they barely constitute an argument against empathy, for Prinz himself does not discuss the results of these different studies at length, instead, he just mentions them very briefly—so it seems—to drive the point home.³² Presenting good counter-argumentations for every single one of these results would require a vast amount of space and shift the focus of my present book and would also overstep my task as a philosopher. Furthermore, I think that the mere citing of psychological studies without an appropriate problematisation would easily lead to a biased activity of cherry-picking. There are a lot of psychological studies about empathy, and the results among them are far from being uniform: no matter how

³⁰ Prinz (2011a, p. 219).

³¹ Prinz (2011a, p. 221).

³² This should not be taken as a criticism of Prinz, but simply as a description of the way in which these examples are presented in his paper.

many pieces of (psychological) research someone can quote to show that empathy is unnecessary for morality: there will be many others proving exactly the opposite.³³ Hence, I prefer to concentrate my attention on other weightier arguments.

These particular arguments can be found in a rather summarised way at the end of Prinz's article. There, besides repeating some claims for which he has presented in the course of the paper, Prinz makes the following contentions: empathy is prone to biases and parochialism (e.g. cuteness effect and preferential treatment), it can be easily manipulated, it can motivate harmful actions, and it interferes negatively with the ends of morality. As we shall see later, these objections will be further developed by Paul Bloom.

To get the full picture of Prinz's hostility to the supposed moral dimension of empathy, some other notable criticisms contained in another article should be mentioned. In *Against Empathy*, the American philosopher contends, *contra* Hume and *contra* Michael Slote,³⁴ that empathy is not a precondition for (moral) approbation or disapprobation, or in other words, for moral judgement. This time, however, his arguments are even starker. Since my argumentation will sustain a thesis that is in many aspects opposed to that of Prinz, I cannot forgo mentioning—for the sake of the exposition—his critiques; however, I will offer a summarised version of those in order not to weigh down my own presentation.

4.4 OTHER INTRINSIC SHORTCOMINGS OF EMPATHY

The first polemical targets of Jesse Prinz are, as already said, Hume and Slote. Hume can be taken to support what Prinz calls a 'patient empathy constitution thesis', whereas Slote represents an 'agent empathy

³³ Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the studies quoted by Prinz are quite old ones. Meanwhile, the research on empathy has advanced, allowing for many more interesting nuances.

³⁴ See Hume (1960, 3.3.1.): 'When any quality, or character, has a tendency to the good of mankind, we are pleased with it, and approve of it; because it presents the lively idea of pleasure; which idea affects us by sympathy, and is itself a kind of pleasure.' For Slote, see Slote (2010, especially p. 37 and ff.), where he theorises his idea that being empathically 'warmed' by the action of another involves our approving of this action, whereas being 'chilled' by the action of another subject entails disapproval of it.

constitution thesis'.³⁵ The former represents the empathy I feel for the recipients of a good action that constitutes my approbation for it. For example, if I see an old woman asking for help and then I see a young man helping her out (say, crossing the street), my empathy for the positive feelings of the old woman (happiness, relief, pleasure, or others) constitutes my moral approval of the action. Conversely, if I see this same man ignoring this old lady, thanks to empathy for the feelings of sadness and discomfort of the woman, I will disapprove of the action.

Prinz criticises this thesis by asserting that it is quite odd to talk about empathy in these cases. In fact, the emotion I feel when observing another subject carrying out an action that I approve (or disapprove) of is hardly the same one the patient of the action feels. If A gives money to B, B may feel gratitude towards A, but I will feel admiration and not gratitude for A. In much the same way, if A robs B, B might feel a sense of fear, despair, and vulnerability, but I will feel anger or outrage. There are even cases in which the victim of an action I disapprove of does not feel anything at all. For instance, if A does not notice that she was robbed, she will not feel any negative emotion, but I, as an observer, will feel anger or outrage towards B regardless.

The 'agent empathy constitution thesis' seems *prima facie* more promising. Here, in fact, I empathise with the doer of a certain action, particularly, with their intentions. Therefore, irrespective of what the receiver of an action may feel, I will approve of an action if I positively empathise with its agent and disapprove of it in the case where I negatively empathise with them. However, Prinz is not persuaded. In fact, there can be cases in which I am perfectly able to empathise with the agent, but I still disapprove of their action (Prinz makes the rather bizarre example of a recovering paedophile, who, while able to empathise with another paedophile, would condemn an eventual action of paedophilia on the part of the other). Furthermore, moral disapprobation appears to be constituted by feelings of blame, or something similar, not by a lack of empathy: if lack of empathy were directly connected to moral disapprobation, we would disapprove of any person towards whom we did not feel empathy, and it is easy to see how this would be nonsensical.

Now, before continuing with the criticisms to empathy, I cannot refrain from noticing and stressing the fact that there seems to be an error in Prinz's reading of Slote. In fact, Michael Slote in his book *On Moral*

³⁵ See Prinz (2011b, p. 217).

Sentimentalism never claims that moral approbation is constituted by empathy and that moral disapprobation is originated by a lack of it; his vision—if I am right in my interpretation—is actually subtler. The central claim of the book is that, thanks to empathy, one becomes receptive towards the emotions, the intentions, and in general the mental states which lay behind an action and drive an agent to carry this out. Therefore, if, after having empathised with the agent, I discover myself to be ‘warmed’³⁶ by their action towards another subject, then I approve of it; on the contrary, if, after having empathised with this agent, I find myself to be ‘chilled’ by their action, then I disapprove of it. Reducing Slotte’s position to the kind of simplistic approach Prinz is describing appears, therefore, a totally mistaken interpretation. Of course, Slotte’s theory can still be criticised for other aspects, but it should, at least, be properly conceived, otherwise one runs the risk of attacking a mere strawman.

Prinz then goes on with the question whether empathy may be a causal precondition for moral approbation/disapprobation, or, in other words, whether empathy is at the basis of all our moral judgements. As we have already seen in the other article, Prinz’s answer is negative: our moral responses are grounded on action-types. If I classify an action as an instance of stealing, murdering, terrorism, tyranny, for example, then this provides me with enough motivation to feel moral outrage or ire. In the words of Prinz:

The very possibility of thick concepts depends on a direct link between a form of behavior (taking property, taking life, etc.) and a negative response. We are conditioned to immediately despise these action-types without having to contemplate the suffering they cause.³⁷

Prinz’s position is very simple: we were raised to disapprove of some actions and to approve of others. This could happen as a result of a special kind of associative learning. We were, in other words, taught to associate negative emotional responses (like disgust, outrage, contempt) with actions deserving moral blame and, conversely, positive emotional responses (such as admiration or appreciation) with actions deserving

³⁶ Slotte defines himself as a sentimentalist and a Humean in the introduction to his 2010 book, thus, when he speaks of being ‘warmed’ or ‘chilled’ he actually intends to describe a feeling we experience and that, as with many (if not all) feelings, has a basic motivational drive as well as a directionality: it tends to push us close to (warm) or far from (chill) the cause of this feeling.

³⁷ Prinz (2011b, p. 220).

moral praise. Since this kind of teaching does not require empathy in order to work, nor is empathy needed after the inculcation of these emotional associations (because then they become a type of automatic mechanism), then we cannot but consider it totally worthy of dismissal.

After this critique, Prinz turns his attention, once again, to the analysis of empathy and moral development. This time, however, the starting point is different: if in the first article the question about the necessity of empathy for moral development was investigated using solely the literature on psychopaths, here Prinz focuses his attention—along with psychopaths—on the issue of moral education. Is empathy necessary to raise our children? Is it the fundamental tool to acquire a sense of morality? Unsurprisingly, Prinz is inclined to think that it is not. If we look at the techniques by which we educate our children (such as offering of role models, punishments, caregiving, and, conversely, love withdrawal) we will soon notice—so maintains Prinz—that empathy does not play a role. Thus, for instance, punishment instils fear, love withdrawal instils anguish, and ostracism instils shame. Ultimately, all these emotions will drive children to avoid certain actions and to carry out others. What is more, given how skilled children are with imitation, they will also imitate the outrage of their parents towards a bad action in the case where another child is caught doing the same. Hence, traditional ways of educating our children are all, in a sense, ‘empathy-free’.³⁸

Even faced with all these criticisms, a supporter of empathy might still contend that it is undeniable that empathy has an essential role to play at least at the epistemic level. Without empathy we would be blind to the emotions of other people, and emotional impact is a feature we have to consider when dealing with other subjects. Suppose A says something that hurts B. A’s capacity to recognise B’s distress is what can bring A to judge that there was something bad in her choice of words and eventually to regret them. Nevertheless, Prinz stands firm: this supposed epistemic role is not only merely contingent, but even epistemically unreliable, for many good reasons:

1. We do not always need to feel the emotions of others to correctly attribute emotions to them.

³⁸ For the role of imitation and models in moral education, see also Prinz (2005, especially pp. 279–281).

2. Affective empathy can lead to (vicarious) personal distress, that is, if the suffering of another is very intense, we might just withdraw and become avoidant, instead of helping out.
3. Empathy inherently suffers from what Hoffman (2000) called ‘similarity bias’ and ‘here and now bias’, that is, it works at best with people who are similar and near to us. Empathising with people of another ethnic group and religion, who live in a distant, foreign land is much harder than empathising with, say, a member of our family.
4. The fact that someone is suffering because of what we have done or said is per se not a sufficient element to conclude that what we have done or said is morally wrong. For instance, someone might be offended by our words because deep inside they know we are right or because they are a manipulative kind of person who tries to make us feel guilty.

On the whole, Jesse Prinz is adamant that: ‘If we measure the moral merit of an action by quantifying harm, rather than empathy, we may allocate blame in a way that better tracks our considered standards of wrongness.’³⁹

Empathy seems also ill-suited as a normative precondition for moral judgement, that is, as fundamental for moral justification. It is true that we can appeal to empathy to justify a choice we have made, or that we can empathically imagine the consequence of our actions before morally approving or disapproving of them, but even in those cases, Prinz is of the opinion that principles of justice should be preferred. The philosopher states very clearly (thereby revealing his consequentialist convictions about ethics) that it is the harm caused by a given act that makes that act bad and, conversely, that it is the pleasure brought by an action that makes that action good. Therefore, empathy cannot (and ought not) rise to the status of a normative guiding principle.

Finally, Prinz poses the question of whether empathy should be deemed necessary for moral motivation. Much like in the first article, even here he regards the hypothesis as problematic: as we have seen above, other emotions, for instance, guilt, anger, and shame, are better suited to motivating us. Moreover, we often have moral values that lead us to avoid certain actions and to carry out other ones without further need for empathy.

³⁹ Prinz (2011b, p. 224).

As if all these criticisms were not enough, Prinz even decided to dedicate another entire chapter (carrying the very telling title of ‘The dark side of empathy’) of his article to what he believes are serious shortcomings of empathy. This time the various flaws are not neatly structured, but presented as supplementary theses to the inadequacy of empathy as a moral principle or skill. Empathy—asserts Prinz—makes us sensitive to secondary qualities and blurs our vision when it comes to the central moral elements. Thus, for instance, it has been observed that jurors are inclined to hand down harsher sentences when the victims are manifestly emotional and lighter ones when defendants show regret.⁴⁰ This is troublesome for Prinz, since what should really matter in such cases is whether the defendants are truly responsible and whether victims were really harmed.

Nevertheless, we may wonder whether empathy must really be this partial, biased, unfair ability Prinz is describing. Is it not possible to adopt a more general, neutral perspective thanks to empathy? Does the capacity to step into the other’s shoes and to see the world from their perspective not allow for that? This was famously the position of David Hume: using empathy to acquire what he called ‘the general point of view’.⁴¹ However, the worst enemy of this general viewpoint is, for Prinz, empathy itself. Trying to reach this perspective by making use of empathy is like hoping to extinguish a fire by pouring gasoline on it instead of water. Empathy, in fact, tends to focus on the individual rather than on the multitude, and on persons, rather than on systematic problems.⁴² Prinz is clear: no objective principle can stem from empathy. In his words: ‘With empathy, we ignore the forest fire, while watering a smoldering tree’, and even more bluntly:

⁴⁰ See Tsoudis (2002). See also Hoffman (2011) for an insightful investigation about the role played by empathy in the court of law.

⁴¹ Hume (1960, 3.3.1). The Scottish philosopher uses various expressions to indicate how to take up (or get into) the general point of view. He asserts that we must forget our interests and neglect the differences between people remote from us and those we consider as countrymen, neighbours, friends, family. We should also overlook our present situation and our own interests and not consider the variations which occur at the basic level of our sympathetic reactions. For a good analysis of the general point of view by Hume (particularly on how it works and how to take it up), see Davie (1998).

⁴² We will further investigate this particular feature of empathy when dealing with the critiques of Paul Bloom, who has coined the term of ‘spotlight bias’ to describe it and talks about it at length in his book (see Bloom 2016, pp. 9, 30–31, 33–34, 87–88, 89–90, 95, 130, 136–137.)

‘The general point of view is not a bad idea, but its greatest hope may lie in the *extirpation* of empathy.’⁴³

In these two quotes is contained *in nuce* the whole Prinziian conception about empathy: whereas ‘normal’ emotions *can be* biased, empathy⁴⁴ *is intrinsically*, by its proper nature, biased. In fact, empathy is fundamentally a dyadic emotion, regulating the responses between two individuals involved in some kind of personal relationship. On the contrary, emotions, such as anger and guilt, are wider and more inclusive in their scope. Moreover, Prinz goes so far as to say that empathy is often the primary cause of the biases affecting other emotions.⁴⁵ For instance, if I fail to get angry at the injustices committed in another part of the world, it may be for the reason that I have chosen to rely too much on empathy or, in other words, because I have focused on the victims (that are not part of my in-group, that come from another culture and from a far-off foreign land),⁴⁶ and not on the crime itself or on the harm it has provoked.

In the very last part of his paper, Prinz examines another kind of fellow-feeling: concern, with the intention to see whether this could be a better alternative to empathy. He describes concern⁴⁷ as a negative feeling which arises from the contemplation of somebody’s plight or, put in another

⁴³ See Prinz (2011b, p. 228) for both quotes. The emphasis on the word ‘extirpation’ is mine, as I find the choice of this term very indicative of Prinz’s absolute hostility towards empathy. The verb ‘to extirpate’ comes from the Latin *ex-* (a prefix added as denoting a sort of negation of what comes after, like the *de-* in ‘demotivate’ or the German prefix *ab-*) and the Latin word *stirps*, that is, ‘sprout’, or ‘root’. Therefore, it has the meaning of ‘to eradicate’, ‘to pull out at the roots’, and that is why it is always found in tandem with an essentially negative thing that must be wiped out. One does not extirpate something that can have a certain utility or that it is not completely bad. Instead, one extirpates the bad, unwanted weed, such as poison dandel, one extirpates a malignant tumour, or the corruption within society. Hence, empathy appears to be, judging from Prinz’s words, a cancer on morality.

⁴⁴ Interestingly, Prinz defines empathy as an emotion (see Prinz 2011b, pp. 214, 229), whereas I showed above that this is not and cannot be the case.

⁴⁵ See Prinz (2011b, p. 229).

⁴⁶ That empathising with people who are different from us, and not in our proximity, pose greater difficulties than empathising with the ‘near and dear’ is a well-known fact. Hume himself was aware of this difficulty (see Hume 1960, 2.1.11.) and today we have several studies that confirm this common intuition (see, e.g. Xu et al. 2009, or Gutsell and Inzlicht 2010).

⁴⁷ See Prinz (2011b, p. 230).

way, from the recognition that someone is in need.⁴⁸ Whilst this particular kind of feeling has surely some advantages compared to empathy, it is—according to Prinz—neither necessary nor sufficient for moral judgement. It is not necessary, because we normally become concerned for someone (and we feel for them) when we believe something bad has happened to that someone and not vice versa. It is not sufficient, because we can feel concern in circumstances that have nothing to do with morality, as when we are concerned about the health of a friend or about the damages made by a natural calamity. Hence, at the end of the day, even concern's contribution to morals is negligible.

Jesse Prinz concludes his very critical article with the observation that research on fellow-feelings in general diverts the attention of scholars (and lay people, too) from more profitable fields of investigation, such as the study of moral emotions: anger, disgust, contempt, guilt, for example. Inquiry on empathy, as a consequence, has to stop.

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⁴⁸ In this sense, it seems to be very similar (if not one and the same thing) to the phenomenon that in modern literature on the matter is usually referred to as 'sympathy', namely, a kind of *feeling for* the other.

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Anti-empathism: Paul Bloom

So caustic were his criticisms, that people might think that Prinz managed to say all there is to say about the potential biases and shortcomings of empathy, but his voice did not remain unheard: a seed was planted, and others would follow his example. In particular, a famous psychologist decided to expand the critique on empathy, even succeeding in reaching laypersons, thanks to influential and powerful articles in magazines, such as *The New Yorker* (Bloom, 2013a, 2013b) and *The Boston Review* (Bloom, 2014). At the end of 2016, Paul Bloom released a book intended to provoke stark reactions both in the arena of public opinion and in scholarly research: *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. In this book, Bloom seems to pick up the harsh objections to empathy advanced by Jesse Prinz, making them even stronger and more extensive by using some of the latest research on empathy and compassion, and thereby building powerful criticisms about the connection between empathy and morality. Furthermore, Bloom, as opposed to Prinz, tries to find an alternative to empathy, a fellow-feeling able to overcome all the weaknesses that are inherent in empathy, and he identifies this feeling in what he calls *rational compassion*.

In this section I am going to review Bloom's arguments against empathy, as well as his claims about the moral superiority of rational compassion. Once we get the full picture of the anti-empathic perspective, it will be the turn of this book to develop the position it intends to defend regarding the moral role of empathy, a position which, whilst

acknowledging some of the deficits attributed to empathy, will also point out the crucial value of empathy within the moral domain.

Now, what are Paul Bloom's criticisms? Luckily, he himself summarises them right at the beginning of his volume. In his words:

Empathy is a spotlight focusing on certain people here and now. This makes us care more about them, but it leaves us insensitive to the long-term consequences of our acts and blind as well to the suffering of those we do not or cannot empathize with. Empathy is biased, pushing us in the direction of parochialism and racism. It is shortsighted, motivating actions that might make things better in the short term but lead to tragic results in the future. It is innumerate, favoring the one over the many. It can spark violence; our empathy for those close to us is a powerful force for war and atrocity towards others. It is corrosive in personal relationships; it exhausts the spirit and can diminish the force of kindness and love.¹

Following this structure, we could break down the criticisms of Bloom in six subclasses, namely: (1) empathy as a spotlight; (2) empathy as biased; (3) empathy as short-sighted; (4) empathy as innumerate; (5) empathy as sparking violence; (6) empathy as corrosive. However, at closer inspection, (3) and (4) seem to be strongly connected with (1): empathy is short-sighted because it focuses on the *hic et nunc*, and it is innumerate, because spotlights can hardly be addressed to multitudes: they work at best with single individuals. Subclass (5), too, is a direct consequence of (2): basically, since we feel more empathy with people of my in-group, we might, out of empathy for them, attack others whom we regard as outsiders. Taking all of this into consideration and, for the sake of clarity and conciseness, I will divide Bloom's criticisms in three categories:

1. Empathy as a spotlight.
2. Empathy as biased.
3. Empathy as corrosive.

¹ Bloom (2016, p. 9).

5.1 EMPATHY AS A SPOTLIGHT

Paul Bloom has a very plain and straightforward definition of empathy, but on balance I find it also correct, thought-provoking, and very much in accordance with mine (at least with the high-level form of this phenomenon): ‘Empathy is *the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does*.’²

This feature of empathy, that of coming to see the world with the eyes of someone else, is for Bloom an extraordinary power of empathy, but it comes at a cost: not only is it fallible (we experience the world as *we think* someone else does and not exactly like them) but, in order to function, it needs what we could call the ‘spotlight effect’. In other words, empathy, exactly like a spotlight on stage, illuminates a small, clearly outlined piece of the general scenario; it does not embrace the ‘big picture’, but focuses on a single person, a certain act, and gives it predominance. This signifies a substantial problem in a world where people in need are extremely numerous and often live in distant, foreign lands. Many times, the only way we have to get acquainted with their suffering is through the news or statistical data, and none of these sources of information seem especially apt to favour a spotlight effect and thereby properly elicit empathy. Hence, empathy turns out to be disappointingly narrow.³ Furthermore, the spotlight nature of empathy is a structural characteristic (and, for Bloom, also a shortcoming) that does not only make empathy narrow in terms of *space* (the one single person as opposed to the multitude, the one single action as opposed to the general context, for example) but also in terms of *time*. In fact, the here and now focus of empathy can hardly take into account the effect of actions that are diffused, perhaps delayed, and in any case difficult to compute. Sometimes helping a person in the here and now can have deleterious consequences in the future. Some other times the (empathic) desire of helping an individual can lead us to carry out an action that is less preferable than others. Remember the old adage: ‘Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime’? Paul Bloom is convinced that the spotlight nature of empathy—prone to kinds of solutions that have an immediate impact—would create a legion of ‘fish-givers’ and not of ‘fish-teachers’. What is more, Bloom believes, exactly like Prinz,⁴ that this spotlight nature that

² Bloom (2016, p. 16, emphasis in original).

³ Bloom (2016, p. 31).

⁴ See Prinz (2011, p. 229).

empathy has is inevitable: there is no way to overcome it, nor to enlarge this spotlight by pushing ourselves to feel more and more empathy for an increasing greater number of people:

Intellectually, we can value the lives of all these individuals; we can give them weight when we make decisions. But what we can't do is empathize with all of them. Indeed, you cannot empathize with more than one or two people at the same time.⁵

Paul Bloom does not offer any kind of psychological study in support of what it seems is a very dogmatic assertion, nevertheless, I would not brand this move as unjustified. After all, it is quite hard to think of a possible psychological experiment that can prove (or disprove) this statement. Perhaps, this is one of those cases in which the authority of a mental experiment is more than sufficient to prove the point and this is exactly Bloom's strategy. It seems impossible, for instance, to empathise at the same time with people feeling different emotions: one cannot feel the jealousy of Amy, the happiness of Paul, and the anger of Liza all at the same time. But it looks impossible to feel simultaneously the *same* kind of *emotion* of *different people*, too, even if they are people you know very well. Imagine what it would look like to empathise, at the same time, with the sadness of your best friend who is going through a rough divorce, that of your grandfather who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and that of your little niece who cannot find her favourite toy. Does it appear implausible to you? That is because it is.⁶

⁵ Bloom (2016, p. 33).

⁶ I am inclined to agree with Bloom on this point. However, I do not think that the reason for this shortcoming is the spotlight nature of empathy. On the contrary, the boundaries of empathy are set here by the fundamental characteristics of emotions. In the first case, empathising is impossible because of the dissimilar *phenomenology* of emotions. In the second case, it is impossible due to the different *intentional object* of the emotions (there are some features which are common to all instances of sadness, but it is one thing to be sad about a divorce and another to be sad about the loss of an object we deem precious). However, when both the intentional object and the phenomenology of the emotion are the same, it seems unjustified to affirm that empathising with more than one person at the same time is impossible. What about, for instance, the kind of sharing of feelings I get when watching a football game at the stadium with other supporters of my own favourite team? Is the happiness I feel and see in their faces, gestures, and vocalisations when celebrating a goal not empathic? Or is my attempt to empathise with the sadness of a class mourning the death of their teacher (a situation which I really had to face) doomed to fail because of the great number of subjects with whom I should empathise? I think that this would be an intolerably dogmatic conclusion, and authors from the phenomenological tradition, like Scheler, Merleau-Ponty, or Heidegger, seem to offer more interesting alternatives. More will be said about this later. For the concept of 'phenomenology of emotions' and 'intentional object' see Deonna and Teroni (2012).

However, there is more. Empathy for Bloom does not only work better with the one as opposed to the many; it even puts the one at centre stage *at the expenses* of the many: it diverts our attention, impeding us from seeing the many.⁷

5.2 EMPATHY AS BIASED

What does Paul Bloom intend to say, when he states that empathy is ‘biased’? Does he mean that empathy is intrinsically biased or that the empathy we are capable of reflects our biases? Both, it seems.⁸ Empathy is inherently biased, because its spotlight nature makes it short-sighted, innumerate, narrow, for example, but empathy is also biased on account of the fact that our biases guide the direction of the spotlight itself. In other words, if we tend to empathise more with people we know, or who live in our proximity, or who are similar to us, as opposed to, say, people from distant lands and stemming from different cultural and ethnical backgrounds, this occurs partly because empathy works better under proximity and similarity conditions and partly as a result of previous biases we have towards certain kinds of people. Hence, the employment of empathy is never neutral. Instead, it follows from the very beginning the biases which are already present in us, like a pair of glasses that we permanently wear which put some elements in a favourable light and others less so.

All these biases affecting empathy bring it to be, for Bloom, an essentially *parochial* phenomenon: we are prone to being more empathetic

⁷ Bloom (2016, p. 34).

⁸ See Bloom (2016, p. 31).

towards subjects of our in-group and much less towards outsiders.⁹ Of course, if empathy really mirrors and enhances our prejudices, it is hard to see in it a moral force, but there is another more worrisome consequence that is strictly tied to the inherently biased character of empathy, and it is the fact that parochialism and prejudices can lead to divisions, undue generalisations, and discrimination, and all these phenomena often bring about violence.¹⁰

For example, if I am more empathic towards people belonging to group A (it can be something trivial like a football team, but also something like a common nationality, religion, or ethnic background) than to people within group B, it seems safe to affirm that I will be more partial and ready

⁹There are several studies that highlight this characteristic. Hoffman (2000) had already talked about it in his very influential book *Empathy and Moral Development* (see especially p. 197), and results in accordance with this view were found, inter alia, in the works listed below (notice that, in some of these works, it is the connection between racial prejudices and helping behaviour that is examined and not really empathy; however, insofar as white subjects judge the pain of black people to be less serious, this can be linked to a lack or a lesser degree of empathy). Gaertner et al. (1982) observed that white female college students high in prejudice in the presence of passive bystanders helped black subjects more slowly than whites. Saucer et al. (2005) came to similar conclusions through another kind of experiment. Kunstman and Plant (2008) also analysed differences in helping behaviour between black and white people, but, interestingly, the minor help offered to black subjects by white individuals was here connected with a belief on the part of the whites to see ‘black suffering’ as *less severe* than the ‘white version’ of it. Further, black subjects did not seem to express the same racial biases while helping others. Pratto and Glasford (2008) examined the influence of ethnocentrism on empathy within competitive contexts, showing that whilst Americans value Iraqi and American lives equally under normal circumstances, they attribute greater value to American lives under competition, enhancing their readiness to empathise with conationals as opposed to foreigners. Finally, Xu et al. (2009) demonstrated in a widely cited experiment (its fame being likely due to its neuroscientific nature, which notoriously always makes one study and its related outcomes appear more ‘scientific’, and thus more trustworthy, than any philosophical or psychological experiment) that Caucasian and Chinese people react differently to displayed pain. In particular, the view of in-group faces in pain elicited increased activations of the ACC (anterior cingulate cortex) and inferior frontal/insular cortex in both groups, whereas this neural response decreased significantly when subjects were confronted with facial expressions of pain coming from out-group members. It seems therefore that empathic biases of parochialism have a well-defined neural basis.

¹⁰The idea that empathy can spark violence is not a new one and can be found already in Adam Smith (1984, pp. 70–71): ‘When we see one man oppressed or injured by another, the sympathy which we feel with the distress of the sufferer seems to serve only to animate our fellow-feeling with his resentment against the offender. We are rejoiced to see him attack his adversary in his turn, and are eager and ready to assist him whenever he exerts himself for defence, or even for vengeance within a certain degree.’

to justify a certain degree of violence against group B, if this should favour group A or prevent it from undergoing negative consequences. But even if that were not the case (suppose I am an extremely peaceful person who abhors any kind of violence, no matter how capable I am of empathising with the different parties within a competition), I would nonetheless be more disposed to justify (or forgive) certain (violent) acts if they happen to come from the party I favour. This can occur even on a large scale. Think, for instance, of the empathic wave which followed the attack of 9.11. What appears (nowadays as well as at that time) as a simple truism was repeated *ad nauseam*. The support on the part of American public opinion for a military intervention in Iraq would never have been possible without the thoughts of the American population constantly turning to the victims of the terrorist attack. Once a martyr (the people who died in the Twin Towers) and a common enemy (the Islamic fundamentalists) were found, it was easy for the phenomenon of empathy to occur ‘on track’, to feel for the people who lost their loved ones in the attack, and to dehumanise, not only the perpetrators of that horrible act, but entire neutral categories per se: the Arabs, the Muslims, the people of the Middle East, and those similar.

If one finds it surprising that empathy can be linked to violence, it is only because we are used to thinking of good acts as driven by empathy and ‘good sentiments’ in general and evil ones as stemming from a lack of empathy and humanity. But the truth is, for Bloom, that empathy can often be at the base of antithetic actions and sustain both sides in battle. In his words:

When scholars think about atrocities, such as the lynchings of blacks in the American South or the Holocaust in Europe, they typically think of hatred and racial ideology and dehumanization, and they are right to do so. But empathy also plays a role. Not empathy for those who are lynched or put into the gas chambers, of course, but empathy that is sparked by stories told about innocent victims of these hated groups, about white women raped by black men or German children preyed upon by Jewish paedophiles.¹¹

The conclusion, these being the premises, is crystal-clear: if empathy is incapable of overcoming our prejudices and changing the way we think, if the only effect empathy has is that of confirming and reinforcing our own biases, then empathy must not be taken into account as a guide for moral action.

¹¹ Bloom (2016, p. 192).

5.3 EMPATHY AS CORROSIVE

The final great argument fielded by Paul Bloom against the supposed moral role of empathy is that concerning its corrosiveness. This argument is quite interesting, since it does not focus on the negative consequences that empathy can have on others within an ethical context (its spotlight nature, its biases, and so on) but on the detrimental effects it can have on the empathiser herself. Hence, even if one were still convinced of the centrality of empathy in the moral sphere, one should refrain to make use of it at least because of its intrinsic harmfulness. The question is now what kind of (corrosive) harm can empathy cause?

Paul Bloom identifies the corrosiveness of empathy in the phenomenon he calls *empathic distress*,¹² described elsewhere as *vicarious distress* and *personal distress*. There are several studies which have focused on this potentially very negative feature of empathy,¹³ but despite the slightly different terminologies they employ (Helgeson and Fritz refer to it with the label of ‘unmitigated communion’), the phenomenon they take into consideration is the same: it is the empathic experience of another subject’s state of distress. What all these pieces of research have investigated is the fact that by imagining our being in the distressful situation of another person who is suffering in some way, we can arouse in ourselves the same emotions that they have, and this can easily be overwhelming. If empathy is strong enough, the empathiser will not just picture in their mind the suffering of the target, but they will feel, to a certain degree, the same sorrow. As the above-mentioned experiments of Batson et al. show, empathic distress will lead to the opposite of altruism: the subject will be incapable of helping or they will even refrain from helping the other in need and will instead try to escape from the situation. Bloom uses the words of a surgeon to explain this phenomenon:

If, while listening to the grieving mother’s raw and unbearable description of her son’s body in the morgue, I were to imagine my own son in his place, I would be incapacitated. My ability to attend to my patient’s psychiatric needs would be derailed by my own devastating sorrow.¹⁴

¹² See Bloom (2016, p. 136).

¹³ Inter alia, Batson et al. (1997, 2003), Helgeson and Fritz (1998a, 1998b, 1999), Jackson et al. (2006), Lamm et al. (2007).

¹⁴ Bloom (2016, p. 142).

Empathy seems to bring the empathiser to be dangerously vulnerable towards others. The empathiser—so Bloom—would lose too much of their autonomy and would precariously be at the mercy of the emotions aroused in the targets of their empathy. This is why Paul Bloom, together with a strong emphasis on the centrality of consequentialist principles, suggests that morality should be guided (if fellow-feelings must play a role in morality at all) by what he coins *rational compassion*.

5.4 RATIONAL COMPASSION

What exactly is rational compassion? Bloom develops this particular kind of fellow-feeling using the work of Olga Klimecki and Tania Singer and by contrasting it with empathy.¹⁵ Rational compassion should offer the perfect alternative to empathy, as it possesses (so it seems) all its advantages, but is at the same time free from its shortcomings. Rational compassion does not involve the mirroring of any feeling, but rather, calm and warm feelings of care and affiliation: ‘In contrast to empathy’, write Klimecki and Singer, ‘compassion does not mean sharing the suffering of the other: rather, it is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other’s well-being’.¹⁶

One of the conclusions that seem warranted from all these recent pieces of research is that empathy should not be seen as the only emotional or sentimental source we can rely on for motivational purposes when dealing with the active practice of morality. Compassion, as opposed to empathy, seems in fact to imply a tighter connection with helping behaviour (after all, when I *feel for* someone, in contrast to *feel with* someone, I am already

¹⁵ It is worthy to remember that though this labelling comes in this case from Paul Bloom, the concept of a form of ‘cold-blooded’ compassion is quite an ancient one. Buddhist texts, for instance, tend to distinguish between a kind of ‘sentimental compassion’, which corresponds to what nowadays we would normally call ‘empathy’, and ‘great compassion’, which resembles indeed the notion of ‘rational compassion’. The crucial difference between the two is that the first one, given its, so to say, ‘warm-blooded’ nature, exhausts the bodhisattva, making him or her suffer like the targets of his/her ‘sentimental compassion’; on the contrary, the second of these is more distanced and can be sustained indefinitely, as it represents itself as a kind of ‘background, offline phenomenon’. For further inquiry, see Goodman (2009).

¹⁶ Klimecki and Singer (2014), R875. For further analysis, see Klimecki and Singer (2013, 2015) and Klimecki et al. (2013, 2014). Bloom does not offer a clear-cut definition of rational compassion in his book, but he seems to share that offered by Klimecki and Singer, given that he uses the following words to describe it: ‘compassion [is] simply caring for people, wanting them to thrive’. Bloom (2016, p. 50).

thinking of myself as somebody who can actively do something for the others and not as a mere passive ‘receptor’ of their feelings).

These conclusions seem to find important confirmation in the studies conducted by Klimecki and Singer with the Buddhist monk and neuroscientist Matthieu Ricard. Basically, Ricard was subjected to a series of fMRI examinations during which he had to engage in two different types of meditation: in the first instance, Ricard had to employ compassion meditation, whereas in the second, he had to carry out an empathic kind of meditation.¹⁷ These meditative acts were conducted while watching videos depicting other people suffering. This series of studies served to show a few interesting discoveries, which were then replicated in subsequent experiments of the same kind involving a group of 25 women out of 30 participants.¹⁸ First of all, Klimecki and Singer demonstrated that empathy training (intended as ‘resonating with other people’s suffering’)¹⁹ and compassion training led to the activation of different areas of the brain: empathy elicited the activation of neurons in the insula and the anterior cingulate cortex (among others), whereas compassion activated parts like the medial orbitofrontal cortex and the ventral striatum. This is something noteworthy, since it shows, in principle, that there is a neurological difference between compassion and empathy; they are, in other words, two different neurological mechanisms.

But there is something of even greater significance for Bloom’s purposes, and it is the way empathy training and compassion training, respectively, impacted on the participants’ psychology. It appears, in fact, from the experiments that empathy training induced ‘a stronger sharing of painful and distressing experiences’ in the participants, whereas compassion training counteracted this effect by increasing positive affect and decreasing negative affect to baseline levels.²⁰ Bloom chooses to cite the even more affecting words of Ricard to prove his point: ‘The empathic sharing [...] very quickly became intolerable to me and I felt emotionally exhausted, very similar to being burned out. [...] I felt so drained after the empathic resonance.’²¹

¹⁷ Klimecki et al. (2013).

¹⁸ See Klimecki et al. (2014).

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 873.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 876.

²¹ Klimecki et al. (2013). Also to be found in Bloom (2016, p. 139).

To sum up, not only is empathy deleterious for morality (which, as repeated by Bloom many times in his book, should be based on consequentialist principles), it even loses the challenge with other types of fellow-feelings, in particular with compassion. Nevertheless, several neuroscientists and psychologists are of the opinion that it is not possible to feel compassion without first feeling affective empathy and that affective empathy works as a precursor to compassion.²² If that turned out to be true, then empathy would be necessary, if not for morality itself, at least as a necessary component of compassion, and given the valuable role that compassion seems to play in moral behaviour (a role that even Bloom has not dared to deny) then empathy would be saved.

Not surprisingly, Bloom does not share this view. There are, in fact, cases in which we care for people and help them (which for Bloom constitutes compassion in its essence) without need to engage in affective empathy. Think, for instance, of the situation where you help a child who is afraid without thereby feeling their fear, such as when you reassure a child scared of the dark. Or when you feel concern and try to support a person who is suffering from a disease you have never had, like rheumatoid arthritis, and without experiencing their suffering in the slightest. Hence, if we can be concerned and worry about others without empathy, if we can help with no empathy, if, in short, we can act morally and be moral persons with no empathy, then empathy really is unnecessary for morality. Or maybe not.

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²²This is the claim, among others, of Marco Iacoboni and Leonardo Christov-Moore: see Bloom (2016, p. 43 and p. 141). The original interventions are to be found in the forum to Bloom (2014).

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PART III

Moral Judgement



Empathy and Moral Judgement

In the last chapter I reviewed all the most important and striking criticisms proffered against empathy. What should be clear by now is that no matter what many politicians, psychologists, neuroscientists, ethologists, economists, or even our own common sense may say, empathy has limits and shortcomings, as well as biases. Empathy is fallible, manipulatable, and inaccurate. For some scholars, this makes it not only unsuitable for morality, but deleterious for it: empathy is not necessary and not sufficient for morality at best and dangerously noxious at worst.

What will now follow is in some sense a defence of empathy. It is not a defence *tout court*, an unconditional support for the case of empathy and an attack on all contrary theses. I will not proceed with the confutation of all criticisms cited against empathy. Empathy undoubtedly has its limits and it is not always a secure guide for acting morally, but it has, nonetheless, a central role to play for morality.

The structure of the following sections will, for the most part, mirror the one employed in the previous one, when discussing the critiques of Jesse Prinz. In other words, the main framework will be constituted by the analysis of the role of empathy in, respectively, moral judgement, moral development/education, and moral motivation/conduct. The boundaries will, nevertheless, not always be so rigid, as the issues at hand are fairly interrelated, hence, cross-references will be in order.

Now, as previously mentioned, the question to ask is: what is the role played by empathy in moral judgement?

I have already rejected some of the objections advanced by Prinz regarding the supposed unnecessary of empathy for moral judgement in the first part of this book. However, some questions have remained unanswered and now is the time to revert to those questions. It seems *prima facie* undeniable that we express at least some moral judgements without resorting to empathy. We are, for example, perfectly capable of judging that we have been wronged by someone else, though few people would dare to say that this judgement stems from empathy with ourselves. On the contrary, this kind of judgement seems to rely on the way we see the action. Thus, typically, for a sentimentalist (I take the case of sentimentalists in light of the fact that Prinz defines himself as such) if I react to a certain action with anger and I have a sense of having been treated wrongly, I have *prima facie* reasons to express a negative moral judgement against this action. Another way to reach the same conclusion is to examine the features of a given action (e.g. jumping the queue) and contrast them to certain rules of conduct that ought to be followed. Hence, if we have a social rule requiring queues not to be jumped, the instantiation of an action entailing this feature has to be condemned.

If you see no use for empathy in any of the above, it is because no degree of empathy is involved here. In other words, no matter where we decide to put our source of normativity (if in rules and principles, as deontological and consequential ethics would require, or in the feeling of certain ‘emotions’, as in the case of sentimentalist theories), at least in the case in which I am the victim of immoral treatment, empathy is not a player in the game. However, Prinz wants to go further than this, by claiming that there are also actions in which the victims are subjects different from me (see the list *supra*) and that, nonetheless, are judged as being immoral without any contribution coming from empathy.

Now, I believe Prinz is right: there are various moral judgements that we make daily without employing empathy; this is an undeniable truth. Nevertheless, I also believe that his position can be tackled on two fronts: the first is by highlighting how empathy and its influences on moral judgement can sometimes be hidden, but, despite that, are very much active. The second is by showing a noteworthy role that empathy can play in moral judgement which, far from making empathy the foundation of moral judgement, makes it nonetheless a crucial faculty when it comes to judging the behaviour of a moral agent, thanks to its connection with a notion that is normally related to morality and moral behaviour: that of *intention*. Let us start with the first objection.

Prinz, as seen in the previous pages, chooses the following actions as examples of immoral acts, the immorality of which does not rely on a judgement based on empathy: evading taxes, necrophilia, consensual sibling incest, destruction of unpopulated places in the environment, and desecration of a grave of someone who has no surviving relative. At closer look, however, three of those acts could (in principle) involve some kind of empathy. I am speaking of, respectively, tax evasion, environmental destruction, and grave desecration. In fact, though we are not confronted (when judging whether these actions are morally good or bad) with actual people with whom to empathise, we can use our imagination to think about how the consequences of these actions could affect other people. For example, we may simulate in our mind the negative feelings of people forced to pay more taxes because of the high number of tax evaders: their anger and, in the case of a low-income family, even their desperation. The same mechanism applies to the other two occurrences: we might empathise with the sadness of people who would no longer be able to enjoy the forest we burned down or we might imaginatively put ourselves in the place of the dead and think that we would like our grave to be treated with respect. Naturally, the fact that all these actions can be judged as morally wrong on the base of empathy does not mean that empathy is always at the root of all our moral judgements. Other principles may take on this role. However, the fact is that it can do so, and as such, it cannot be easily dismissed.

The cases of necrophilia and consensual incest are more complex. One could sustain that even in the case of necrophilia it is possible to put ourselves in the place of the dead person to see that what the necrophile is doing is deeply wrong. However, it is true, intuitively, that empathy is not the first emotional (or emotional-related) reaction we have when contemplating these cases. On the contrary, our first natural answer is *disgust*. The truth is that we normally feel these kinds of acts, even before considering the violation they represent for social or ethical norms, as intrinsically *disgusting*. Our negative judgement is from the very beginning driven by this strong emotion of revulsion and Prinz is surely right to affirm that empathy does not even come into play, here. Disgust is *ipso facto* sufficient for a condemnation of this action.

Since I agree with Prinz on this matter, I will not investigate this point further, and I will instead focus on the second kind of consideration about the role of empathy for moral judgement.¹

6.1 THE EPISTEMIC ROLE OF EMPATHY

At first glance, morality seems to be a matter of actions and of consequences stemming from these actions. We look at a certain action and see its outcome and we then judge if the action was good or bad. We say, for instance, that killing an innocent person *is bad* or that giving to a charity *is good*. Sometimes, we jump from the moral judgement of an action (or of more than one) to the moral judgement about the person themselves, for example, we say that a man who frequently kills innocent people, like a serial killer or a terrorist, is a *bad person*. Conversely, we normally deem the doctors who risk their lives to help people in need in warzones to be *good people*.

However, it seems that, when judging the morality of a certain action, the *intention* of the agent also plays a huge role. Interestingly, the intention of the agent is a dimension of morality that concerns all the main ethical theories. Both consequential and deontological ethics, for example, have at their core principles that agents have to take as their aims before acting, which means to say that the agents' intentions must be in accordance with these principles. Thus, for instance, a utilitarian ought to have the intention of maximising the happiness and well-being of the majority of people, whereas a Kantian should intend to follow the requirements of the categorical imperative. But the role of intentions is central in other ethical systems, too. Take the case of virtue ethics and of the ethics of care. In the first, the intention of the agent who wants to act morally must be addressed to the instantiation of virtue (depending on the case, they have to perform, such as, a courageous or a generous act, or something similar). In the

¹It would be interesting to see how 'disgust' can be linked to a sense of 'immorality', as in the cases in question, since not all actions that we consider disgusting have a strong tie with morality. Most of the time, they have no actual moral content (such as speaking while chewing, or belching, or picking one's nose). Perhaps, a fruitful way to proceed might be the following: disgust is per se insufficient for a *moral* condemnation, since as an emotion it can be applied to any series of acts, which are by no means ethically categorisable (e.g. the way one behaves at table or the lack of personal hygiene). Nevertheless, when, as in the cases cited by Prinz, the awareness of a violation of some kind of strong ethical or societal rule is also attached to the emotion of disgust, then moral condemnation is what we get as a result.

second one, the intention of the agent must be that of a person who has other people at heart, a person who *cares* for them. Even in everyday morality we tend to credit the intention of the agent as having a crucial importance. When, for instance, someone does something wrong to us, that person can apologise and hope for our forgiveness by saying: ‘It was not my intention.’ We recognise the centrality of intention also in the legal field. In the court of law, a felony is judged as more or less serious depending on whether it is deemed as having been intentional or not.

Hence, although the views about the axiology of moral judgement, that is, about what should be judged ‘moral’, is anything but unitary, it seems rather safe to affirm that whatever our position is in ethics, the intention of the agent must in any case be taken into account together with the action which is carried out by him or her. Granted that we agree on this issue, empathy comes to assume a special significance in this regard. In fact, empathy—so I claim—can make not only the emotions, but also the beliefs and the intentions of others transparent to me. Put in another way, empathy makes visible the reasons why an agent acts in a certain manner. This feature of empathy, which is part of what we may call its *epistemic role*,² is what makes it such an irreplaceable instrument for morality. In fact, if the intention and the reasons behind an action of a subject indeed matter—from a moral perspective—not less than the action itself, then empathy’s role becomes key. Let us see, with the help of a practical example, how this can work. This example comes from personal experience. I find it quite interesting, as it shows reasonably well how empathy can work both in refining our moral judgements and in furnishing reasons to judge the behaviour of someone else in moral terms.³

6.2 THE EFFECTS OF (EMPATHIC) LINGERING

During my months spent in Germany as a PhD candidate at the FU Berlin with my second supervisor, I had to have an operation. Luckily, it was a minor one, but of course such happenings are generally never pleasant, and they are especially unpleasant when undergone in a foreign land, with a foreign health system, where doctors speak in a foreign language (it does not matter how familiar you think you are with it, technical language can always

² See also Slote (2017).

³ Moreover, given the increasing literature about empathy in health-care contexts, the example is also very topical.

surprise you), and when you are alone, far from family and friends. After the operation at the hospital, the doctor told me to come back the next day, so that she could change the bandage and see if the wound was clean and was healing correctly. I remember that she told me explicitly to come at 14:00 on the next day. I said that I would have come at that time and I thanked her.

The next day, punctual as a Swiss watch, I was in the hall, waiting to be examined. Even if I was merely there for a quick check of my wound, I had to pay the maximum fee, because, as a resident of Switzerland, I was not covered by my Italian, and hence European, health insurance. I sat for an hour, then two. After two and a half hours, I tried to speak with the nurses and doctors who passed by, telling them that I was told to come at 14:00 for a very short visit and no one had examined me, yet. They seemed cross and told me that it was perfectly normal to wait that long in a hospital when there are people in more severe conditions. I knew they were right. I am aware of how things work in a hospital: after all, my mother was a nurse and my father is a surgeon and they have been working in a hospital for their entire lives. But still, I found it very strange that I was given an appointment at an exact time, and no one at least had the courtesy to come and tell me how long I might be expected to wait. I told myself that maybe they were struggling with unforeseen emergencies and I sat down once again. Over the hours that followed I kept on sitting there while I watched all the other people who had arrived well after me receiving medical attention, and I was there, waiting for my personal Godot. I remember having thought: 'You should go, Manuel. Nobody will come for you. Just leave!' But I could not. I had paid an expensive fee to be treated and I had waited for so long. I just could not bear the thought of leaving without accomplishing anything and with the risk that five minutes after my departure the doctor might arrive. So I stayed. For *five* long hours. From two to seven o' clock. At the end I was angered and exhausted. I was literally overwhelmed with feelings of frustration and unable to understand why this had happened. I was the only one left in the hall and I had been among the first to arrive. I wondered what could possibly justify such treatment? While I was still asking myself these questions and looking for possible answers, I saw 'my' doctor arrive. It was the otolaryngologist who had operated on me the day before. I raised my head and looked at her, she glanced at me for a moment and I thought that she was going to say something. But she did not. She turned her head and did so as if to walk away. I could not let her run away, so, I stood up and reached her. I remember having told her that I had been waiting for

five hours, that I had arrived punctually at two o' clock, as she had asked from me. Then I wanted to ask her if it was possible for her to examine me, but I could not, because her quick and rather abrupt reply interrupted my flow of speech: 'Yeah, well, it's not my fault! What can I do? It's not my fault if I haven't had the time. I've also been here the whole afternoon, you know?' She was really on the defensive and attempted to excuse herself by refusing any kind of accountability. She never said 'I'm sorry.' Not once. Not even a 'I'm sorry, but...'

I told her that I understood her and that I got the point, but that she could have been honest with me and let me know as soon as she noticed that the day was going to be a very busy one. After that, I wanted to ask the question I could not ask the first time, that is, if she could check me over now. But, once again, I was interrupted: 'This is a hospital, what do you expect? It is possible that you might be waiting for hours. If you don't like that, you can go to a private clinic!' I didn't know what to say. This was not the point at all. Of course I could have gone to a clinic in the first place, but she was the one asking me to come at 14:00 that day, hence I was bound to her by her promise to examine me and by the fee I had paid. How could I just leave? I explained all of this to her, but she just shook her head, shrugged her shoulders, and told me yet again: 'What can I do? It's not my fault.'

I gave up. I could feel my frustration and my irritation boiling up in me and I certainly did not want to verbally assault the doctor who had operated on me the day before and who very likely had had a stressful day. So I stopped talking, hoping that she would understand my situation and, since it would have taken no more than five or ten minutes, maybe offer to examine me right then and there. But she did not. As soon as I shut my mouth, she turned around and walked away. A few minutes later I saw her out of uniform, dressed in street clothes, ready to leave the hospital. It was simply too much to bear: I got up, took my things, and left the hospital, too.

Now, let us analyse what happened at the psychological level and what role empathy played. Five hours spent like this, waiting for such a short visit, while watching other people who had arrived after you being dealt with before you, would test the patience of anyone in the world to the limit. It is normal to feel frustrated and annoyed, and it is easy and understandable to blame others (in this case the staff of the hospital) for causing you all this distress. Nevertheless, I refrained from doing that and empathy was the reason I was able to do it. I perfectly remember how I was trying to change my judgement about the doctors by empathising

with them. I thought that it must be difficult to handle all those patients, they are forced to make choices and they have to give preference to people who have worse injuries and pathologies than me. I constructed entire narratives and imagined that the doctors were probably dealing with several emergencies, and, although maybe more stressed than me, they were trying to do their best to help everyone there.

What I carried out was in fact a high-level empathic process, which I shall label *lingering*. To empathically linger with others means dwelling, as it were, in the others' *inner world*. It means trying to see the world with the eyes of others, by taking their perspective and by simulating their feelings, beliefs, and intentions. Of course, we will never be able to perfectly feel or think like others do, but we can get close to that, and the more information we have on others and on the situation they face and the more our empathic skills improve, the more consonant our thoughts and emotions will be with regard to them.

This is exactly what I did: I tried to imagine being a doctor in the emergency department of a hospital during a busy day and asked myself what it would be like. I used the stress that I felt while waiting to simulate the stress they might have been having during that day and I was able not only to understand, but, somehow, to *feel* that, despite all the good intentions they might have and in spite of all their efforts, they were simply unable to offer the best of the services.

Hence, my empathic process had three positive effects: it helped me to identify the situation correctly⁴; it managed to refine my judgement about the hospital's staff (they were not unprofessional, unkind, or disorganised, they were just extremely busy and stressed); and it slightly lightened my mood by appeasing my frustration.⁵

Then, time passed by, and a profound sense of vexation arose in me. I had the impression of having totally wasted my day and when I addressed my doctor I was exhausted, drained of all my physical and psychic energies.

⁴In the end they confirmed that it was in fact a day with several emergencies.

⁵*Nota bene*: of these three effects, only the second one is directly connected with morality, as in my overall judgement of the doctors, there were also some moral judgements (the supposed lack of kindness and caring on their part, for example). Nevertheless, the other two effects can also be linked to morality (although only indirectly), since, on the one hand, a better identification of the situation at hand can help one fine-tune their moral judgement about the subjects involved, and on the other hand, a more relaxed state of mind, free from frustration and anger, also helps one express more reliable judgements and instantiate moral behaviour, avoiding negative outbursts *et similia*.

I remember that I fundamentally expected two things from her: the first was to hear that she was sorry. Obviously, I did not want her to beg me for forgiveness or something similar, but I would have liked her to have empathised with my frustration and tell me she was sorry for not having checked on me, as she had arranged only the day before.⁶ The second thing I wished she had done was to suggest examining me at that time, when she had finally finished her shift. Of course, I knew all too well that she was presumably tired, possibly even more so than me, but given the fact that she knew how long I had been waiting for that examination, that I had paid, and how short and easy my check-up would have been, I had hoped that she could empathise with me and dedicate ten minutes of her time, before going home. But, as I have already mentioned, nothing of that kind happened and, thus my claim, that lack of empathy was the cause for it. A brief analysis of the event will hopefully substantiate this thesis.

The reaction of the doctor clearly indicated a closure on her side: she was not willing to listen to me and the fact that she interrupted me more than once is an additional proof. The words she used are also symptomatic in this regard: far from telling me that she was sorry, she invested her energies in informing me that she was not responsible for the situation, nor for her inability to examine me. She made no attempt to empathise with me, to feel what I felt, nor understand that all that was needed was for her to simply tell me if my wound was clean and healing satisfactorily.

I find this particular example remarkably interesting, in fact, in addition to illustrating another side of the connection between empathy and moral judgement, it outlines two other crucial features that we are going to investigate more in depth further in the book, that is, the link between empathy and moral motivation and that between empathy and moral perception. The interplay of these different elements is extremely complex and it requires a deconstruction of the example.

The way the doctor replied to me and her decision to leave were, for me, a cause of profound distress, frustration, and resentment, and thus, after having used empathy to counter these feelings and hold a positive (moral) judgement about the hospital staff, I was now unable to do so. My judgement had radically changed: the behaviour displayed by the doctor was the definitive evidence of the lack of care and empathy for me and my

⁶I just want to add, incidentally, that she would have had the time to tell me that, even with the emergencies of the day. Indeed, she came into the hallway several times and noticed me, but did not say a word.

situation. This deficit could not but lead me to reconsider the narrative I had been constructing: that of caring doctors willing to help but unable to do so because of the many urgent cases they had to face. Now the doctors (or, at least, *that* doctor) *deserved* my resentment and my moral blame, because she had shown with her actions, as well as her words, an unwillingness to undertake her responsibilities and do what she ought to do. To be clear, I do not want to claim that her behaviour was plainly immoral (that would be an undue exaggeration), my argument is rather that she had an occasion to do what would have been moral (helping me out by examining me at a very low cost in terms of her time) and she chose not to do so.⁷ By doing that, the doctor failed an occasion to do ‘the moral thing’ and, from the point of view of a virtue ethicist, she showed a certain deficiency of virtue.

Now, some may object that the problem with the doctor’s behaviour was not her lack of empathy for me, but the fact that she did not perform the action that she ought to perform (i.e. to examine me). In other words, my resentment towards her and my negative moral judgement about her behaviour do not stem from her absence of empathy, but from her failure to fulfil her commitment towards me. Put yet in another way, it is wrong to read the situations through sentimentalist glasses, since the issue can be more easily examined in deontological terms: in my mind, the doctor had a duty towards me; the unfulfillment of this duty is hence the real cause of my moral disapprobation, whilst the role of empathy is marginal or non-existent at all. Had the doctor seen me, my judgement about her would have been positive, no matter whether empathy was or was not effectively in play.

⁷ Maybe there are people who would deny that the doctor had failed to do what is moral. After all, she had dealt with the emergencies until the end of her shift and then, quite understandably, she enacted her desire to go home. In doing so, she fulfilled her duty as a doctor. This is a good point, but I am not fully convinced. I believe, in fact, that a valid claim can be made about the fact that there are some crucial distinctions between our duties as people executing specific functions and playing a certain role and as moral actors *tout court*. So, there is a difference between the doctor’s duty *qua* doctor and her duty *qua* moral actor. Whereas I agree that it would be wrong to require doctors to attend to their patients past their working time on any occasion, I argue that exceptions can and should be made. My case was paradigmatic in that regard, since the reason I had returned to the hospital and wasted the whole afternoon waiting for an appointment which never occurred was the fact that she had requested an appointment. Hence, in order to fulfil her side of the bargain (not *qua* doctor, but primarily and most importantly *qua* moral actor), she should have made an exception.

6.3 THE ‘MORALISING POWER’ OF EMPATHY

This is a very strong objection and it deserves my attention. I have no problem in conceding that the situation can be considered in deontological terms and that, in any case, the performance of a certain action is what is central in my moral judgement about the doctor. Nevertheless, it seems that empathy can, in certain cases—and this is one of them—have an indirect influence not only on moral motivation, but on the way we normally judge other people. What struck me as ‘immoral’ (or, at least, as ‘not so moral’, as ‘less than morally virtuous’) in the doctor’s behaviour was not the lack of fulfilment of a certain duty, but her lack of empathy. I would have accepted hearing something like: ‘I am so sorry for what happened. I know how frustrating it might have been for you, but today was a rough day for everybody here. I know I should have seen you, but there simply was no time!’ What I could not accept was a total rejection of responsibilities, the coldness in her manner, in the expression of her face, and in the words she pronounced, which clearly revealed her unwillingness to empathise with me. I received the impression that there was an insurmountable wall between us, which impeded any kind of fruitful communication. If she had shown empathy towards me, she would have managed to see my reasons as reasons for her to come to my aid and to see that it was morally reprehensible for her to refrain from examining me.

Judging from her answer, I am sure that the doctor had considered the situation at hand through the lens of moral indifference. She believed, in other words, to only have a duty to help patients (starting from the people in the most serious condition) during her working time, but not past it. Now, my claim is that if she had had empathy, she would have seen the situation as intrinsically moral and as requiring a precise action on her part. Here we come to another crucial effect brought about by empathy: its *moralising power*. I claim that empathy has the power to moralise what can appear *prima facie* as being morally indifferent. This is so for the very good reason that when you take into account the feelings of another and you acknowledge the fact that you have a certain power over those feelings—or, which is the same, that you have an impact on the way another subject can be affected by you and your actions—then you are also fully aware of the responsibility that derives from your influence on the other. Of course, you may find an excuse to avoid these responsibilities and consequently refrain from acting. Or, alternatively, there may even be cases in which acting morally requires that you hurt the feelings of the other for the sake

of a greater good (as when the father of a diabetic child denies them an ice cream, thereby making them sad but safeguarding their health), nevertheless, even in these cases, the judgements we make seem to be better off with empathy playing its part. In order to show that, I am going to analyse in the next chapter the connections between empathy and *moral perception*, that is, between empathy and our ability to see certain situations as inherently moral and as requiring a moral action on our part.

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Empathy and Moral Perception

At the end of the previous chapter I drew attention to a special characteristic of empathy, that is, its moralising power. By this I do not wish to commit myself to the implication that empathy is intrinsically moral and that it *always* plays a moral role, but rather that it *can*, and that, in several different circumstances, empathy makes us alert to the moral features of a specific situation. In other words, empathy, functioning as an information-gatherer,¹ enriches our understanding of a certain situation: of the motivations driving the agents, of the impact that our behaviour can have on them, of the possible reactions that might arise. But there is more. Very rarely are the situations that we face, and in which we can act, comparable to the kind of elementary feedback we find in basic physics, where from a precise action inevitably follows a fixed reaction. Human psychology is a complex matter, and empathy is the best GPS we have to drive us across the others' inner world. In what follows, I am going to show how empathy can play a central role for what is normally known in the literature as *moral perception* and how this can assist our moral judgement. In order to reach this goal, I am going to analyse three emblematic examples and, in conclusion, I will try to substantiate the results by engaging in dialogue with suggestions stemming from Immanuel Kant and Hannah Arendt.

¹This is exactly what I call (partially following Slote, 2017) the *epistemic role* of empathy, that is, its capacity to provide us with data about others (how they feel, what they think, sometimes even the reasons behind certain feelings and thoughts).

However, before moving any further, we have to ask a crucial question: what is moral perception and how does it differ from moral judgement?

Rivers of ink could be written about what precisely is intended by moral judgement, but, to not uselessly complicate matters, we could describe moral judgement as that process by means of which we can judge the morality of an action or a subject. Put in another way, moral judgement is the process that should bridge the gap between moral rules, principles, and/or values, on the one hand, and particular circumstances, on the other, between the general and the particular, the axiological and the factual, the theory and the praxis.² We can judge, for example, that telling the truth is a good or a moral thing to do because we follow the categorical imperative as a principle or because we value positively sincerity and honesty (we think that such qualities have a high moral value). We can also morally judge a person and say, for instance, that Gandhi was on the whole a good man, for the reason that we consider his actions and his ideas to be morally worthy.

In this sense, moral perception can be deemed to be similar to moral judgement, since it also deals with moral values and qualities. Indeed, moral perception could be described as the faculty to intuitively discern (to perceive, as it were) the morally salient qualities in particular situations. However, whereas moral judgement analyses the morality of, let us say, a certain action, moral perception is what makes this action appear intuitively moral. Moral perception comes at the stage before moral judgement³ and can sometimes even bypass moral judgement entirely by leading to moral action without bringing the particular circumstance in front of the courthouse of the moral judgement. Notice that, for the sake of simplicity, I have defined moral perception as a faculty. Nevertheless, as we will see, moral perception should not be conceived as a unitary capacity, but rather as a cluster of multifarious moral and psychological processes of which empathy is an integral part.

The most typical (and most powerful) potentiality of empathy is its capacity to make us step into the shoes of another, to make us understand another not *from the outside*, in a cold and detached manner, like a scientist describing the behaviour of a particular animal, but, as it were, *from the inside*, in a hot and very attached way. Thanks to empathy, we inhabit the body of the other—maybe only for a few moments, and in any case

² See, for example, Blum (1994, pp. 30–31).

³ It is, in phenomenological terms, more ‘original’ more ‘primary’ than moral judgement.

without losing the fundamental awareness of who we are—and take on a double perspective: my own one and that of the target of my empathy.⁴ This is what I called the *lingering* in the world of others, which is a fundamental component of empathy (at least in its ‘high-level’ form): trying to recreate the perspective of the other, dwelling in the other’s *persona*, almost in an ecstatic manner, and then come back with an enriched awareness.

This feature of empathy is, taken per se, morally neutral, but it can serve the aims of morality in a variety of ways. We have seen previously that Paul Bloom has argued extensively in his book about the supposed intrinsically biased nature of empathy. Empathy is for Bloom the mother of all prejudices in morality, and if we want to act morally, then we have to cast it aside. However, we are now going to see that empathy can in fact correct our biases and help us to act morally; in particular, empathy can adjust our biases regarding other people and those regarding the (moral) appreciation of certain situations.

Take a paradigmatic case that we find in the work of Luigi Pirandello, a brilliant Italian playwright, novelist, and poet.⁵ This is an example that goes under the Italian name of *La vecchia imbellettata*, which means, approximately, ‘the froufrou old woman’.⁶ Pirandello relates that he was idly strolling down the streets of his hometown when his attention was suddenly drawn by a singular vision: a mature lady was walking on the other side of the road wearing a frilly colourful dress, high heels, and a heavy makeup.⁷ Now, the first emotional reaction Pirandello had (and, he hypothesised, the majority of people would have) contemplating this sight was that of something comic: there is something wrong and bizarre in an

⁴ *Nota bene*: whilst this perspective is essentially double, since it arises from the duo empathiser-target, it can possess high degrees of complexity. The perspective that I can contemplate can in fact be mine in appreciation of theirs, theirs in appreciation of mine, ours in appreciation of that of someone else, theirs in appreciation of themselves, and so forth.

⁵ Pirandello (2012).

⁶ This example was originally used by Pirandello to clarify the difference between what he viewed as the two different aesthetic emotions of the *comic* and of the *humoristic*, but it also wonderfully illustrates the point I am trying to make here.

⁷ To fully get the oddity of the scene you have to keep in mind that Pirandello lived between 1867 and 1936 and that at that time, especially in small Sicilian towns like the one Pirandello was from, women dressed with a sobriety that is utterly unusual and anachronistic for the women of today, let alone for the habitually fancily dressed modern Italian women. Long skirts, dark blouses, and shawls made up the customary outfit of the women of that period in southern Italy.

elderly woman dressed like this. The contrast between what we think an old lady should wear and what this particular woman actually was wearing gives us the impression of something deeply ridiculous. If we based our judgement about the lady on this first impression, it could be nothing but negative: we would think that what the lady is doing is inappropriate (people of that day and age would probably go so far as to judge it outrageous), that she must be shameless and, as such, constitutes a bad example for other women and a scandal for her relatives.⁸ However, a second, more profound degree of analysis is achievable, though locked behind the door of our prejudices, and the key that can open that door is empathy.⁹

Pirandello says that we could be satisfied by this first impression, chuckle and think that the lady is really embarrassing herself, and then proceed on our walk. Or else, we could do what he chose to do. We could try to step into the shoes of that mature woman and resort to what I previously called *narrative empathy*. We can, that is, construe a narrative about the woman in order to understand why she decided to dress like this and, in order to get in tune with her, to have consonant feelings and thoughts.¹⁰ We could start with a very generic kind of imaginative simulation: what does it mean to be a woman of that age? What are the expectations society has of us? And why, being aware of all these expectations that a mature woman should dress with sobriety and always act conventionally, would we choose to look the way she does? We then go on to add particulars to our narrative simulation, we build a story: we see a wedding ring on her finger. Maybe she is married to a man much younger than her, maybe she lives in

⁸ Again, it is the appraisal of a man living at that time that I am trying to depict.

⁹ *Nota bene*: this second degree of analysis is not open to everyone. There are people who, in this and in many other circumstances will remain limited by their biases, unable to see other possibilities for explanation, understanding, or motivation. And this is precisely the reason why empathy should be cultivated and be guaranteed a role within moral judgement: not because all judgements stemming from empathy (and from empathy alone) always hit the target, but because when facing certain situations, only empathy can provide us with the correct insights and refine, if not even adjust, our moral judgement.

¹⁰ What makes the task of empathy challenging is that in order to simulate the mental states of the other we cannot rely only on emotions, or merely on beliefs, or just on thoughts, or purely on intentions. All these different elements constitute *together* the totality of our mental states. The mistake that many scholars make when examining affective empathy is to think that it only refers to emotions, that all the empathiser has to do is simply produce in themselves a feeling similar to that of the target. However, doing this would only accomplish the phenomenological part of the emotion, and the essence of emotions is not exhausted by feelings nor can they be described merely in terms of feelings.

fear that her husband might one day see her as too old for him and fall in love with a younger woman. Maybe she notices the judgemental looks on the others' faces when she passes by dressed like that and she feels shame and embarrassment, but the desire to be seen as still attractive by her husband and the fear of losing him are stronger than anything else.

When we have reached this level of analysis, our judgement about her can no longer be the same as it was. Empathy has enriched our comprehension: we have felt her embarrassment, we have felt her fear of losing her love. Granted, we may not have recreated the identical mental state (this would be utopic: we might in fact have failed to feel all the emotions that she might have felt, we might have underestimated or overestimated the power of some of those, for example) but on the whole we have managed to enter into a mental state that is much more consonant to hers than to our previous one: we have empathised with her. Empathy has widened the horizon of our perception: now we are able to see aspects (of her, of the situation) that we were unable to see before, and these aspects have a weight in our judgement regarding the morality of the woman. Where we once saw a ridiculous, if not shameless and scandalous elderly woman, we see now a concerned wife trying to do her best to keep her family together. And if we still think we can laugh—so asserts Pirandello—then ours will not be laughter, but a bitter smile, because we understand now that we are not in the presence of something comic and ridiculous, but of something tragic or tragicomic at best.¹¹

Admittedly, one could object that we cannot be certain whether our empathy has hit the target, whether the lady really dresses like this because she is driven by the thoughts and emotions we have imaginatively enacted. Maybe we were correct the first time, perhaps she really is just a vain and deluded woman pretending she is still 25 years old. This is an obvious objection, but as already evidenced, empathy is not a completely reliable mechanism. Undoubtedly, we can be mistaken. Nonetheless, whilst this should invite prudence and caution when seeking confirmation for our empathy, it should not lead us to distrust empathy in its entirety. After all, the words of friends and colleagues are not wholly reliable, nor is our memory or reason, and even our senses are not always trustworthy, but we do not cease to rely on them. The good news is that there can be opportunities to put our empathy to the test and see if we have made the right

¹¹ Which, for Pirandello, is the essence of the *humoristic*.

deduction, and when we cannot, at least empathy contributes in making us aware of the potential complexity behind even the most trivial situation.

However, I want to stress this point even further. Even in the case where we found ourselves wrong about the lady, the sheer fact that we embarked in this empathic process and that we conceded the possibility of another explanation for what we saw, that spared the woman from a too-rushed sentence of immorality, reveals a scruple of conscience that already has a moral weight. It is a moral weight that is not only expressed in the following act of moral judgement, but reflected in the *ethos*, too, in the ethical value of the empathiser themselves. We say, in fact, that it is good, for example, not to judge by appearances, that it is good not to jump to hasty conclusions, that it is good to concede the benefit of the doubt. When we utter these sentences, we do not intend to say that these actions are good because of their consequences, because they are in some sense instrumentally useful (to reach some kind of goal, for instance). On the contrary, we value these types of conduct as *inherently* good. Further, we consider these token-behaviours as exemplifications, as instantiations of the moral virtues possessed by the agent. Indeed, a virtuous person is that kind of person that avoids jumping to hasty conclusions or judging from appearances. And if this is so, then empathy has to be a necessary feature of the virtuous person. Put as a syllogism: (A) the virtuous person must have the correct moral perception, that is, they must be able to identify and correctly evaluate all the moral elements of a given situation; (B) Nonetheless, empathy is, on many occasions, necessary to perceive (and judge) the moral meaning of certain situations or types of behaviour; and (C) *Ergo*, empathy is, on many occasions, necessary for the moral person.

To deny C, one ought to deny A or B. Since I believe that few people would dare to deny A, objectors might want to reject B, so that C could no longer follow. Indeed, there are not that many studies that focus on the link between moral perception and empathy in modern literature, and, what is more, none of these studies can be taken to provide a final answer to the question of whether empathy is necessary or not in this case. If history of philosophy has taught us anything, it is that any thesis can be confuted. Therefore, my aim in what follows cannot be that of finding the final and indisputable proof of the necessary role played by empathy in moral perception (and subsequently in moral judgement). Nevertheless, I will attempt to make this hypothesis quite compelling and hardly objectionable.

7.1 MORAL PERCEPTION IN LAWRENCE BLUM

In his 1994 book, Lawrence Blum has developed a very illuminating way of showing how the characteristics of moral perception are distinct from those of moral judgement and how the task of moral perception does not overlap with that of moral judgement. He conceived an example with the intent of demonstrating this precisely and another one to illustrate (so it seems and so I interpret it) the role played by empathy in moral perception. Interestingly, I find that even his first example, however, does not but confirm how empathy and moral perception are strictly tied. Blum imagines the following:

John and Joan are riding on a subway train, seated. There are no empty seats and some people are standing; yet the subway car is not packed so tightly as to be uncomfortable for everyone. One of the passengers standing is a woman in her thirties holding two relatively full shopping bags. John is not paying particular attention to the woman, but he is cognizant of her. Joan, by contrast, is distinctly aware that the woman is uncomfortable.¹²

Now, the first feature that should stand out with a certain degree of clarity from this example is—in Blum’s opinion—that John and Joan clearly perceive the situation differently. In other words, different aspects of the situation are *salient* for John and Joan.¹³ Using Blum’s words: ‘what is fully and explicitly present to John’s consciousness about the woman is that she is standing holding some bags; what is in that same sense salient for Joan is the woman’s discomfort’.¹⁴ Now Blum is convinced that this difference is due to a difference in salience, which means that John and Joan perceive the same situation differently, because they have different perceptions of what is salient in the situation. The question to ask is therefore: why is that? Why is Joan aware of some elements that John seems to ignore? Blum stands still on the issue of perception: the point for him is that Joan perceives the discomfort of the woman in a way that John does not.

¹² Blum (1994, pp. 31–32).

¹³ But it could also be stated that the same aspects of the situation have a different salience for John and Joan. The point is that the focus of their respective attentions is set on distinct elements which make them perceive the situation differently.

¹⁴ Blum (1994, p. 32).

Now, whilst I agree with Blum about the difference in salience between Joan's and John's perception, I think that the only way we have to break the circularity of the argument for which we perceive a situation differently because we have different saliences, and we have different saliences because we perceive the situation differently, is to ground this diversity of salience in one of our most fundamental psychological mechanisms: empathy. Empathy is, in fact, intrinsically connected to what was rightly defined as the *salience effect*.¹⁵ This means, using the words of Oxley, that: 'empathy makes salient another's particular emotions, concerns, reasons, interests, and considerations in such a way that they are relevant and important to the empathizer, so that she is motivated to respond to these concerns'.¹⁶ This special characteristic of empathy allows us to explain how empathy can influence our moral perception: different empathic levels in different people produce different saliences, which, in turn, provoke dissimilar (moral) perceptions of the same situations. To be more concrete, let us return to Blum's example.

Blum correctly observed that where Joan sees a woman in discomfort, John only sees a standing woman holding two shopping bags. There is, thus, a sense in which both of them see the same situation, constituted by the same elements (the standing woman in the subway train with her bags), and another in which they see two radically different things. The factor that shifts Joan's perception, as it were, to another level, is empathy. Joan feels the discomfort of the woman, she is aware of it in a way in which John is not. Having this awareness, although it is admittedly possible for Joan to refuse to give up her seat, it is nonetheless harder, surely than for the unaware John. However, it would be a mistake to stress the link that empathy can have with action uniquely, as if the only element to have moral value were a practical act. On the contrary, there is already (moral) merit in the perception of the morally significant aspects of a situation, and, in the same way, we have to distinguish the moral shortcoming of a *failure to see* from the moral shortcoming of a *failure to act*. I have stressed more than once that morality is, *inter alia*, a matter of degrees. Now, Blum's example allows us to observe it very clearly. Contrast, in fact, the behaviour of Joan with that of John and that of another man: Ted.

¹⁵ See Oxley (2011, p. 78). Notice also that the 'salience effect' is just another way of labelling the highlighting effect of empathy that almost all scholars of empathy have noticed. For instance, Paul Bloom, as we have seen, uses the labelling of 'spotlight effect'.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

Joan empathises with the woman and perceives her discomfort. She is not merely *aware* of her discomfort (i.e. in a cognisant but not emoting way), she is instead *moved* by the representation of her discomfort and consequently chooses to give up her seat. Ted, in turn, has no problem in unambiguously and correctly perceiving the woman's discomfort, but, contrary to Joan, he is not moved by it. He is, that is, cognitively aware of her discomfort, but he does not feel affective empathy for her. Probably, his own comfort has a stronger salience for him. John, in this sense, does not display the same egoism and insensitivity showed by Ted. He is simply unable to see the woman as in a discomforting position. However, if this discomfort would be brought to his attention, he would promptly empathise with the woman, feel her distress, and act similarly to Joan. Hence, as it should now be clear, John finds himself in the middle between a truly morally virtuous person like Joan, who is able both to see all the moral aspects of a situation and to act accordingly, and a morally bereft person like Ted, who, though he notices the same moral aspects, refuses nonetheless to act. To make the scenario even more interesting, we could think of a character even worse than Ted, for example, someone who is unable to perceive the moral elements of a situation and that even if these were brought to his attention, he would nevertheless refrain from helping: Bob.¹⁷ In this state of affairs, we might choose to describe the differences between the four characters as differences in moral perception (this is, e.g. what Blum seems to do), but I want to go one step further and see if differences in moral perception are related to differences in empathy and I think that it can be argued that they are in fact linked.

My claim is that the best criterion we have to unequivocally distinguish the nuances in the moral merit and the moral disposition of these four characters is empathy. Taking empathy as a yardstick permits us to affirm that Joan is the more empathic person of the group: she feels affective empathy for the woman, which makes the woman's discomfort transparent to her (she feels it the moment she observes her) and this in turn motivates her action. The second in the scale of moral virtue is John, who, possessing a lesser degree of empathy (compared with Joan) is unable to perceive the woman's distress, but who would be ready to help if this distress would be pointed out to him. Then it is the turn of Ted: he is able to acknowledge the woman's discomfort, but this recognition never crosses

¹⁷Notice that Bob is a character I have invented and who is not present in Blum (1994).

the cognitive boundary: it remains at a purely cognitive level ('I know that she is uncomfortable') and never reaches the emotional one ('I feel her discomfort'). The exclusion of any kind of affective empathy for the woman leaves Ted apathetic, unmoved, and unmotivated, without triggering any reactive behaviour. Finally, at the lower stage, we find Bob, who not only displays the same deficit of affective empathy showed by Ted, but also exhibits an absence of cognitive empathy, since he is even unable to recognise the woman's general state of discomfort.

If we take the example of Joan as a paradigm of 'perfect'¹⁸ moral virtue, then we may assert that the three other subjects are at different distances from the 'perfect' virtue: John has to work on his cognitive empathy, so that it can help him, *inter alia*, to detect the moral aspects in which the emotions of another living being are at stake; Ted has to work on his affective empathy, so that the recognition of the suffering of others can trigger a similar emotion in him and motivates him to help; Bob, finally, has to work on both forms of empathy if he wants to have a chance improving his seriously callous and unemotional character.

This explanation surely makes sense, but—it could be argued—seems far from being the only viable explanation for the four characters' behaviour. Critics of empathy like Prinz, Bloom, and others might object that feeling the distress of the woman is not necessary to perceive that she is in a position of discomfort, nor to help her in some way. We may also, for instance, act following a sort of 'script', that is a behavioural pattern that we have previously learnt. For instance, if we were raised with the idea that it is good to give up one's seat to people in discomfort, we would be ready to do it, almost without thinking. Also, in order to perceive that the woman is in an uncomfortable position, empathy seems unnecessary: we can detect it by objective elements in the context of experience. If this is the case, then resorting to empathy is superfluous.

Faced with such an objection, I would again be forced to clarify what, by now, should be patently obvious: my claim is not that empathy is necessary *in every single case* of moral perception, nor that it is *always* sufficient to trigger moral behaviour, nevertheless, it ought to be acknowledged that there are cases in which empathy plays a fundamental role in both moral instances. If we go back to Blum's example, we will soon discover that this is exactly a circumstance in which empathy becomes essential. As Blum

¹⁸I use the quotation marks since moral perfection can never be reached and it constitutes merely an objective for which every virtuous person should strive.

describes the situation, there seems to be no objective feature indicating that the woman is in discomfort: ‘the subway car’—Blum says—‘is not packed so tightly as to be uncomfortable for everyone’,¹⁹ the shopping bags are two and only ‘relatively full’,²⁰ the woman, finally, is ‘in her thirties’, thus not too young, nor too old to have sufficient strength to stand, she is not pregnant and she does not show any manifest sign of distress. This being the state of affairs, accepting the objection made above would take us to very questionable consequences: it seems in fact implausible to think of a person, no matter how based on kindness and altruism their education might have been, who would be so aware of others’ distress as to automatically notice it even when there were no clear signs of it, and, what is more, who would be so altruistically oriented as to always give up their seat to anybody being in the woman’s same situation, only on the ground of a mere observation.

Yet again, an objector might want to affirm that there is in fact an emotion driving our attention to the woman’s situation, but it is not empathy, it is, instead, *concern*.²¹ It is because we are concerned for the woman that we notice her discomfort, and it is because we are concerned about the woman being uncomfortable that we decide to give her our seat. Finally, it is because we are concerned people that we tend to be bothered by conditions like that in which the woman is in. This model certainly makes sense, but it hardly divests the role empathy can play. In fact, what exactly is concern? Prinz does not offer a clear-cut definition of it. He describes it as: ‘[...] a cousin of empathy. It is a fellow-feeling that arises when we consider another’s plight. [...] Concern is a negative sentiment caused by the recognition that someone is in need. [...] It is canonically expressed by a knitted brow, akin to worry.’²² This definition is rather unsatisfactory, being too vague, as it makes concern undistinguishable from other fellow-feelings, such as compassion or pity. I believe, instead, that what is typical of concern and should have been evidenced by Prinz is its essential dimension of ‘interest’. When we are concerned about a person, about another living being, or about a thing (a cause, a subject, or a place in the

¹⁹ Blum (1994, p. 31).

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 32.

²¹ This may very well be an objection that Jesse Prinz would make, judging by his 2011 article *Against Empathy*, where he prefers the fellow-feeling of concern to empathy (at least before rejecting even this). See especially Prinz (2011, pp. 230–231).

²² Prinz (2011, p. 230).

environment, for example), what is characteristic of our relation towards the object we are concerned about is that we take a kind of emotional interest in it; we *care* for it, the object *matters* to us. If this is a correct representation of concern (and I believe it is), then the question to ask becomes: how can one become concerned about anything? Here, the empathy that we expelled through the main door comes back through the window. Take again the example of the woman in the subway: how can I feel concern for her without putting myself in her position? Notice that, in order to empathise with her, one does not need to feel her same discomfort: it suffices to imaginatively linger in her position and to feel a hint of discomfort. If this is still not convincing, try to imagine how one can become concerned about someone without feeling any empathy. Try to think of how Joan might be able to make John understand that the woman is probably uncomfortable without making use of any typically empathic vocabulary: ‘Try to be in her shoes’; ‘Wouldn’t you feel uncomfortable in her position?’, for example. Granted, I can become concerned about something like climate change because I have read that it is a true menace and because I value my life, the lives of my loved ones, and those of all living beings on the planet, but I claim that the easiest and most common way of becoming concerned about other people is through the empathy we are capable of feeling for them. I cannot be concerned about all the people standing with two relatively full shopping bags in a subway train, equally and at all times. However, I can feel concern for *that* particular woman because of the empathy I have felt for her, that is, because I have lingered, for a moment, in her inner world and seen the world differently. In so doing, I have widened my perception, my knowledge of all the elements that might matter in the situation, in the context she and I are in, and, based on this knowledge (which is also a knowledge of an affective kind, for the good reason that I feel a part of her discomfort and so a knowledge that motivates me as only states of affairs charged with emotional content can do),²³ I have made a choice. What is more, I have made

²³For the moment, I do not think that there is a need to offer further explanation to show that emotions typically motivate, but I will, nonetheless, come back to this discussion and explain how it can happen in the chapter about moral motivation and conduct. For the time being, I wish to appease all the experts of emotions by stating that I am not claiming that all emotions have motivational powers (some emotions, such as, *inter alia*, nostalgia or admiration, can rightly be called ‘contemplative’, because they do not necessarily trigger any reactive attitude in us), but only that many of them have this power. See also Deonna and Teroni (2012) and Tappolet (2016).

this choice for the right (moral and altruistic) reasons: not to win something, but because, through empathy, I have begun to care for the woman for her own sake. Empathy has made her condition salient and, along with it, also important to me; her condition has become the condition I might find myself in, and her probable desire has become my desire. This is the special, unique power of empathy. In order to see how fundamental empathy's role can be, it suffices to take into account the second example Blum gives:²⁴

Theresa is the administrator of a department. One of her subordinates, Julio, has been stricken with a deteriorating condition in his leg causing him frequent pain. He approaches Theresa to help work out a plan by which the company, and in particular their department, can accommodate his disability. Theresa is unable to appreciate Julio's disability and the impact it is having on his work. Although in principle Theresa accepts the company's legal obligation to accommodate Julio's disability, in fact she continually offers him less than he needs and is entitled to.

More generally, Theresa makes Julio feel uncomfortable in approaching her and gives him the impression that she thinks he may be too self-pitying and should just "pull himself together." It is not that Theresa fails entirely to see Julio as "disabled" and "in pain," but she does fail to grasp fully what this means for him, and to take in or acknowledge that pain. The level of Julio's pain and its impact on his mental state is insufficiently salient for Theresa.²⁵

The last sentences in this example are the most important: Theresa knows that Julio is in pain, she perceives it, but, Blum says, she fails to *fully grasp* what this means, not in general, but *for him*. She is unable to *take in* Julio's pain, it is simply not sufficiently salient for her. In doing this, it is rather obvious that she is neglecting morally significant features in the situation, that is, Julio's pain and the negative impact this physical distressing condition is having on his work and on his life in general. Notice that Theresa's behaviour is different from that shown by John. John suffered from a sort of attentional laziness, a 'situational self-absorption' says

²⁴ Again, it is curious to remark how the examples of Lawrence Blum are meant to show the role of moral perception, but can all be interpreted as being great displays of what empathy can do for moral perception and, subsequently, moral judgement and moral conduct/motivation.

²⁵ Blum (1994, p. 34).

Blum;²⁶ something that could be cured just by drawing his attention to the problem. Even a comparison with the character of Ted (in the previous example) would be inappropriate, since the problem with Ted, as we have described it, was his cold and indifferent personality; instead, Theresa's condition is more complex. Blum does not describe her as a cold-hearted and uncaring person, but as someone who unconsciously identifies pain with weakness. She becomes uncomfortable when people talk about pain in her presence, or when they display symptoms of it, till the point where she finds herself feeling contempt for these persons, thinking that they are exaggerating their suffering. Whatever the cause for her behaviour might be, it is crucial to point out that her condition is different both from that of a situational self-absorption (John) and from that of a generally insensitive and uncaring disposition (Ted). This also takes the discussion about moral perception to a higher level: far from being just a way of making moral discriminations, of discerning the moral features/elements in a certain situation, moral perception involves also the correct evaluation of these elements. It is, in other words, both a loupe and a scale: it provides the identification of the moral aspects and their weighing, as well; it tells us what matters (morally) in a given situation and how much it matters.

If we consider Theresa's example and the reasons behind her deficient moral perception, we will soon discover that only empathy can be the appropriate cure. It is in fact the lack of empathy (or, at least, of a sufficient degree of it) that prevents her from perceiving with the suitable amount of salience Julio's pain and all that this pain entails. Theresa knows that Julio is suffering, but she is unable to see this suffering as he sees it, to *feel toward*²⁷ this pain in the same way he does.

If, in the example with John, empathy was needed in order to identify the moral aspects of the situation (that were not clearly perceived by him), here it is necessary to weigh them correctly, to give them the appropriate value, the significance they deserve. The mistakes Theresa is making are essentially two and are strictly intertwined and tied to the fundamental dimension of *feeling with* inherent to empathy. The first one is acknowledging or understanding Julio's pain at a purely cognitive level, without embracing it at an emotional one. Without the affective dimension in play, Theresa only knows that this suffering exists and is impacting negatively on Julio, but it is quite easy for her to believe that he is overdoing it.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ I give the expression 'feel toward' the same meaning that it has in Goldie (2000).

Furthermore, this merely cognitive acknowledgement (that could be called a case of ‘cognitive empathy’) leads Theresa to treat Julio’s pain as something which is placed in the exterior, objectively measurable world, as something that can be objectively quantifiable, thereby forgetting (or ignoring) that pain is intrinsically embodied. The only way to morally deal with it is to enter and linger in the other’s world, not deluding oneself with the thought that it is possible to fully understand it by staying, as it were, ‘on the outside’.

Hence, *contra* Bloom and Prinz, who think that empathy is inherently biased, empathy becomes the path Theresa has to take to eliminate her own prejudices; it cuts through her biases and sheds light on a reality which exists, but of which she was less than fully aware. Notice that I am not arguing that the right amount of salience we have to give to something that regards others (like their pain) is the salience they grant them, but rather that our understanding of a certain condition can be wrong and that the best way to correct it, or at least to put it to the test, is by comparing it with that of others. Empathy with others, or, in other words, the effort of stepping into their shoes and seeing things as they see them, should precede all of our judgements about them: about what they think, what they do, what they are, and what they deserve. In fact, how can one believe in judging impartially by adopting only one’s own perspective? Impartiality is not always a matter of ‘subtraction’, that is, of abstracting from all particular point of views to reach an objective one, but often it is a matter of ‘addition’, in other words, of considering, in addition to my own point of view, that of the person/s I am judging, as if I were the spectator of my own behaviour, and of other people, too.²⁸ The first kind of process is a deductive one, and can be used when we have clear rules and principles that we can apply: if the action or person we are judging is clearly categorisable, then judging is easy. For example, under the *lex talionis*, if a man unjustly attacked another man with a knife blinding one of his eyes, he had to suffer the same fate. However, most of the time judgements are not so straightforward: a number of elements have to be taken into account (among them mitigating circumstances, external influences, and so on). This is why some judicial systems (like the American legal

²⁸ Remember the words of the impartial spectator by Adam Smith: ‘We begin, upon this account, to examine our own passions and conduct, and to consider how these must appear to them [...]. We suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us.’ Smith (1984, III. 1.5.; p. 111).

system) established a jury: a group of people appointed to judge the accused and to find a common sentence, not by abstracting, but by listening to one other, by empathising with each other's perspective, but also with the perspective of the accused and that of the victim(s) of the accused.²⁹

Notice that the practice of submitting one's own conduct to the judgement of an imagined tribunal thanks to the power of HLE (i.e. narrative- and perspective-taking-empathy) has a long story in philosophy. In fact, even one of the most prominent and influential theorists of empathy, Adam Smith, put exactly this procedure at the base of his famous concept of the *impartial spectator*. The approval and disapproval of oneself that we call conscience is an effect of judgements made by spectators. This mechanism is, at the end of the day, nothing but the introversion of a mechanism we know very well: each of us judges the behaviour of others as a spectator, and each of us is judged by others as spectators. Thus, we come to judge both our conduct and that of anyone else by imagining how an impartial spectator would judge it, or, using the words of Adam Smith: 'We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it.'³⁰ In a passage of the first edition of his volume (but which does not appear in the five later versions), Smith is more thorough:

To judge of ourselves as we judge of others [...] is the greatest exertion of candour and impartiality. In order to do this, we must look at ourselves with the same eyes with which we look at others: we must imagine ourselves not

²⁹ An example of how empathy can help to refine our moral judgement about a person and this person's action is offered by the film *12 angry men*, where the protagonist Henry Fonda not only empathises with the accused, but he also tries (with some success) to make other jurors empathise with him. He encourages the others to step into the shoes of the accused boy and his strategy has a crucial effect: the other jury members stop seeing the boy merely as a criminal, an outcast, a reject of society. On the contrary, he slowly becomes a fully-fledged person, with his dreams, his fears, his weaknesses, and, of course, his rights. Empathy makes the interior character of the boy perceivable to others, and with it, it allows a more fine-grained understanding of his value as a person and of the motivations behind his actions. This is not to say that empathy *always* or *necessarily* leads to moral results and that we can forget all other leading principles to favour empathy uniquely. My claim is rather that empathy should always be regarded together with other rational and legal principles if fine-grained judgements (and not easy generalisations and trivialisations) are what we are looking for.

³⁰ Smith (1984, III. 1. 2).

the actors, but the spectators of our own character and conduct. [...] We must enter, in short, either into what are, or into what ought to be, or into what, if the whole circumstances of our conduct were known, we imagine would be the sentiments of others, before we can either applaud or condemn it.³¹

We can see that all features which are typical of empathy (the imaginative enactment, the perspective-taking) are here employed by Smith as the fundamental gearwheel of which the machine of moral judgement is made. Now, the problems with this view are well known. We all are aware of the fact that people are generally fallible and that their judgements are not always impartial. Hence, how can the decision to use their imagined sentiments (of approval or disapproval) be a good technique to arrive at impartial judgements? The analogy of the jury I made above already hints at the right direction: *pace* Smith (believing that the mere simulation of the judgement of others was enough to reach judgemental impartiality) principles are essential. Exactly like a jury has to ground their judgements on law and/or former courtroom decisions, we also need moral principles as guidelines to assist our empathy. In fact, *empathic deliberation* does not always invariably overlap with *moral deliberation*. But let us be systematic. Empathetic deliberation involves, following the definition offered by Oxley: ‘keeping in mind the other’s relevant feelings, reasons and desires and the way they perceive their lives, and thinking about their situation’.³² Though this process is very useful for moral deliberation, it is nevertheless not equivalent to it. In the words of Oxley: ‘Empathetic deliberation becomes moral deliberation when an individual uses moral norms, values, and principles to guide the deliberative process and determine how best to understand that person and the situation.’³³

³¹ The passage can be found in the first edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* following what is now III.1. 3, and in Raphael (2007, p. 35).

³² Oxley (2011, p. 80). Notice how this definition, too, evokes my concept of *lingering*: indeed, Oxley warns that we have to ‘*keep in mind* the other’s relevant feelings, reasons and desires and the way they perceive their lives’. ‘Keeping in mind’ implies something more than simply thinking, or considering, for to keep in mind a certain thought it is not sufficient to merely identify it: one needs to maintain it not even in the background, but in the foreground. This is what happens with empathy: the other comes to be the centre of my attention, the inevitable and focal thought among the others that can crowd my mind.

³³ *Ibidem*.

So, in short, moral deliberation is nothing else but empathic (or ‘empathetic’) deliberation plus ‘moral norms, values, and principles’. Empathic deliberation makes certain features of the person and of the situation salient, but then, in the deliberation process, it is the moral commitments that have to intervene together with empathy. Thanks to empathy, the inner world of the other becomes salient to me and this saliency is maintained in the deliberation. However, this deliberation has to be grounded on principles as well as on empathy. It is not just a matter of informative content, as if the only good of empathy were the capacity to bring about a series of pieces of information about the other’s mental states, about their personal situation, and so on. On the contrary, what is characteristic of (affective) empathy is the capacity to feel, as it were, this information and to regard it not as something *that is the case*, but as something *that matters*. Darwall (who Oxley also quotes) affirmed in what is possibly his most famous work that empathy: ‘works to bring others’ view inside our perspective so that they can be part of our own critical reflection and *not just recorded as what others think*’.³⁴ This observation of Darwall is fundamental. The information gathered by empathy is not just *collected*, but made *salient*, which means that empathy does not merely have an informative content, but an informative *cum* emotional one. It is information that *matters for me, because it matters for others*.

I said above that morality is intrinsically relational, because it concerns the actions of an inherently relational being as the man is, shaped by relations with others, with the environment, with ourselves, and more. This representation of morality was also shared by Stephen Darwall, who famously founded the normativity of our moral obligations from the second-person standpoint, that is, ‘the perspective you and I take up when we make and acknowledge claims on one another’s conduct and will’ and it is taken up (and this is crucial) when making demands on how one ought to be treated.³⁵ We cannot hope to treat others morally without asking ourselves how they ought to be treated and, in order to do this, we have to concede to their thoughts, their emotions, their beliefs, their intentions, no less attention than what we dedicate to the moral principles driving us.

³⁴ Darwall (2006, p. 170). Emphasis is mine.

³⁵ See Darwall (2006, p. 3 and ff).

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CHAPTER 8

Overcoming Empathy's Judgemental Biases

In effect, all this arguing undoubtedly leads to an important role that empathy can play for moral judgement, thanks to what Oxley calls *salience effect*, Bloom labels *spotlight effect*, and what we have named the *instrumental role* of empathy. In other words, the morally virtuous person will instrumentally utilise empathy to find the best way to put their moral principles into practice. In fact, principles and norms are, by definition, general, whilst the subjects and the situations affected by our actions (and our judging) are always particular, hence, the practical application of moral rules requires a somewhat 'inverse abstraction' from the general to the particular. Given, for instance, the moral principle of helping people in need, the moral person might resort to empathy to better identify what this particular individual needs and how best can be helped. This is a significant function that empathy can fulfil and it surely offers an alternative vision of how even what Bloom sees as a bias, a limitation inherent to empathy (its spotlight/salience effect) can become an irreplaceable tool. However, I wish to argue for another effect that empathy can have.¹ Previously we spoke of the influence empathy has on moral perception. Now, it is time to speak briefly of the effect it can have on moral judgement itself.

¹Later in the book we will see that empathy plays more than a merely instrumental role for morality and that this kind of role only constitutes a first stage of the process and a basic benefit. It is not, however, the only one.

We have seen, especially with the analysis of Bloom's argumentations, how biased empathy can be. Studies from the field of psychology that appear to confirm the validity of many of Bloom's criticisms are numerous. For instance, it was observed that we actually have a tendency to help single, individual, clearly identified persons more than anonymous, merely statistical ones, a phenomenon that is known in the psychological literature by the name of *identifiable victim effect*.² For example, you might very well empathise with the beggar you see near the exit at the train station and maybe give him some money, but you will probably remain unmoved by the millions of poor people living worldwide: empathising with all of them seems impossible, let alone helping them. The task seems beyond a person's ability.

Another potentially worrying limitation of empathy regards its typical *intergroup bias*. In short, there is overwhelming evidence of the fact that there is a natural inclination across species to experience empathy towards members of one's own group, which is also directly connected to an incentivising of helping behaviour towards these same members.³ Conversely, a lesser degree of empathy is felt for outgroup members.⁴ In humans, in particular, this phenomenon is often observed among people who belong to different ethnical, political, or social groups.⁵

8.1 INTERGROUP BIAS

At this point I think I have to provide a brief explanation. Whilst the question of the identifiable victim effect will be analysed in the section about empathy and moral conduct/motivation, I have chosen to take issue with

² See, for instance, Jenni and Loewenstein (1997); Small and Loewenstein (2003); Lee and Feeley (2016). Notice that all these studies raise the issue that we are more inclined to help the clearly identifiable individual than the masses, but they do not expressly criticise empathy; their focus is rather on the bias concerning helping behaviour. However, it is possible to think that this sway in helping behaviour reflects and is in some respects correlated to a sway in empathy, since even our empathic capability seems to work better with individuals than with large groups of people, as Bloom himself points out in his work.

³ See especially Preston and de Waal (2002) and de Waal and Preston (2017).

⁴ See Cikara et al. (2014). This study also reveals that *Schadenfreude* is a common response to the suffering of subjects considered to be enemies or competitors. For other similar findings on outgroup bias and *Schadenfreude*, see also Cikara et al. (2011, 2011); Leach et al. (2003).

⁵ In Batson and Ahmad (2009) it is possible to find a comprehensive review of many of the most important studies on the issue.

the intergroup bias here, in the section dedicated to moral judgement (and not in that dedicated to moral conduct and motivation). This is because I believe that these shortcomings affect moral judgement *prior to* moral conduct and motivation and that they have an impact on the way we act (or not) due to their deep influence on the way we judge. In fact, our judgements (i.e. what and who we deem morally good and bad, and why) are at the base of the kind of moral education we want to teach and what kind of actions we are ready to carry out. Indeed, if we pay attention to the reasons behind the existence of the intergroup bias, it is possible to see—and this is my claim—that they are not the product of a deficiency inherent in empathy, but they are caused by our own (cognitive, not necessarily emotional) beliefs and judgements. Also, present in this fact is contained a strong answer to the criticism made by Bloom (and, in part, by Prinz) about the parochialism of empathy. Bloom, in fact, by asserting that empathy is intrinsically parochial, ascribes a shortcoming to empathy which is not inherent to empathy itself, but to our own cognitive judgement. We feel less empathy for people of another ethnicity, of another land, of another language, culture, or religion, because we think that these are substantial differences, and not the other way around. Put in another way: since we think that certain classes or categories of people are profoundly different from us, we also tend to feel less empathy when we consider their conditions. I think that the more Bloom attempts to argue for the parochialism of empathy (and he is not alone in this effort, given the list of authors he cites), the more he makes visible the logical fallacy at the base of his attack. Take for instance the example he makes in the chapter *The Anatomy of Empathy*, p. 74 of his book *Against Empathy*:

Jonathan Glover tells of a woman who lived near the death camps in Nazi Germany and who could easily see atrocities from her house, such as prisoners being shot and left to die. She wrote an angry letter: “One is often an unwilling witness to such outrages. I am anyway sickly and such a sight makes such a demand on my nerves that in the long run I cannot bear this. I request that it be arranged that such inhuman deeds be discontinued, or else be done where one does not see it”.⁶

Bloom considers this example as showing not only that empathy does not always properly motivate to act morally (which, by the way, seems to

⁶Bloom (2016, p. 74).

me to be a rather weak statement: what kind of emotion can *always* do it?⁷) but also to imply that empathy is parochial. He repeats that several times in his book: Nazis, for instance, were capable of feeling a great amount of empathy for, say, German children or for animals, like dogs,⁸ but this empathic capacity was then just ‘turned off’ as a kind of switch, when dealing with other classes of people, such as Jews and other prisoners of the death camps. I argue that implying from this fact that empathy is parochial is a logical fallacy, in fact, on closer examination, it was the Nazi’s strong conviction—that Jews did not deserve empathy because they were not comparable to other Arian people—that guided them towards a morally unjust discrimination that then influenced their empathic ability as well. In other words, only the empathy of parochial people is parochial, because the prejudices that one has are then passed, almost via osmosis, to one’s own capacity for empathy and end up modifying it. This also amounts to saying that what makes these people really immoral is not their biased empathy, but their seriously reprehensible moral judgements and principles.

Nevertheless, to make the criticism of Bloom more complex by way of response, let us imagine a possible reply he might have to my argument. He may assert that what I have claimed proves one more time just how unreliable empathy is: it is such a biased process that it can be manipulated easily by the inculcation of immoral principles and offer no kind of defence against external or internal bias. If empathy reveals itself as unable to oppose a positive force to our darkest tendencies, then it is, at best, useless for morality and, at worst, deleterious, since it can strengthen our prejudices instead of helping us to change them.

To this criticism, two answers can be offered: on the one hand, although it is undeniable that empathy can in some cases bolster our biases, it can nevertheless also help us to overcome them; on the other hand, there is evidence that empathy is, *in nuce*, a positive force, but which also has the disadvantage that it can be corrupted. It seems in fact that babies have the ability to empathise with almost anybody, regardless of differences in terms of language, ethnicity, and other categories. However, an analysis of this will be offered in the chapter on moral development. Here, I will

⁷Think about the following: even an emotion generally considered as moral as compassion could potentially lead to a wrong and immoral course of action, if felt—as Aristotle would probably put it—in the wrong moment, and/or for the wrong reasons, and/or in the wrong amount, and/or for the wrong kind of person.

⁸Bloom (2016, p. 196).

focus on the first question, that is: does empathy always reinforce our bias? If the answer is 'not necessarily', then we have to conclude that the criticism of Bloom is not definitive. As we will see, my claim is that empathy can, on some occasions, bolster our bias, whereas on others it can have the opposite effect. This amounts to saying that the two propositions: 'empathy is biased' and 'empathy helps us to defeat our bias' are both true and, hence, that the most effective way of dealing with empathy is not to deny it a moral role, but to invest our efforts in maximising its positive effects and minimising its negative ones.

There are countless examples that could be mentioned and discussed to show how empathy can motivate moral behaviour and change the prejudices driving our moral judgements and our moral perception. Indeed, a rather long and well thought-out list of them can be found, *inter alia*, in the 2011 article of Martin Hoffman *Empathy, Justice, and the Law*.⁹ However, there is one example that I feel I should cite, for many different reasons: its fame, in particular, in the Anglo-American context, the sheer quantity of philosophical investigations it has had, and, last but not least, the personal meaning it had for me when, as a teenager, I had the chance to read the following book. This example comes from the famous novel by Mark Twain: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

8.2 A LITERARY CASE

The context is the following: Huckleberry "Huck" Finn is a teenager living in a small town on the banks of the Mississippi River, in the State of Missouri, when he decides to escape from the violent and constantly drunk father by taking a raft down the big river that he knows so well. The story is set around the 1840s, at a time when the Mississippi River is a long, wide body of water, mostly plied by many of the first steamboats, stretching for almost 4000 kilometres across ten different states: in short, the closest thing to a modern highway existing at that time. During his trip, Huck meets a black man named Jim, a slave escaping from his mistress Miss Watson, who wants to sell him in the infamous slave-market in New Orleans. Eventually, Huck will decide to help Jim escape and they will sail away together. Nevertheless, this is not an easy decision for Huck, and the analysis that follows focuses on the hesitations, the doubts, the reasons, and especially the emotions that lead him to make this difficult choice. As

⁹Hoffman (2011).

I have said before, this passage proceeded to become a *topos* and the subject of several studies,¹⁰ but whilst most of them were interested in the investigation of the rationality of our choices and on the phenomenon of the weakness of will (or *akrasia*), my focus is rather on the link connecting empathy with moral perception and moral judgement.

Now, before starting with this analysis, a possible argument could be made about the fact of whether to consider what Huck felt for Jim as empathy or as something else (notably compassion/sympathy). Critics of empathy might in fact want to make the claim that Huck was driven by compassion and not by empathy. Sabine Döring herself speaks in her insightful essay of *Mitgefühl*, a German word usually translated into ‘sympathy’ or ‘compassion’, which seems to imply that it was not empathy that she had in mind when reflecting on the emotion that influenced Huck’s moral perception of the situation. This said, I firmly believe that, if we take into consideration the description that Mark Twain gives of the situation Huck is facing and we speculate somewhat on the possible thoughts crossing this teenager’s mind, we will notice that empathy is a more suitable candidate than compassion for what Huck might have felt towards Jim. In fact, although having sympathy or compassion towards Jim would surely have made sense to Huck, we do not find explicit signs of this kind of emotion in the episode at hand. On the contrary, it seems that Huck makes his decision to run away with Jim rather unconsciously at the beginning, based on a certain empathy for him (after all, Jim is escaping from a bad situation like he is) and only thereafter does he come to think about all the implications of that choice.¹¹ Huck proves to have a strong emotional intelligence, and interestingly, he tries to motivate himself to return Jim to what he believes is his rightful owner (i.e. Miss Watson) by vividly imagining all the good things she has done for him and then imagining that what he is doing by helping Jim is not only wrong per se, but even a bad thing to do to her and that she does not deserve it. See the following lines:

Conscience says to me, “What had poor Miss Watson done to you that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor old woman do to you that you could treat her so

¹⁰ See Bennett (1974), De Sousa (1987), McIntyre (1990), and Tappolet (2003), and the text which influenced me the most in my examination, that is, Döring (2009).

¹¹ See Twain (1981, p. 87).

mean? Why, she tried to learn you your book, she tried to learn you your manners, she tried to be good to you every way she knowed how. *That's* what she done.”

I got to feeling so mean and so miserable I most wished I was dead.¹²

Notice how Huck tries to push himself to feel compassion for that woman and how he actually manages to feel it: he thinks of her as a ‘poor old woman’ and he uses features which are distinctive of empathy in order to simulate her loving and caring attitude towards him: ‘she tried to be good to you every way she knowed how’. Nevertheless, no matter how miserable he feels, Huck is not able to motivate himself to do what he thinks is right. Sabine Döring asserts that he could not, on account of the compassion/sympathy he felt for Jim, but I think she uses the word *Mitgefühl* for lack of a better term. After all, her focus in the mentioned article is not so much on the subtle difference between empathy and sympathy, but on how emotions can influence our moral perception, and it is clear that, in the end, Huck acted out of emotion and against his moral principles. It is only unclear what emotion he did actually follow. Furthermore, in German the two terms normally describing empathy, that is, *Einfühlung* and *Empathie*, are not remotely as commonly used as the word ‘empathy’ is in the English language, which suggests that also the mere familiarity with the term might have played a role in her word choice. My claim, as it should be clear by now, is that what Huck felt for Jim was not compassion (he seems to feel that more for Jim’s mistress than for Jim himself) but empathy. Huck was able to be ‘on the same wavelength’ with the former slave, to understand and feel the commonality of their ways to see the world, and to be, both conceptually and practically, ‘in the same boat’ as him.

Although Huckleberry had received a typical southern education and was raised to see nothing wrong in the practice of slavery, thereby showing that he had an intrinsically biased education, he ended up feeling for Jim that which no person with his same prejudices would normally feel for a black slave: empathy. Huck, in other words, did not see Jim as substantially different from himself: he treated him as an equal and allowed himself to be *vulnerable toward* him, which amounts to saying that he accepted the fact that he could rely on him, trust him, live together and share adventures with him, and, after and through all that, care for him and

¹² Ibidem.

become friends with him. This was possible only because Huck made (we do not know exactly how consciously) an *epoché*, that is, he decided to suspend his (biased) judgement about Jim and about what he ought to do and he permitted himself to be touched by Jim's *humanity*, the same humanity he also shared. He decided not to build a wall of prejudices, and this prepared him to feel empathy. As a consequence, by the time he let the prejudices learnt through his education come into play, the empathy he felt for Jim was already strong enough to successfully oppose his biased arguments and leave him torn by the profound disagreement between what he felt he should do (namely, help Jim) and what he knew it was his responsibility to do (i.e. take Jim to his 'rightful owner').

Towards the end of the novel, we find Huck writing a letter to Miss Watson telling her the place where Jim is hiding. Huck holds the letter in his hands, uncertain about what to do¹³:

And [I] got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and the night-time, sometimes moon-light, sometimes stormes, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could do for me, and how good he always was; and at least I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had smallpox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now [...] I was a-trembling, because I'd go to decide, forever, betwixt two things and I knowed it.¹⁴

If we look at these lines and search for a trace of sympathy/compassion, we will not find it. However, what we will find is the presence of elements suggesting empathy and friendship stemming from it. Jim and Huck had the opportunity to share many experiences and the resulting emotions together: 'we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing'. This co-sharing and co-living, what Heidegger would have called *Miteinandersein*,¹⁵

¹³Notice that I am quoting a shorter version than that quoted by Döring.

¹⁴Twain (1981, p. 214).

¹⁵See Heidegger (1962), especially § 26.

permitted the opening of the self to the other and the reaching of a proximity, a togetherness free from all barriers caused by prejudices, a positive kind of *Fürsorge*.¹⁶ True friendship between the southern youngster and the black slave was made possible by the powerful, although discreet, action of empathy: that of the low-level one (e.g. when Huck simply shared emotions, feelings, and thoughts with Jim in an unmediated and conceptually poor way) and that of the high-level one (e.g. when he contemplated the possibility of betraying Jim and imagined his probable reactions).

8.3 EMPATHY, RECEPTIVITY, AND THE DISCLOSURE OF VALUES

Of course, Heidegger famously regarded empathy with suspicion. He thought that this concept was invented to find a solution to the Cartesian solipsism: 'Empathy', wrote Heidegger, 'is then supposed, as it were, to provide the first ontological bridge from one's own subject, which is given proximally as alone, to the other subject, which is proximally quite closed off'.¹⁷ However, for Heidegger this is only a fake problem, in fact, empathy is not an original phenomenon and cannot be taken as the basis for the *Mitsein* (let alone the *Miteinandersein*), for the 'Being-with' itself is actually what renders empathy possible at all. Put in another manner, the *Dasein* originally lives in a *Mitwelt* and is never really closed in their own solipsism, because even the condition of being alone is nothing but a way of being with others. In the words of Heidegger: "Empathy" does not first constitute Being-with; only on the basis of Being-with does "empathy" become possible: it gets its motivation from the unsociability of the dominant modes of Being-with.¹⁸ Notice that the criticisms of Heidegger will surely hit the mark *if* empathy were intended as a way to overcome a sort of Cartesian solipsism. Nevertheless, as it should show clearly from the first theoretical part of the book, the concept of empathy defended here is totally in agreement with the phenomenological view (derived by

¹⁶I follow once again the Heideggerian vocabulary. *Nota bene*: I add the adjective 'positive' to *Fürsorge*, as this phenomenon cannot be perfectly translated by the English term 'caring', since caring designates a *way of being in the world*, an attitude, that it is always, by definition, positive. However, the term *Fürsorge* is intended by Heidegger as neutral: it can have both positive and negative connotations (see again Heidegger, 1962, § 26).

¹⁷Heidegger (1962, § 26, p. 162).

¹⁸Ibidem.

the interpretation made by modern phenomenologists, such as Zahavi and Overgaard, of classic texts like those of Scheler or Merleau-Ponty) following which the *Ego* (or, in the Heideggerian vocabulary, the *Dasein*) is already originally in communication with the Other and the empathy of the *Ego* is nothing but the basic mechanism which mediates the encounter with the Other. As a consequence, following my own proposed concept of empathy, this should be intended as a particular form of Being-with-one-another, that is, *to be in an empathic way* with the other. It is exactly this special form of *Miteinandersein* that allows Huckleberry to have a different (moral) perception of Jim and of his moral duties towards him, dissimilar from those of the rest of the society in which he has been raised. Huck made what is required by true empathy: he suspended his judgement and made himself *vulnerable, receptive* towards Jim.

It is crucial to stress this point: whilst *high-level empathy* requires an active effort on the part of the empathiser, who has to imaginatively enact and simulate the other's mental states, starting from their own past experience, their knowledge, and other behavioural and contextual cues to infer what is going on in the other, low-level empathy demands a sort of passivity on the part of the empathiser. It is, in some sense, the opposite movement: the empathiser does not have to project themselves onto the other (or, in any case, to form mental states which are consonant with those of the other), instead, they just have to let the other 'flow', as it were, into themselves. Under some aspects, this phenomenon is very similar to that of emotional contagion, but it is distinct from it because, as already mentioned, empathy is essentially an intentional mechanism, which means that it has a specific target and that we are aware of the fact that the mental states we have stem from empathy with the other.

Huck's empathy for Jim, as we pointed out, goes in both directions: his low-level empathy enabled him to share emotions and experiences with Jim, thereby contributing to form a strong emotional bond between them, whilst his high-level empathy made its voice heard every time he imagined what would happen if he betrayed Jim: what it would mean for him, how he would react, thereby helping to shape a deeper sense of (pre-)culpability.¹⁹

However, there is more. We have said previously that being empathic comes to define a way of Being-in-the-world, a way of Being-with, and particularly of Being-with-one-another. We now add that this particular

¹⁹The thought behind it being: 'If I did that, he would suffer so much, and I would be wretched in response.'

kind of modality of being is accompanied by a peculiar manner of seeing the world, of perceiving it, and, of course, of living in it. Notably, the empathic person is characteristically *receptive* towards others, their attitude is an attitude of openness. This granted, it is possible now to see how empathy has worked with Huck. Döring, accordingly to her position in considering Huck as showing compassion rather than empathy, says that there are aspects of Jim's situation which come to the fore thanks to compassion and make Jim appear as a friend and thus as an equal with a justified need for freedom.²⁰ The idea is therefore that the compassionate person would focus on the pain and sorrow experienced by Jim and would take care of them, leaving all other aspects of the situation (the fact, e.g. that he is an escaped slave) in the background. However, we have argued before that it makes more sense to think of Huck as 'more empathic than compassionate', and now we see a confirmation of this. On closer inspection, Huck never ceases to see Jim as an escaped slave and, in some sense, a criminal, but this awareness goes hand in hand with the feeling that he deserves better, that he deserves what he, Huckleberry, deserves, that they are not as different as he might have thought once. In other words, it is not about 'foregrounding certain aspects of Jim and his situation' and compassionately putting others in the background. Rather, empathy puts everything in the foreground, it makes all aspects appear visible, but (and this is crucial) with different evaluative levels. Since the empathic person will be more aware of the similarities in terms of situations or conditions, and more receptive towards the emotional charge of the feelings experienced by others, these aspects of the situation will consequently receive more gravity as opposed to others. The more our empathy is refined, the more precise the evaluation of the importance of every single element will be. Huck's empathy helped him to find an answer to the implicit question: 'Should I consider Jim as a criminal, or as a fellow human being striving for freedom? How is he to be judged?' Here is where empathy influences moral perception. As we have seen, empathy cannot but directly influence our way of seeing things. In its high-level form, in particular, empathy implies a perspective-taking, the looking at the world through the eyes of the other. The empathic experience can be very pervasive, as it surely was for Huck. Through the sharing of negative and positive emotions, Huck discovers that Jim is not so different from him: they both suffer and rejoice for much the same things. Through high-level empathy he becomes aware

²⁰Döring (2009, p. 58).

that they are both guided by similar values and principles, such as friendship and loyalty, and seek to achieve the same dreams, like freedom and happiness.

Notice that the moral perception facilitated by empathy is twofold: on the one hand, it ensures the identification of the abovementioned value, and, on the other hand, it assists with the choice of the moral action. In fact, we, as readers, see Huck's decision to help Jim and his refusal to betray him as morally right, and, more importantly, as *objectively right*, not as right for Huck, for Jim, or for our modern *forma mentis* and the present values of our western society.²¹ We deem that the rightness of his choice and the values he has recognised are right in general, in that time as in ours and in the ages that will follow in the future. Notice that this is a typical characteristic of moral values. We see them as moral truths to be discovered and acknowledged, not as objects to be created or invented. This means that moral values have, in some sense, 'always been there', waiting to be detected by people advanced enough in their moral reasoning and moral perception to have the ability to see and acknowledge them.

Huckleberry's example thus shows that empathy offers us the opportunity to enlarge our moral horizon by refining our moral perception and rendering us sensitive to values. We could, of course, decide not to open ourselves up to empathy by choosing to follow our prejudices; indeed, it would have been possible for Huck to have simply reported Jim from the very beginning. Another option, certainly, would be to empathise with people who would enhance our bias rather than helping us overcome it. Empathy per se is thus not always and not necessarily a guarantee of moral behaviour. Insights stemming from empathy need to always be questioned and scrutinised in light of our moral principles. We need, that is, to test the content of our empathic processes.

However, if we keep in mind Huck's paradigmatic case, we cannot fail to notice that empathy can go further than our moral norms in detecting the right thing to do and in motivating us to carry it out. This introduces a difficulty: if there are cases in which trusting our empathic intuitions is better than following our moral principles, and others in which the opposite is true, on the basis of what exactly should we judge (and act) on each occasion? Unsurprisingly, such a difficult question has no easy answer. Arguably, we are perhaps best suited to provide a solution to this difficulty if we examine it from the point of view of a virtue-moralist. We can answer,

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 62.

in fact, that a morally virtuous person would know when to trust empathy and when to heed their rational principles. This subject would follow a bottom-up process in which, starting from the analysis of a certain situation and of the data gathered by empathy, a response would be devised and carried out. But this is not the only possible method. People who adhere to a definite ethical system with a fixed set of moral norms (e.g. the previously cited consequentialists or deontologists) would probably use empathy merely instrumentally, following its insights only in cases where these match the principles at the base of their ethical system. In other words, they would proceed in a top-down manner: judging from the moral rules and norms uppermost, they would then investigate whether empathy in the concrete situation at hand was able to enhance these principles with a useful amount of emotional charge or not. Much could be said about the utility and effectiveness of these two methods, but what seems to be beyond dispute is that empathy is an element of crucial importance, especially when the adopted moral system (often thanks to empathy itself) reveals itself as being biased or, anyway, fallacious. Hence, my claim is that it should be guaranteed that empathy always plays a role in moral decision-making and all of its intuitions are welcome. Then, the moral subject will judge in light of all possible considerations that can be drawn upon and act according to what was once called 'conscience', 'inner voice', or similar, and what is usually known nowadays as *moral sense*.

Before turning our attention to the connections between empathy and moral development, I want to address one final issue with the intent of offering a definitive answer to the charge of the supposed parochial and prejudicial nature of empathy. My aim is to show that there is something more worrisome for morality than a person driven by a biased and misplaced empathy, and it is a person unable to feel empathy at all. In fact, prejudices can be fought and overcome, often thanks to a redirection of empathy or a widening of it (as Huckleberry's example has shown), but when empathy is totally absent, the results can be devastating and the hope for improvement remains a sheer utopia. The argument I am going to make starts with a quote from a philosopher that I am incapable of forgetting, even when I am not supporting his theses—Immanuel Kant—and this will take us to the Arendtian reflections on Eichmann. Finally, also with the aid of a philosopher too often and culpably forgotten in the international discourse on empathy—Arne Johan Vetlesen—I will try to make the point that moral judgement should never be prescindend from empathic considerations.

8.4 THE BENEFICIAL EFFECT OF EMPATHY ON MORAL JUDGEMENT

We have spoken above of the concept of an imaginary tribunal, highlighting the role that HLE can play to put our personal judgement in communication with that of others (by anticipating it, simulating it, and comparing it). We have also stated that the Smithian idea of an impartial spectator emerges from an abstraction from our personal point of view by means of the consideration of the perspectives held by others. By empathising with others, I can gradually form the perspective of an impartial spectator, which will then help me to curb my own emotions and shape my judgements of approval and disapproval. Now, my claim is that this idea, so distinctively sentimental in its description, finds a most unexpected mirroring in the argumentation of a strict rationalist like Kant (though ‘purified’, as it were, from any reference to sentiments and affects). Take, for example, a telling passage of the *Critique of Judgment*, to be found in § 40:

[W]e must [here] take *sensus communis* to mean the idea of a sense *shared* [by all of us], i.e., a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (a priori), in our thought, of everyone else’s way of presenting [something], in order *as it were* to compare our own judgment with human reason in general and thus escape the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subjective and private conditions for objective ones, an illusion that would have a prejudicial influence on the judgment. Now we do this as follows: we compare our judgment not so much with the actual as rather with the merely possible judgments of others, and [thus] put ourselves in the position of everyone else, merely by abstracting from the limitations that [may] happen to attach to our own judging.²²

According to Kant, the ‘maxim of enlarged thought’, the concept of the *sensus communis* embodies the following: ‘to put ourselves in the place of everyone else’, thanks to a faculty that is central to HLE also: the *Einbildungskraft*, that is, the ‘imagination’. Now, notice that even though emotions—as already mentioned—do not play a role here, the mechanism of imaginative enactment typical of empathy is in place. This is a kind of *representative thinking*,²³ that is of a thinking through imagination that renders the others—who are actually absent—present. This kind of

²² Kant (1987, p. 160).

²³ For more on this concept, see Vetlesen (1992), especially the 2nd chapter.

thinking mirrors the enlarged representative mentality of empathy. It requires from the subject to be open to all sides, receptive to external demands. This mechanism seems to resonate (so finds Vetlesen, analysing the work of Hannah Arendt, and I agree with him) in many Arendtian considerations:

I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. [...] The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would think and feel if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion.²⁴

What are the implications of these reflections? It is possible to notice that the Kantian insight that Arendt wishes to employ in the ethical and political sphere is that in order to judge particulars—and, needless to say, judging is always of particulars—we have to represent in our thinking the standpoints of all concerned. The way she found to immediately make this argument productive in the ethical domain was to put it in relation to the case of Adolf Eichmann. The refusal to judge constitutes, for Hannah Arendt, the greatest of evils in the political realm, and Eichmann came to embody exactly this lack of representational thinking, of *sensus communis*. Eichmann failed to judge because of his incapacity to represent others in his mind. The ethical discourse should focus, on her part, not around Eichmann's supposed wickedness, but around his patent (so she believes) thoughtlessness. This is the worst among his sins. Hence, in summary, Arendt's position is that Eichmann's incapacity to act morally is caused by his incapacity to exercise judgement, which, in turn, is nothing but the consequence of his original incapacity to think; to think, that is, as a normal human being should do.²⁵ If we wanted to reduce it to a scheme, as Vetlesen does in his book,²⁶ we would have two intellectual (or conceptual) activities that then bring about a third, practical one: thinking → judgement → action.

This interpretation is undoubtedly interesting and insightful, but it suffers from at least two not-to-be overlooked weaknesses. The first is to

²⁴ Quoted in Vetlesen (1992, pp. 96–97).

²⁵ It is easy to notice the exquisitely rationalist tradition behind such a strong position.

²⁶ See Vetlesen (1992, p. 103).

be discovered in the rationalist tradition that influences Arendt and has her commit the classic idealistic fallacy of supposing (or subsuming) that action is necessarily preceded by thinking, when we know that this is not always the case. The second weakness is, if possible, even more remarkable. In Arendt's reconstruction of judgement, there is a total absence of any kind of emotionality. However, it is common knowledge that emotions and feelings constitute a great and important part of who we are and that they can influence, if not even drive, our judgements. Leaving these elements out of the picture seems to be an act of undue over-intellectualisation. Furthermore, choosing not to talk about emotionality at all definitely ignores the proverbial 'elephant in the room', namely, the fact that Eichmann, to the surprise of many spectators of his (in)famous trial, remained perfectly cold, apathetic, showing no sign of emotion. Notably, Eichmann remained completely unmoved even at the moments of great psychological distress, when witnesses, for instance, broke down in tears. He appeared to be simply unaffected and disinterested, and the massive television coverage, together with the sheer amount of empirical evidence coming from the proceedings, clearly displayed this unaffectedness and this disinterestedness. However, curiously, almost no word by Arendt was dedicated to these features, which seems to substantiate the thesis that she indeed suffered—so to say—from intellectualist biases.

8.5 EMPATHY AND REPRESENTATIVE THINKING

Eichmann—so the claim I defend—did not seem to epitomise a man incapable of thinking in a correct, normal way; on the contrary, what he unambiguously showed was an incapacity to feel, to be affected like normal people would. Quoting Vetlesen:

The capacity he failed to exercise is emotional rather than intellectual or cognitive; it is the capacity to develop empathy with other human beings, to take an emotional interest in the human "import" of the situation in which the persons affected by his actions found themselves. To be more accurate, the empathy Eichmann failed to develop is not just one "emotional capacity" among others; rather, what I intend by "empathy" is people's basic emotional faculty. Corresponding to this is my conception of "representative thinking," that is, the mental process of making present to the mind the

standpoints of those who are absent, as the basic cognitive faculty required for the exercise of moral judgment.²⁷

Let us try now to analyse this rather dense quotation. Vetlesen is convinced (as I also am) that the inability displayed by Eichmann is emotional, rather than cognitive. To argue for an intellectual or cognitive deficiency on the part of Eichmann, we would have to agree with the arguments presented by Arendt, based on the principles of a rationalist tradition that not every person would be ready to follow, whereas any individual who was present at the trial or was able to see it on television or read about it in the newspapers would notice the emotional failure exemplified by Eichmann. It was entirely plain to see. Now, Vetlesen claims that Eichmann lacks empathy, which should be considered as the most basic (and important) emotional capacity. This capacity, which involves, among other things, the capacity 'to take an emotional interest in the human "import" of the situation in which the persons affected by his actions found themselves', also corresponds to the concept of *representative thinking*, which is considered, in Vetlesen's theory, as a cognitive process that is part of the bigger mechanism of moral judgement, and that other authors have alternatively called 'cognitive empathy', 'mentalising', 'theory of mind', or similarly. This process, which implies 'making present to the mind the standpoints of those who are absent', has, for Vetlesen, to work together with empathy as he intends it, as, respectively, the basic cognitive faculty and the basic emotional faculty required for the exercise of moral judgement.

This is exactly what I have argued for throughout the entire section. We have seen with Blum's analysis that moral judgement needs moral perception and that moral perception needs empathy. Remember the example of Julio and Theresa: in one sense, Theresa was able to understand Julio's situation as she had the cognitive faculty to imagine it. Nevertheless, there is a sense (and a crucial one) in which she was in fact unable to do this, for the good reason that she was not capable of feeling what is like to be in Julio's situation. Therefore, we argued that empathy ought to be an integral part of any moral judgement, because to correctly judge a certain situation, or a given individual, it is necessary to take all the moral features into account, to have *sensitivity* for them, to *perceive* them. Now, Vetlesen helps us to better substantiate this concept. Moral judgement, he claims, is both a cognitive and an emotional process. These two dimensions have to work

²⁷ Vetlesen (1992, p. 105).

together because they are both integral parts of moral judgement. The rationalist (and specifically Arendtian) scheme for which from *thinking* follows *judgement* and then *action* has to be reconsidered. The real schema is the following: *Perception* → *Judgement* → *Action*.²⁸ Notice that perception is both a cognitive and an emotional process,²⁹ and so is judgement. Vetlesen thought that empathy and representative thinking were two different things. He saw in representative thinking the heir, so to speak, of the Kantian *sensus communis* and of certain Arendtian arguments and believed that it had to work in tandem with empathy. In the same spirit, I propose to combine the two in what I have called *High-level empathy*, which involves the capacity to be *receptive* to the emotions of others and, at the same time, and because of that, to keep in mind the others' perspectives, to *linger* in their inner worlds. Empathy, in this sense, is exactly the mechanism for which Vetlesen was arguing, an essential component of moral judgement and moral perception, and, for this reason, a reply to both rationalist theories overemphasising the role of rationality as opposed to emotionality and to sentimentalist and neo-sentimentalist theories that minimise (or plainly criticise) the role of empathy, like that of Prinz.

8.6 IS EMPATHY INTRINSICALLY BIASED?

The proposed explanatory scheme is apt to offer a convincing elucidation of Eichmann's and others' similar failures to judge and act morally. Eichmann did not act morally because he was unable to judge morally, and he was unable to do this because of his incapacity to perceive morally. More precisely, Eichmann failed to perceive the Jews as fellow human beings, and this occurred because he failed to develop empathy towards them, to linger in their position, and, through this, to acquire an emotional interest in their situation. In other words, he remained *unconcerned* because he was *unaffected*. As a consequence, it is of crucial importance to stress the following point: the correct answer to a biased empathy is not the banishment of empathy from the moral kingdom, but a rectification of those biases. Also, notice that these biases are never a by-product of empathy itself, instead, they are the rotten fruit of a perverted reason. Critics of empathy, such as Paul Bloom, wonder how was it possible that Nazis were

²⁸Vetlesen (1992, p. 103).

²⁹Because it involves empathy and it is not just an epistemic kind of perception, but a moral one.

able to feel empathy for some categories of living beings and not for others, and they believe to have found an answer to that question by pointing the finger at empathy itself. However, I claim that it is mistaken to think of empathy as naturally biased: empathy's only weakness resides in the fact that it is responsive to our convictions and can be manipulated and even perverted by them.³⁰ This assertion might sound odd at first, so let me clarify it. I am not claiming that empathy does not suffer, per se, from any in-group biases. In fact, it does. Research shows that, from a very early stage, children clearly display these biases.³¹ For example, Fehr and colleagues found that already from three and four years of age, children showed in-group favouritism in a game in which they had to share some stickers.³² Similarly, Dunham and colleagues found that five-year-olds privileged same-gender recipients in a resource distribution task, but, *nota bene*, in-group favouritism became negligible when group membership was determined by arbitrarily assigning children to different colour groups.³³ However, is empathy truly responsible for these in-group biases? It seems to me that empathy can at best be only indirectly responsible for the displayed favouritisms. In fact, the explanation should be sought in the identification within a given group. If children identify themselves as members of a group (as friends as opposed to strangers, or as boys as opposed to girls, or as pupils of section A as opposed to those of section B, and so on), then in-group biases may result. However, identification is not caused by empathy; on the contrary, it is the other way around: because one particular child identifies with a certain group, he or she will also tend to have more empathy for people of that group than for outsiders. This should bring us to another consideration: if this is the case, then

³⁰ *Nota bene*: I am not claiming that empathy's insights are always morally good and that our ideas and convictions can only pervert this innocent faculty. There can be, in fact, cases in which our empathy needs correction given by our reason, by our cognitive faculties. The morally virtuous person is that person who is wise enough (they have what Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* calls *phronesis*) to listen to the inputs stemming from both sources, judge morally, and act accordingly. Our condition should never be that of choosing between following certain rational principles *and* following empathy. On the contrary, rational principles and empathy must work together. For instance, the initial infatuation a German youngster has for Adolf Hitler can perhaps be corrected by rational arguments, but it can also be rectified by learning to feel empathy for the victims of Hitler's hate-speeches.

³¹ For evidence on these biases, see Fehr et al. (2008), Moore (2009), Dunham et al. (2011), and Fehr et al. (2013).

³² Fehr et al. (2008).

³³ Dunham et al. (2011).

it is not empathy per se that needs correction (or that deserves our moral condemnation), but the opinions which lead us to identify with a certain group and to develop suspicion—if not open hostility—towards the subjects we consider as part of an out-group.

This kind of explanation has the merit of providing an answer to the strange ‘Nazi-empathy’. As it should be clear by now, Nazis were capable of feeling spontaneous empathy for, say, other Germans or for animals, but they were also able to ‘turn it off’ when dealing with Jews and, in general, with members of persecuted groups. This could happen for the very good reason that Nazi propaganda was extremely effective, among other things, in depicting Jews³⁴ as less than human and even lower than animals. They constituted a class of hideous living beings with whom no form of identification or fellow-feeling was possible because they were not *fellow* humans in any sense of the word: they were enemies, and, what is more, they were inferior and repugnant. One of the authors that better described this matter was Martha Nussbaum, who in *Upheaval of Thought* wrote:

Thus for Hitler (and not only for him), the Jew is a maggot in a festering abscess, hidden away in the apparently clean and healthy body of the nation. [...] Repeatedly, Nazis made Jews do things that would further associate them with the disgusting [...] thus, in the spectator’s mind, linking the thought of Jewish worship to the thought of filth.³⁵

However, it is Primo Levi (quoted by Nussbaum), himself a prisoner in a concentration camp and who survived the holocaust, who offers the best description and unambiguously highlights the existing link between turning a category of human beings into a disgusting and hateful one, and thereby leading to a consequent incapacity to feel empathy, proximity, or identification with it: ‘people like this deserve their fate, just look how they behave. These are not *Menschen*, human beings, but animals, it’s as clear as day.’³⁶

The argument here is that when people feel more empathy for individuals they think are part of their in-group, it is wrong to consider this attitude as a shortcoming of empathy. This incapacity is the direct outcome of a tendency to divide the world in: ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. The error, the

³⁴ For the sake of simplicity and conciseness, I will talk only about the paradigmatic case of Jews and not about other prisoners of the concentration camps.

³⁵ Nussbaum (2001, p. 348).

³⁶ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, quoted in Nussbaum (2001, p. 348).

shortcoming, the bias (call it what you wish) is in thinking that we are not all equal members of one and the same humanity, that differences in gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, and such are substantial differences and can justify an almost ontological (if not ontic) separation. It is this attitude, and not empathy, that should be revised. It is not a new concept what I am arguing for. In fact, it is also to be found in religions, such as Christianity or Buddhism. We can, for instance, think of the proverbial parable of the good Samaritan (narrated in Luke 10, 25–37).

The facility is all here: not to dig ditches or build walls, but to consider oneself as part of a common, shared humanity. Of course, often it is empathy that achieves this: we have seen with Huckleberry's case that it was the empathy spontaneously felt by the young boy that changed his convictions about black people. Therefore, often it is empathy itself that helps us to build a world free of prejudices. Nevertheless, there are contexts that favour more or less the rise of empathy, which means that it makes a considerable difference whether we raise our children to see unbridgeable differences between, say, blacks and whites or whether we teach them especially to see the many characteristics we share. In the first case, if empathy arises, it will be the exception; in the second, it will be the rule.

However, here we are entering the territory that will be the subject of the analysis of the next chapter, so, for the moment, I will not continue with these considerations. To sum up, we have seen once again, with the examination of Eichmann and the Nazi, that empathy should always be a part of the larger mechanism of moral judgement, because our cognitive faculties are not sufficient to convey the complexity of the emotional experience, nor do they guarantee alone a necessary instantiation of moral behaviour. What is more, if we turn off our empathic faculty, or if we manipulate it so as to feel it merely for some classes of people and not for others, we become unable to judge properly. On the contrary, if we introduce empathy to our moral judgements at any time, we will broaden our context of experience and reach more impartial verdicts. Empathy is, therefore, a necessary component of moral judgement.

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PART IV

Moral Development



CHAPTER 9

Empathy and Moral Development

The link between empathy and moral development seems, *prima facie*, to be a very tight one. Though it would, admittedly, be incautious to speak on behalf of the proverbial ‘vast majority of people’, it appears nonetheless to be common for many individuals to believe that in order to develop a moral character empathy is a *condicio sine qua non*. Nevertheless, even this apparently obvious connection was objected to by Paul Bloom and Jesse Prinz. With regard to the former, albeit he does not take the question of moral development/education explicitly into consideration, he contends, nevertheless, that rational compassion and utilitarian principles are together both necessary and sufficient for the development of a moral character. As a consequence, empathy would constitute merely a supplement and, given its intrinsic biased nature (in Bloom’s conception), an extremely undesirable one. Prinz’s critique is, as we have seen, rather more complex. On the one hand, he argues that empathy is not necessary for moral development or education for the good reason that other emotions are very much suited to carrying out this role, such as guilt aroused by punishment or reprimand, happiness and self-esteem elicited by praise, or admiration prompted by the use of role models. At the same time, Prinz takes into account subjects who are commonly considered as devoid of empathy (i.e. psychopaths) with the intent to show that it is not the absence of empathy that leads to unmoral (or even immoral) behaviour—as it had long supposed to have been—but more an original lack of deep-felt emotions on the part of these kind of people.

I think that Prinz is following a clear strategy here. I believe that he knows that simply arguing in favour of the importance of other emotions for the moral education of a child is not enough to constitute a real critique of empathy. In fact, there is no philosopher or psychologist that would dare to support a view for which empathy is both necessary *and* sufficient for moral education and development, without further need for the effects stemming from other emotions or from the inculcation of certain moral and social principles. Furthermore, the support given by Prinz to the various emotion-eliciting mechanisms could at best serve to sustain the claim that ‘normal emotions’, so to say, are fundamental for moral development. However, this would not, *per se*, divest the possible role played by empathy in this matter. One could argue, for instance, that to develop empathy through training would have the same positive effect or that by making empathy work in tandem with the aforesaid mechanisms, one would secure a better kind of moral education, among other such reasonings. In my opinion, Prinz is aware of this difficulty and this is why he decides to demonstrate the unnecessary of empathy for moral development especially by means of an all-round critique to the view that the total lack of empathy is the generative condition of psychopathy.¹

Contrary to Prinz, I wish to claim that empathy is in fact of crucial importance for moral development or education, and in order to address his criticisms, I am going to set up a double-edged response: firstly, I aim to show that the elicitations of emotions caused by mechanisms of imitations and of punishment and reward cannot be taken to be necessary for the exclusion of empathy; at best, they are necessary in conjunction with it. Secondly, I intend to analyse the issue of empathy and psychopathy and see whether the answer given by Prinz on this matter is really as convincing as he thinks it is. Lastly, I will present and comment on the outcomes of several studies showing what seems to be a strong link between the improvement of empathy in children on the one side and moral perception, judgement, and behaviour on the other. However, let us be clear on the following matter: in my opinion, Prinz is correct when he asserts in his 2011 article *Is Empathy Necessary for Morality?* that, in light of the present state of research, it is impossible to conclude with absolute certainty that empathy is necessary for moral development and, therefore, that it is diachronically necessary for the formation of moral judgements. After all,

¹In support of such a position, see, for example, the famous and vastly influential (and controversial) work of Baron-Cohen (2011).

to argue for the necessity of empathy in this context, we would need to raise children without making any use of it and see what the results would be, and, of course, this is not an easy—nor an advisable!—thing to do. Hence, it is extremely difficult to argue for a definitive and unobjectionable answer on this issue. Nevertheless, in what follows, I want to demonstrate that there are very good clues that empathy might be essential for moral development and that this conclusion is much safer to draw and to support than that of Prinz.

Possibly, the best way to start this analysis is by taking again into account the already quoted ‘cookies-example’ proposed by Prinz in his article *Is Empathy Necessary for Morality?*. Prinz utilises this example to argue against the necessity of empathy for moral judgement; however, as we are going to see, the reasons behind his refusal are the same that drive his rejection for what concerns the supposed centrality of empathy for moral development and education. Thus, it makes sense to focus on this example at this stage. Here, Prinz wants to highlight the fact that we do not need to reflect and empathise on the harm of an individual every time we judge an action as morally bad. In fact, we are perfectly capable of judging the action of eating the last cookie, instead of offering it to a friend, as being greedy, and, in that sense, also as ‘morally bad’ (or at least ‘defective’), without further need to empathise with this friend’s harm or sadness. The friend might indeed be delighted that we ate the last cookie.² How can this happen? Prinz’s answer is that in any given occasion, our judgement about the moral goodness or badness of a certain action stems from a sentiment which leads to feeling the appropriate emotional response. Sentiments are, in fact, for Prinz, as we have seen, ‘dispositions to have emotions’. Hence, if I have a sentiment of disapprobation towards greed, I will feel anger or scorn when I see someone acting in a greedy manner, and guilt and/or shame when I myself have committed a greedy action. Now it should be quite easy to understand why this example (and the line of reasoning behind it) is so deeply connected with the theme of moral development. In fact, the only way we have to learn to have sentiments of approbation and disapprobation towards specific actions, patterns of behaviour, and something similar is to be raised in a certain way, to receive a certain kind of education. Prinz does not explicitly maintain this position in his 2011 article, but he does in one previous article from 2005. Here, he states:

² See Prinz (2011, p. 215).

When a child hits someone and sees that her victim has been hurt, it causes the child to feel bad by emotional contagion. This gives hurting a negative value that does not seem to depend on cultural conventions. In other cases, strong negative emotions are instilled by caregivers. Polluting the environment may be given moral standing by drawing a child's attention to the harm to future generations, and in older children, victimless transgressions such as masturbation may be moralized by convincing children that it will lead to disease, deviance, or divine censure.³

Now, in light of Prinz's doctrine about empathy, this quote appears rather problematic. It seems to me that Prinz, faced with the plain fact that children learn to feel bad about the harm done to others, thanks to empathy, tries to avoid this conclusion by speaking of 'emotional contagion' instead. However, as it should be clear by now, this is not at all a case of emotional contagion. The child, in fact, *knows* that the other was hurt because of what he or she has done and hence is not simply infected by the other's sadness or pain. Nonetheless, what is indeed noteworthy in this quotation is the second part. Prinz points to the fact that strong negative emotions are instilled by caregivers. Interestingly, here again Prinz seems to contradict himself when he says (incidentally, absolutely correctly) that 'polluting the environment may be given moral standing by drawing a child's attention to the harm to future generations', as this mechanism is again based on empathy. I have indeed to imagine these future generations and the harm I may cause them to then empathise with them and feel guilty for the damages I might cause them. In fact, if I simply pictured in my mind the consequences of my actions for the future generations, I might not feel anything at all: why should I care for people who I do not know and will never know? It takes strong moral principles to do this. Or, merely a small amount of empathy can suffice. If I am good at putting myself in the position of future generations and empathise with them as they are forced to struggle with ecological problems, then these people will start to matter and I will feel the full range of emotions I may need to act morally towards them: guilt, responsibility, and more.

³ Prinz (2005, pp. 279–280).

9.1 EMPATHY AND IMITATION

Nevertheless, as we continue with the reading, matters become more interesting. Prinz's aim, here, is to base the inculcation of moral principles and rules on the mechanism of imitation and he states this unambiguously a few lines later in the article.⁴ Furthermore, on the following page, Prinz asserts that mechanisms of imitation are pervasive and contribute at each stage in the moral development of the child, who is famously always looking for role models. Hence, the elements to be emphasised here are two, which are strictly connected: (1) the concept that caregivers shape the emotionality of children, and (2) the idea that the primary mechanism that permits the internalisation of moral rules is that of imitation. In the discussion that follows, I will, at first, briefly analyse the second element and then return to the first.

The idea that imitation and the influence of role models are central in the moral development of the child seems to be a licit one and Prinz does not fail to offer some good empirical evidence to support his thesis. Of course, one might question the importance of this mechanism and discuss whether it is an essential, necessary mechanism for moral development or simply an important one among others. However, in my opinion, developmental psychologists are better suited than philosophers to find an answer to this question and this is why I am going to leave this matter to one side. Instead, I want to focus my attention on one simple question: does the role played by imitation and role models really divest empathy of the function that it could carry out? The answer, I believe, is no.

Consider, for instance, how the imitation of role models usually works and you will soon discover that it is difficult to conceive of it as functioning without the aid of mentalising mechanisms which build up cognitive empathy, such as simulation and perspective-taking. Suppose you want to emulate the behaviour of a real or idealised person who profoundly influenced your life, and you try to ask yourself, for example: 'What would my father/mother/teacher/Buddha/Jesus do in this situation? How would he or she behave?' It seems evident that such a process cannot be carried out without the use of at least cognitive empathy. Of course, Prinz may reply that what he means to say is that imitation is at the base of education *tout court*, irrespective of the fact of whether we are dealing with a moral or an immoral education. In other words, children can unconsciously

⁴Ibidem.

imitate both moral and immoral behaviour and it is up to caregivers to be positive, rather than negative, role models. However, if this is actually his position, then it is uninteresting for our purposes and irrelevant for our argument. Our question is in fact about how ‘moral education’ can occur and not about how education in general occurs. Imagine, for instance, the following situation: Jill is a woman in her thirties who had the misfortune of growing up with an alcoholic and abusive father and a sensitive, but weak and submissive mother. She remembers vividly that her father would come back home late in the evening and inflict his aggressiveness and frustration on her and on her mother. Now, while talking to her therapist, Jill suddenly understands that she is repeating an old scenario that she knows very well. She forms relationships with men with no fixed job and no future, who have problems dealing with anger and habitually consume excessive alcohol, in the hope that she can eventually ‘cure’ or even ‘save them’. She comprehends that she does this because it offers her the illusion of a reconciliation with her father. She always looks for men who match the figure of her father, hoping that she will succeed where her mother failed. Although she acknowledges all this to her therapist, she cannot prevent herself from adding: ‘Well, I guess this is what you get when you’ve had such dysfunctional role models’. Now, I think that it is easy to understand that if it is true that Jill has in some sense *imitated* the behaviour of her mother and has defined her parents as her ‘role models’, she does not want to imply, in the slightest, that they were moral role models that she wants consciously to imitate in order to act and judge morally. Hence, imitation is, taken per se, a neutral concept that can have, alternatively, positive or negative outcomes for moral education and cannot be taken as, on its own, necessary and sufficient for moral development. Over the next pages, we are going to see whether empathy can have a positive influence on the development of morality and to what extent it can be considered as being necessary for it.

9.2 LEARNING MORAL RULES THANKS TO EMPATHY

Let us come back to the cookies-example and to the concept that caregivers shape children’s emotionality. If this idea is true (and, surely, it is undeniable that much of our emotionality is deeply influenced by the kind of education we receive), then we must conclude that the subject in the cookies-example disapproves of her action because this action epitomises greed, and her caregivers taught her to disapprove of greed. Observe,

however, that the very concept of ‘greed’ is, to a large extent, based on empathic considerations. If we look at the definition of ‘greedy’ provided by the Oxford Dictionary,⁵ we find: ‘Having an excessive desire or appetite for food’ or ‘Having or showing an intense and *selfish* desire for wealth or power.’ Now, the term ‘selfish’ is quite telling. To be selfish implies a closure with regard to others, a lack of openness and receptivity to others’ sentiments, desires, needs, and expectations. The selfish person is the unempathetic person *par excellence*. In fact, instead of being open to the others, oriented towards them, the selfish subject is egocentric and egoreferential, that is, completely focused on themselves. Suppose that I feel greedy, and therefore also guilty, because I have eaten the last cookie: this is not because I think I have been greedy in the sense of gluttonous or overindulgent (I may have eaten only a few cookies), but in the sense of having been disrespectful towards you and towards the desires you might have had in relation to the cookies. In order for me to entertain this line of thought, I need the shifting of perspective offered by empathy. There is nothing inherently wrong in the act of eating the last cookie; it can become wrong only when the emotions and expectations of others enter into my consideration when deciding what I ought to do.

Of course, Prinz could easily reply that it is not necessary to empathise with the other every time I have to decide whether to offer the last cookie or not (as in other similar situations). Rather, once I have learnt to label as ‘greedy’ the action of eating the last cookie, thanks to my education, then my judgement and my correspondent action will come automatically. Notice that I am not arguing for a synchronic role of empathy here, but for a diachronic one. In other words, I am arguing that it is necessary to feel empathy in order to attribute the judgement of ‘greediness’ to that kind of action and to internalise it. Since it would be difficult (as already mentioned) to find a way to teach a child these kinds of principles and, at the same time, ensure that the child is not empathising in any way, perhaps the best we can do to prove that empathy plays a diachronic role in these cases is by means of a proceeding that philosophers love: a mental experiment.

Suppose that in my childhood I used to eat the last cookie all the time, when sharing cookies with friends, and suppose that all that my parents did in reaction was to tell me that what I did was wrong, because it was greedy, but without using the ‘inductive discipline’ method I explained

⁵ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/greedy>.

earlier. That is, they did not lead me to empathise with my peers, by telling me to imagine what I would feel if my friends were to always eat the last cookie. In this case, I do not think that it would have been possible to develop a real sense of guilt for what I had done. In other words, I would not have been able to internalise this moral rule: it would remain a simple convention, like an external imposition, and sound like: 'Eating the last cookie is a greedy action and it is wrong to be greedy!' However, the real question here is what is wrong in being greedy? In effect, this question can be answered only by empathic considerations.

I am aware that a critic of empathy may very well reject this view by claiming that we do not have enough evidence to conclude that other methods, such as punishment and love-withdrawal, might have worked as well, however, I do have difficulties in thinking that the development of a refined moral sense can actually happen without empathy. I say 'refined' because whilst it can surely be argued that moral judgements, such as 'it is wrong to kill an innocent person' or 'it is wrong to rob a bank', or others akin to these, can be reached without empathy, I believe, nevertheless, that our everyday morality, constituted by modest every day moral judgements and actions, which typically do not directly share an involvement with killing innocent people and robbing banks, needs empathy in order to work properly. The moral person needs empathy to give advice to a friend, to forgive a colleague who has acted wrongly, to be a good listener to their children, and so on. And, what is more, the moral person needs empathy to *become* a moral person. In particular, I am arguing for the importance of empathy to understand moral rules 'from the inside', as it were, and not 'from the outside', or, put in another way, to differentiate between *conventional* and *core* moral rules and values. Greed, for instance, is wrong not because of what 'mummy and daddy' told us, but because—among other things—it makes other people suffer. It is, in other words, *substantially* wrong and not only *formally* or, better, *conventionally* wrong. My claim is that if mummy and daddy want to have any chance of being successful at teaching their child why eating the last cookie (but also stealing a pen or hitting a classmate) is intrinsically wrong, then they have to turn to empathic considerations, emphasising the pain caused to the others, and not the breaking of some rule of conduct. There is, in fact, overwhelming evidence of the fact that children are able to distinguish between moral and conventional violations precisely thanks to the awareness of the harm done to others. One of the most influential, revelatory, insightful, and extensive pieces of research that has been done on this matter is to be

found in Shaun Nichols' book *Sentimental Rules: On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgments*.⁶ Nichols argues in this book that the capacity for core moral judgements depends both on information about which actions are prohibited (thus, a 'normative theory') and an affective mechanism that confers a special status to the norm. The two dimensions are, together, both necessary and sufficient for that capacity. Nonetheless, what is crucial here is that innumerable pieces of research in psychological literature (well-reviewed by Nichols) prove, quoting Nichols:

[...] that, from a young age, children distinguish the moral violations from the conventional violations on a number of dimensions. For instance, children tend to think that moral transgressions are generally less permissible and more serious than conventional transgressions. Children are also more likely to maintain that the moral violations are "generalizably" wrong, for example, that pulling hair is wrong in other countries too. And the explanations for why moral transgressions are wrong are given in terms of fairness and harm to victims. For example, children will say that pulling hair is wrong because it hurts the person. By contrast, the explanation for why conventional transgressions are wrong is given in terms of social acceptability—talking out of turn is wrong because it is rude or impolite, or because "you're not supposed to." Further, conventional rules, unlike moral rules, are viewed as dependent on authority. For instance, if at another school the teacher has no rule against chewing gum, children will judge that it is not wrong to chew gum at that school; but even if the teacher at another school has no rule against hitting, children claim that it is still wrong to hit. [...] Thus, it seems that the capacity for drawing the moral/conventional distinction is part of basic moral psychology.⁷

Therefore, the capacity to distinguish between moral and conventional rules (and between moral and conventional violations) appears very early in life, and this leads us to the fundamental question: how does it happen? Interestingly, an affective system that is sensitive to harm in others (and which is active in all human beings, with the famous exception of psychopaths) seems to be the answer. In this regard, Nichols gives a wonderful example that, even if far from being definitive, very tellingly suggests that, at least for children, harm-based explanations are the end of the line for the judgement of immoral actions. The following exchange took place

⁶Nichols (2004).

⁷Nichols (2004, p. 6).

between Nichols and his five-year-old daughter, after the question: ‘Why is it wrong to hurt people?’ I quote:

- Q: Why is it wrong to hit?
 A: Because it hurts the person.
 Q: Why is it wrong to hurt someone?
 A: Because you might hurt them really bad.
 Q: Why would that be wrong?
 A: Because you might break their bones.
 Q: Why would that be wrong?
 A: Because it would hurt really bad.⁸

Of course, growing up, our morality becomes more and more structured and these simple explanations gain in complexity and profundity, but Nichols’ thesis is that this fundamental apprehension remains primary even in adults and grounds the distinction between norms that are backed by an affective system (*harm norms*) and norms that are not backed by an affective system (*conventional norms*). This does not constitute a rejection to the view expressed by Prinz. In fact, Nichols’ theory of *Sentimental Rules* (as he calls the class of norms prohibiting affect-backed violations) could very well go hand in hand with Prinz’s choice to emphasise the role of emotions in the face of empathy. However, my point is that by refusing to use empathy we would lose the affectivity which is so important (even for a sentimentalist like Prinz) to ground (and develop) our moral judgments. I have already mentioned the example of the inherent badness in being greedy, which can be exhibited by empathy, but empathy reveals the affect-backed intrinsic badness of an action in many other cases as well. Take, for instance, what seems to be, *prima facie*, a very conventional violation: lying.

To understand why lying is wrong, and to justify the importance of telling the truth, one needs a conception of morality much more complex than the one shown by Nichols’ daughter. One would have to stress, in fact, the importance of reliability, trust in relationships, maybe even social pacts and agreements, as well as the correct functioning of society as a whole. However, it is also possible to simply resort to empathy. In fact, no one likes to be lied to, and a child, who would probably not be persuaded of the wrongness of lying by means of arguments highlighting the

⁸Nichols (2004, pp. 20–21).

above-mentioned elements that lying deny, could get an insight into the wrongness of this act, thanks to what Hoffman calls *inductive discipline*⁹ and is, in fact, a method founded on empathy. The name sounds rather academic, but the mechanism it depicts is, I believe, almost universally known. For instance, if I think back to my childhood, I can easily remember many times when my parents admonished me using empathy as a stimulus, and I believe that this is an experience common to many other people. Sentences like: ‘Don’t act like that with your sister! How would you feel if she did the same to you?’ were often to be heard. This phenomenon is well known to both psychologists and pedagogists alike. Hoffman, in particular, conceives this mechanism to be the opposite of the ‘power-asserting’ kind of discipline, by means of which parents attempt to raise a child merely through threats of punishment (which are then carried out if the child does not obey) and by inculcating moral reflection, motivation, and behaviour through the sheer citing of moral rules and principles. Induction appeals, on the contrary, to the empathic capacity of the child by letting them imagine how they would feel if they were to undergo the harm they had done to another, and thereby making them fully aware of the wrong-doing they had committed. If this strategy is applied repeatedly over time, the child will come to associate bad feelings (especially feelings of guilt) in situations in which the harm they can do is not yet done. Hoffman calls these habitual associations ‘guilt scripts’ and asserts that they are essential for moral development and moral motivation. In his own words:

[...] peer pressure compels children to realize that others have claims; cognition enables them to understand others’ perspectives; empathic distress and guilt motivate them to take others’ claims and perspectives into account.¹⁰

I think that this line of thought is much more promising than the one supported by anti-empathists, like Bloom and Prinz, and it is commonly and effectively used. Even young children are, in fact, capable of carrying out simple empathic processes and understanding that some actions are wrong because they make others suffer, as well as the fact that they would suffer similarly if these actions were done to them. Highlighting the tight connection between empathy and the line of thought behind the

⁹Hoffman (2000, chapters 5 and 6).

¹⁰*Ivi*, pp. 10–11.

‘inductive discipline’ mechanism takes us to other, not less important, considerations. Indeed, if I (together with Hoffman) am right in considering Hoffman’s induction to be an empathic process (and I do not see how a mechanism envisaging a perspective-taking with the aim of experiencing what another is feeling cannot be deemed as ‘empathic’), then we cannot possibly overlook the fact that empathy is also at the basis of another famous moral rule with an incredibly long history: the golden rule.

9.3 THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN RULE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ‘RECEPTIVITY’

The origins of this rule are lost in time: we know for a fact that a general conception of the rule we know was already present in the philosophical reflections of Confucius and that it plays a central role in religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and others. Simon Blackburn asserts that it can be ‘found in some form in almost every ethical tradition’,¹¹ and this is far from being a reckless statement, since formulations of the same principle are to be read almost anywhere and in any time period. I will therefore refrain from quoting the various verbalisations of this norm of conduct and I will simply say, for the sake of better understanding, that this rule can be expressed in three slightly different forms, that is, in a negative form, implying that one should not treat others in ways that one would not like to be treated; in a positive form, according to which one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself; and finally, in a desiderative form, which involves wishing upon others what one wishes upon oneself.

Conceivably, it should be quite easy to see how the whole framework supporting the golden rule is founded on a very basic presupposition: normally, we wish and seek for ourselves positive things and we tend to avoid negative feelings, be they physical or psychological. Therefore, the golden rule offers a simple norm of conduct, which can be followed (and understood) without much effort by almost anyone. However, as obvious and banal as it might seem *prima facie*, the golden rule (GR) contains a by now well-known complication: no matter how similar people may be, no matter (if you will permit the wordplay) how it makes sense to speak of a common sense shared by the majority of people, there are still exceptions, and if a rule has to become universal, it has the duty to deal with them

¹¹ Blackburn (2001, p. 101).

accordingly. The problem with GR is that not any instantiation of this rule (if taken naively) would be deemed moral, and, furthermore, not any instantiation of it would even be fitting with regard to the aim we try to achieve (i.e. acting morally and doing good towards others). This means that if we were to interpret the rule literally we would soon discover how unreliable and nonsensical this would be. People have different tastes and preferences, they have different characters and personalities and take pleasure and displeasure in different things: if I were to do to a friend of mine exactly what I would like to be done to me, I may be right in some cases and be completely mistaken in others. Furthermore, if a person with unconventional or unsocially acceptable tastes, for example, a masochist, were to do to another person what they like to receive (or, to put it better, to undergo), we would hardly call this act an instantiation of moral behaviour, or even an act of good will.

Therefore, the GR needs correctives, not only to work legitimately as a universal moral principle, but also—and more fundamentally—to be interpreted in a fair way. It is here that the role played by empathy becomes essential: empathy acts as a necessary integration of this norm. Take, for example, the following case: I consider myself to be a humorous person. I like to make jokes and I have a real passion for witty irony and no bias against black humour. However, I happen to have a friend who is exactly the opposite in this regard: he finds black humour to be disrespectful, he thinks that irony, even when it is witty, can easily turn into sarcasm and, in general, hates people who seem not to take serious situations in a serious way. Now, suppose that this friend of mine—let us call him Matthew—were telling me how awful his day was and how frustrated he was feeling. If I were in his situation, I would love to have someone who was able to make light of the situation and make me laugh. Thus, if I were to apply the golden rule in this circumstance and do to Matthew what I would like to be done to me, I would fail. He would feel misunderstood or even not taken seriously and he could get offended. However, if I empathised with him, if I tried to imagine, not what I would like to receive in her situation, but what he, Matthew, would like to receive, then I would be able to foresee his reaction to this tendency of mine of downplay situations and adopt another strategy. I would think something like: ‘Well, if I were Matthew, I would like to be listened to, I would like to see a concerned face and hear soothing words of comfort.’ In this way I would be better off in achieving my goal: that of consoling him and making him feel better. Notice,

moreover, that this mechanism does not have to be grounded on purely cognitive empathy. As I have said more than once, in fact, cognitive and affective empathy are often felt in an intertwined manner.

I think we can become convinced by these statements if we come back to our previous example. I have said that Matthew is one of those people who likes to treat serious situations in a serious way. However, how can I know that the kind of situation in which Matthew is at the moment is a serious one, assuming that Matthew and I have different views about what is really serious and what is not? Of course, I might find out because Matt decides to tell me. But what if he does not? There are cases in which we want to help, be kind, and altruist and in which we simply cannot ask questions like: ‘How serious is the situation you are facing?’ because these kinds of question are not only embarrassing (if you have to ask, then you really did not understand how serious the situation was), but they tend to undermine our aim to help the person. Thus, a certain sensitivity, *receptivity*, I would like to say even *vulnerability* (in the sense of being vulnerable towards what others feel and think, being hit by their thoughts and feelings in order to really understand them and empathise with them) is in order. This means that in order to act morally towards Matthew, by being kind and trying to help him feel better, I cannot rely solely on a pure cognitive mechanism in which I simply put myself in the position of someone who does not appreciate humour in certain circumstances,¹² but rather, I have to feel part of his sadness. It is in fact this sadness that tells me, more than anything else, that, at least for Matthew (I could be of a different opinion) the situation he is facing seems serious. Once I know that—and I know that not as a descriptive statement about the state of the world, but as part of Matthew’s present and personal experience of the world—I also know that I have to avoid downplaying the situation and trying to cheer him up by means of humour. To summarise: empathy allows me to understand how serious Matthew’s situation is by providing me with a hint of the emotions he feels. Once I discern the gravity the situation has for Matt, then I can, by considering what I would like to hear if I were him (so, holding on with my empathic process), understand what I should do in order to help him.

¹² If this is actually a ‘pure cognitive mechanism’ at all. I am generally suspicious towards philosophers and psychologists who are so certain of being able to distinguish between cognitive and emotional processes: often, even in classical ‘theory of mind’ inferences, the role of emotions is far from being excluded.

Empathy thus helps us to understand the golden rule in the correct manner: after all, this principle does not require from us that we do to others exactly what we want to receive, but, just as we would like others to take into account our preferences when dealing with us, we should do the same when it is our turn to reciprocate. Using the words of Walter Terence Stace:

Mr. Bernard Shaw's remark "Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may be different" is no doubt a smart saying. But it seems to overlook the fact that "doing as you would be done by" includes taking into account your neighbor's tastes as you would that he should take yours into account. Thus the "golden rule" might still express the essence of a universal morality even if no two men in the world had any needs or tastes in common.¹³

Through these words shines the real (and realistic) interpretation of this rule, which does not, in any case, bind us to do to others exactly what we do (or would like to have done) to ourselves, but reminds us of the fact that others have needs and desires as we also do and that we should take these needs and desires into consideration (as we do with our own ones) every time we act. Empathy, in this sense, acts as a necessary corrective, in that it permits us to understand in what respect the desires and needs of others differ from those of our own, and to act accordingly.

To be clear: it is not my intention to make an argument in favour of the GR by stating that it is the basic principle of morality. In fact, I generally distrust the use of single principles as bedrocks for realistic moral theories. The GR has problems and ambiguities as any other principle of the kind, be it the categorical imperative, the utilitarian maxim, or others. To be honest, I regret the love that moral philosophers seem to have for the idea of a unitary principle capable of grounding an entire moral system and which has had them struggle for years and years through a plethora of books and articles, looking for ways to solve the problematic cases these principles inevitably leave unsolved. This is why I am choosing not to found here any new moral theory, nor am I offering any basic principle as its base. What I am doing in this work is analysing our everyday morality and seeing which role (if any) empathy can play there. Hence, my humbler and much more modest argument in this chapter is simply the following:

¹³ Stace (1937, p. 136).

empathy plays a necessary role for the GR, and, if we all agree on the fact that the GR constitutes one of the main principles through which we educate our children to be moral persons (and I think that not many people would dare to deny it), then empathy assumes a special importance for moral development or education and even an indirect necessity.

The question now becomes: is the role played by empathy for moral development or education indirectly necessary at best (i.e. necessary for a principle which seems to be an integral part of moral education), or can it be necessary *tout court*? As I already made clear above, attempting to demonstrate the incontrovertible necessity of empathy for moral development or education can easily become a rather quixotic endeavour. Empathy is such a deep-seated capacity in human beings that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible (let alone imprudent), to raise a child without using empathy and, at the same time, to also be sure that the child is not making use of it either. Philosophers and psychologists are aware of this issue and this is why the discourse about the necessity of empathy for moral development and education is usually conducted by means of the examination of people whose empathic capacities seem to be impaired, if not totally compromised, that is, psychopaths and autists. Usually, the scholars who deny that empathy plays a necessary role for moral development use the example of autistic people. The general argument sounds approximately like this: if people with autism—whose capacity for empathy is normally taken to be absent or at least severely impaired—are capable of thinking and acting morally, then we have evidence to deem empathy unnecessary for moral development or education.¹⁴ Prinz, as we have seen, takes another view and claims that even psychopaths are not amoral

¹⁴ Jeannette Kennett (2002), for instance, sustains a rationalist view that the fact that autistic people are capable of moral thinking but incapable of empathy suggests a Kantian account of moral agency, for which the role of reason is central, and that of empathy and other emotions is, instead, marginal at best. Other scholars, such as Victoria McGeer (2008), support instead a Humean position about morality. McGeer, in particular, is in fact convinced that only emotions have the required motivational force to accompany our instances of moral behaviour and that, consequently, all kinds of moral agency are ultimately rooted in affect. Nevertheless, she claims that the condition of people with autistic syndrome suggests that empathy and perspective-taking abilities cannot be considered as the basis of morality. In autism—so she argues—the deficit of empathy and perspective-taking abilities does not lead to a deficit in morality. Therefore, she draws the conclusion (which I believe Jesse Prinz would also share) that other kinds of affective dispositions which are available to people with autism as well are both necessary and sufficient for moral behaviour.

because of a lack of empathy, but on account of a blunting of nearly all emotions.

The challenge is thus twofold: the defender of empathy should, on the one hand, reply to the argument about the ‘unempathic morality’ of people with autistic syndrome, and on the other hand, he or she should find a good answer to the amorality of psychopaths, not having to do with a presence or an absence of empathy. Therefore, in what follows, I will find possible explanations for the fact that both the particular (even if very distinct) conditions of autistics and psychopaths can be grounded on their different relationships with empathy. In this way, we would have good reason to argue in favour of a probable (even though not certain)¹⁵ necessity of empathy for moral development and education. I shall begin with psychopathy.

As we have already seen, psychopathy is a mental disorder associated with callous and unemotional traits, such as lack of guilt, remorse, fear, a general shallow affect, and, famously, antisocial and aggressive behaviour.¹⁶ In the psychological empirical literature, there are two significant theories employed to explain these impairments. One is Blair’s VIM theory (which we have already discussed), but this is not accepted by Prinz. The philosopher prefers instead to follow an updated version of the theory put forward for the first time (at least to the best of my knowledge) by Fowles.¹⁷ According to this revised theory, the emotional deficit of psychopaths in systems modulating the experience of fear leads them to reduced emotional responses in anticipation of punishment and in imagining negative, threatening events, and, therefore, a reduced aversive conditioning. In simple terms, punishment instils fear, and a child who is afraid of punishment will develop important (fundamental for moral socialisation) aversive responses to imaginatively anticipated threats. Thus, a psychopathic child who is unable to experience fear will also be untouched by this method of moral training.

Prinz, as we have observed, widens the range of this approach: it is not merely the lack (or severe impairment) of fear which explains psychopaths’ amorality. Psychopathic people have a more general deficit in experiencing all kinds of emotions, and, for this reason, they also are insensitive to mechanisms of inhibition grounded in emotions. How can we possibly

¹⁵ Notice also that the theories of anti-empathists about this matter are only conjectural.

¹⁶ See also Patrick (2005) and the aforementioned Blair et al. (2005).

¹⁷ See Fowles (1988).

educate a child who is not frightened by anything and who does not feel guilt, remorse, or even sadness towards the suffering of others or in the contemplation of a violation he has committed?

Now, this reconstruction certainly sounds persuasive and it has merit in giving a simple explanation for what appears as a complex, serious problem. However, I will argue in what follows that it does not suffice, per se, to demonstrate that it is not the lack of empathy that is the fundamental cause of psychopaths' amorality. According to the argument supported by Jesse Prinz (and also Paul Bloom, who simply chooses to follow Prinz on this issue), psychopaths have a deficient morality as a consequence of their general emotional blunting. For my part, I will not argue with the view that psychopaths really have severe impairments regarding their emotionality; nevertheless, my claim is that it is only because this general blunting makes it impossible for them to feel empathy that amorality comes as a result. Therefore, even if the condition of psychopaths is correctly described as a condition of callousness and lack of deep-felt emotions *tout court*,¹⁸ this callousness is the primary cause of their amoral behaviour only insofar as it impacts negatively on their empathic capacity.

In the chapters that follow I will argue that psychopaths' amorality is due to (1) a compromised capacity to perceive in a moral way and, therefore, to judge morally and (2) an incapacity to be motivated to act morally. However, before that, I will criticise Prinz's theory of moral education and claim that empathy has a role to play here. Once we have criticised this position it will be, in fact, possible to argue in favour of empathy and to see how the absence of it can lead to moral aberrations, such as those displayed by psychopathic individuals.

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¹⁸We will see later how this condition differentiates them from autists, who in fact are capable of adopting moral behaviours.

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Moral Education: An Alternative to the Anti-empathic Model

The account given by Prinz about moral education is, briefly, the following:¹ a child develops moral competence thanks to imitation; in particular, the child has to be able to react with negative emotions in the presence of negative states of affairs, for example, the suffering or distress of another subject or the disapproval of caregivers and, conversely, to react with positive emotions in the presence of positive states of affairs. Now, it is understandable that to be able to react with positive or negative feelings in certain contexts it cannot suffice to possess a mere disposition to feel basic emotions, like joy, sadness, disgust, or fear; the child also needs the ability to discern other's feelings and emotions. Here is where imitation plays its part: these emotional dispositions are, in fact, established by imitation and emotional contagion. Children learn to mimic perceived emotions through vocalisations, facial expressions, and gestures, for example, and then eventually come to feel, by means of imitation and especially emotional contagion, the inner states of others. Growing up, they will learn that, in response to given emotions experienced thanks to emotional contagion, certain reactions are in order. Thus, for instance, the sadness they feel thanks to emotional contagion from someone who is suffering will elicit a consolatory response learnt via imitation. Within this scope, Prinz sees the failure of psychopaths (besides their incapacity to be moved by fear, admiration, and other emotions) in their inability to become 'infected' by the feelings of others and to respond accordingly.

¹ See Prinz (2005).

If I am right about this reconstruction, I think it can be criticised within the framework of (moral) developmental psychology and in light of well-documented studies, which allow for another interpretation. Let us consider these in succession.

Imitation surely can provide a basic sense of social connectedness. Through imitation human beings become capable of mutually acknowledging each other and understanding the sense of existing with others that are, in various aspects, similar to them.² However, this is not sufficient for morality to develop. For this to happen, imitation and mirroring processes have to be supplemented by an open system of reciprocation and shared representations of intentions, emotions, thoughts, and other mental states. It has been observed (and it is widely documented by developmental psychologists)³ that the mechanisms of emotional contagion, mimicry, and imitation tend to decrease as the subject develops other, more complex (and more important) cognitive capabilities. To quote Passos-Ferreira on this issue:

Imitation gives way to signs of reciprocation and emotional co-regulation. As joint attention to objects develops, shared affective representations also emerge. Eventually an explicit moral sense develops, accompanying the emergence of mind-reading and imagination by age 4. Around age 5, children show explicit understanding of the mental states that drive others in their behaviors and beliefs, allowing children to understand the motivational aspects that trigger moral attitudes.⁴

Therefore, the reading given by Prinz of the (moral) evolutionary story of the child might turn out to be rather simplistic. Imitation and emotional contagion are surely the first step in the development of metacognitive, social, and moral abilities, but not the last step. Notice, also, that emotional contagion is an ability the occurrence of which happens before the development of full self-other differentiation. Thus, for example, in the case of vicarious distress (like the famous case of collective crying in a nursery) the baby is not experiencing the others' distress, let alone acknowledging that others are probably suffering. On the contrary, the infant is feeling their own distress. Hence, to explain

² See, for example, Meltzoff (2007).

³ See, for instance, Hoffman (2000) and Rochat and Passos-Ferreira (2008). For a useful review of many of these studies, see also Gallagher and Zahavi (2012).

⁴ Passos-Ferreira (2015).

the phenomenon of empathic concern, as well as the simple recognition that another is in distress, Prinz would need more than imitation and emotional contagion.

Moreover, empathy is not only our most pervasive method for understanding others, but it also permits us to make faster and more reliable predictions about the others' mental states, decidedly more so than emotional contagion. It is, furthermore, undeniable—as already stated in the first section of this book—that (high-level) empathy seems to be the only psychological mechanism we have to understand the mental states of all individuals to whom we do not have perceptual direct access, because they are absent or because their mental states are not clearly expressed in their actions. For these reasons, empathy becomes essential when there is the need to grasp secondary moral emotions, false or divergent beliefs, cognitive and affective perspectives of others, and other such states. This seems to me to be the big gap in Prinz's attempt to defend an ethics without empathy. To think morally, one cannot refrain from sharing others' affective states or taking others' perspectives into consideration through imagination or simulation.

By reading Prinz's theory, one repeatedly receives the impression that the philosopher is doing everything possible to avoid speaking of empathy, until the point in which he is forced to use the phenomenon of emotional contagion as a substitute for empathy. The problem with this is that emotional contagion is ill-suited to act as such. In fact, unlike both emotional contagion and imitation, empathy emerges in the child only at the moment in which they become aware of self-other differentiation, and from this moment, the role of emotional contagion becomes increasingly marginal. Already in early development the emergence of certain cognitive functions draws a clear line (of which babies become more and more aware with the age) between emotional contagion and empathy. Pacherie⁵ asserts that this occurs by means of three levels: the first involves the emergence of a capacity in children to connect the motor representation of a certain emotional experience with the emotion that might have caused it, without thereby going through what developmental psychologists call the 'proprioceptive stage', which means without using the corresponding imitation of the other's expression. In other words, children develop a perceptual access to others' emotional states by perceiving their mimicry, vocalisations, facial

⁵ See Pacherie (2004).

expressions, for example, without this happening through proprioception (imitation).

It has been observed, for instance, that infants, using the words of Gopnik and Meltzoff: ‘vocalise and gesture in a way that seems [affectively and temporally] “tuned” to the vocalizations and gestures of the other person’.⁶ This was proved, in particular, thanks to two experiments which have become classics in the field of developmental psychology. In 1985, Murray and Trevarthen⁷ conducted an interesting test. A two-month-old infant had to interact with its mother via a video monitor in two different ways: in the first instance, the interaction was carried out through the use of a live video monitor; the child, in other words, saw the face of the mother in the screen and her attuned answers to its facial expressions and vocalisations. In the second situation, the monitor only showed a video-registration of the mother’s previous expressions, gestures, and so on. On this last occasion, the interaction simply failed. The infant seemed to understand quite rapidly that its mother’s actions were not synchronised with its own. This eventually led to a suspension of the interaction and usually left the child upset. Similar results had already been observed in a previous experiment conducted by Tronick and others.⁸ Here, infants from three to six months of age were examined in a normal face-to-face interaction with an adult. For one or two minutes the adult had to assume a neutral facial expression, without trying to engage in any way with the infant’s gestures and vocalisations. Then, the interaction was repeated, but this time the adult was allowed to respond in an appropriate way to the actions of the baby. As in the experiment conducted by Murray and Trevarthen, the infants became upset and the interaction quickly ceased in the case of the impassive face, whilst in the second case, the face-to-face interaction flowed without difficulty.

Other studies, besides these, have shown that infants from five to seven months of age are able to detect and understand the existing correspondence between visual and auditory information that specifies the expression of emotions. In other words, they begin to see a correlation between a certain type of emotion and the visual and auditory way in which human beings usually express it.⁹

⁶Gopnik and Meltzoff (1997, p. 131).

⁷Murray and Trevarthen (1985).

⁸Tronick et al. (1978).

⁹See Walker (1982) and the more recent works of Hobson (1993, 2002).

All these capacities acquired by the baby are characteristics of a kind of empathy (it is in fact a rudimentary form of low-level empathy) that allows the infant to draw fundamental distinctions between feeling a given emotion, spotting the same emotion in others, and sharing this others' emotion. The child at this stage has acquired the ability to identify distinct *types* of emotion.

Growing up (starting from nine months of age), the child reaches a second level of empathy, thanks to which it can understand the *object* of the emotion, meaning that the child is able to see the connection linking the emotions experienced by others with a certain situation. This ability appears at this stage due to the development of mechanisms underpinning what phenomenologists would call the *intentionality*. These mechanisms are joint attention processes, social references, and, indeed, intentional communication and allow for the understanding of others' behaviour and the awareness of shared meanings about objects, events, and more.¹⁰

As a result, for instance, the child starts to attribute emotional evaluations to happenings that depend, to a large extent, on the affective responses of others (often caregivers). To illustrate what it is meant by these words, think of the classic scene of a toddler falling down and then turning to its mother. There is a moment in which the child seems surprised, rather than frightened or in pain, then the reaction of its mother, which, most of the time, is constituted by a concerned face, sad and high-pitched vocalisations, and a run to help pick the child, elicits the final emotional response of the child: crying. The infant here understands the 'correct' affective reaction to attribute to what has happened as a result of empathy with its mother and will thereby be able to understand, when it sees the same occurring to others, that falling down is a bad thing.

This case seems to show once again the unsuitability of the explanation offered by Prinz that is grounded in emotional contagion. Sometimes, in fact, the mother might not put on a sad face or express unambiguously an emotion that the toddler can discern, but the very fact that she runs to the child and tries to comfort it is enough for the child to understand that something bad has happened.

¹⁰ Studies demonstrate that at 6 months infants start to perceive the movement of grasping as a goal-directed action, and between 10 and 11 months of age they begin to perceive many other gestures as goal directed, such as movements of the head, the mouth, the hands, and even more general body movements. See, for example, Senju et al. (2006).

There are also times when the mother might express a certain emotion about a third object (or subject) different from the child: for instance, laughing while playing with the family pet. In this case, thanks to the mechanism of joint attention, the child will attribute a positive meaning to the pet and treat its mother's emotions in relation to the animal as a kind of judgement or commentary towards it. This will eventually help the child to understand the causal role of emotions and the motivations behind one's own affective reactions. In fact, this is the third and last level of the process so described by Pacherie (2004) and Passos-Ferreira (2015), that is, understanding the correlation between the three different dimensions of an emotional reaction, which they state as the type of emotion, its intentional object, and its motivational factors. This level of comprehension occurs from two years of age and requires the use of imaginative and simulative processes. It is, therefore, no coincidence that it begins with children engaging in symbolic and play employing pretence, in which imaginative characters are created, hypothetic scenarios are conceived, and objects and gestures from the real world are used to symbolise objects in fictive, imagined situations (a banana as a phone, for instance, or the gesture of holding an invisible cup of tea and drinking from it). These patterns of behaviour, which have apparently no connection with the phenomenon of empathy, are actually essential in allowing children to acquire the capacity to simulate others' cognitive and affective perspectives and to acquire a good imaginative flexibility overall. This, in turn, will contribute to the development of what I have called 'high-level empathy', which is, as we have seen many times previously, of crucial importance both for the deepening of the information acquired through low-level empathy and for the use of empathic capacities in 'opaque' (to use Pacherie's words) contexts, that is, for those contexts in which we have no clear perceptible clues to rely on for the acknowledgement of others' emotions.

The following is a quote from Passos, who uses the term 'imaginative empathy' to refer to the phenomenon I have named 'high-level empathy':

Empathy, defined as this capacity to understand via perception or imagination the type of emotion and the connection between emotion, motivational aspect, and intentional object, is essential for moral development. The capacity to express moral attitudes involves the capacity to understand and identify secondary emotional reactions like guilt, shame, contempt, regret, admiration, outrage, and concern. Imaginative empathy plays a central role in understanding those affective reactions and allows us to internalize those

emotional reactions as we imagine or simulate them based on others. This is the way children come to understand and internalize moral rules and moral attitudes.¹¹

Now, here Passos is asserting something crucial. Her claim is that empathy is diachronically and possibly synchronically necessary for morality, as well as for a normal emotionality. What she calls ‘secondary emotions’—such as shame, guilt, and outrage—in fact can only be experienced thanks to typical empathic mechanisms where the subject shares the emotions felt by others as a result of perspective-taking and simulation. So, for instance, the fact that the caregivers of a child react with shame (or act as if they were profoundly ashamed) to certain actions carried out by the child leads it to feel ashamed as a reaction and to attribute the property of ‘shameful’ to those actions.

Passos is convinced that this kind of explanation constitutes a direct criticism of the theory expressed by Prinz and that can be considered partially true. The reconstruction made by Passos has the not negligible merit to constitute a valid and reliable alternative to that made by Prinz, and its being more in line with the old and recent discoveries of developmental psychology certainly places the burden of the proof on Prinz’s shoulders. This, though more modest in degree, is good news for the defenders of empathy. Imitation and emotional contagion are the first steps in a long process also (and especially) involving affective perspective-taking and empathic simulations and, until the emergence of these abilities, it is impossible to speak of morality in children. This, if it is admittedly no proof of a causal relationship, surely speaks in favour of a close correlation between empathy and moral development.

In what follows, I want to argue for two aspects of high-level empathy that I believe have a crucial importance for morality: first of all, HLE enables people to overcome their own egocentric perspective and perceive others (and oneself among them) as independent but, in many ways, connected living beings. Secondly, thanks to HLE, people can receive the quasi palpable impression to be seen and be observed by others. Indeed, this *regard d’autrui*, to quote Sartre, is deeply connected with the development of moral emotions (Smith would probably say ‘sentiments’) that

¹¹ Passos-Ferreira (2015, p. 44).

are, in their turn, an essential component of our moral life. Within this framework, the analysis of the work of Edith Stein will provide an excellent starting point.

10.1 THE ANTI-EGOCENTRIC POWER OF EMPATHY

In her work on empathy, Stein never thematises the moral function of empathy in an explicit way. This is a choice that is perfectly understandable if we keep in mind that her primary interest was to clarify the epistemological function of empathy. However, there are some parts of this work (especially in the second and third chapters, respectively: *The Constitution of the Psycho-Physical Individual* and *Empathy as the Understanding of Spiritual Persons*), in which she makes assertions that allow for some level of interpretation. Take, for instance, the following passage: ‘[A] new object realm is constituted in in feeling. This is the world of values. In joy the subject has something joyous facing him, in fright something frightening, in fear something threatening.’¹²

Now, whoever has even a passing familiarity with these issues knows that this statement is far from being undisputed, and trying to substantiate this claim of Stein’s by making use of the literature on the theme would involve grappling with decades of diverse ideas on the topic brought up by numerous and famous philosophers of emotions. It would involve discussing the perceptual theory of emotion, the cognitive theories, the sentimental and neo-sentimental theories, the attitudinal theories, and this is certainly not the forum for it. What is imperative to highlight, in order to interpret Stein’s words in the right way, is a simple matter of fact. In the case of an adult, full-fledged, and normally-gifted person, and where the emotion is not *recalcitrant*,¹³ simple and ‘naïve’ judgements of values are normally associated with the feeling of a certain emotion in the following way: if I fear X, then I have at least one reason to find X under some aspect fearsome; if I feel admiration for Y, then I have at least one reason to find Y admirable, and so on. Of course, I

¹²Stein (1989, p. 92).

¹³The so-called recalcitrance of emotions refers to the tendency of some emotions to go against our rational judgements. A famous class of recalcitrant emotions are phobias, which, as we all know, are hardly respondent to reason. Take, for instance, the fear of flying: the subject can rationally judge that flying is the safest way to travel but then feel nonetheless afraid every time they step onto a plane. See, for example, Brady (2009) and Deonna and Teroni (2012).

might be wrong and/or I might change my judgements over time and with more information, however, in the situation where I feel Y about X, I have a *prima facie* reason to think that X deserves Y or that feeling Y is fitting with regard to X being as they are.

Now, if we consider empathy as the principal ability we have to understand and even share others' emotions, thoughts, intentions, desires, or similar (and I see no reason to doubt that), then it becomes easy to see how it is possible, thanks to empathy, to abandon our egocentric perspective and assume that of the other. It becomes, in other words, possible to understand what Stein means when she asserts, in another even more significant passage, that by means of empathy we always experience another person as a feeling, thinking, desiring, and judging subject, as the 'center of orientation' of their own world. Quoting Stein: 'a sensitive, living body belonging to an "I," an "I" that senses, thinks, feels and will. The living body of this "I" not only fits into my phenomenal world but is itself the center of orientation of such a phenomenal world. It faces this world and communicates with me.'¹⁴

What does it mean to experience another human being as the 'center of orientation' of their own world? It means to experience the other as a being that has their own perspective on things and that perceives the world primarily in relation to themselves; a being that has needs, an emotional life, and vulnerabilities as we do. This kind of experience is the opposite of the egocentric kind of experience; it is the opening to a horizon consisting of mutual relationships. The others are not perceived as mere shadows of myself, as individuals that I can objectify to pursue my ends, but as autonomous subjects. It is thanks solely to this kind of perception (or experience) that I can not only simply *acknowledge, inter alia*, the desires and interests of others, but that I can even *respect* them. Notice another important passage in this citation. Stein affirms that the other is also always in communication with me, which means that they cannot be conceived merely as the centre of orientation of their own world, but as a being that can observe me, relate to me, and even make requests of me from their singular world. This means that I am seen by the other, judged by the other, appealed to by the other in a way that I would never be able to experience without leaving my egocentrism behind and opening towards the others and the world through the use of empathy. Namely, what I think that can be argued on the basis of the reflections of Stein is that

¹⁴Stein (1989, p. 3).

empathy works as a *precondition* to moral judgement and moral behaviour. Empathy, in fact, helps us with correct understanding of the moral scenarios we have to face. It helps us—as already mentioned in the chapter about moral perception—to interpret the situation at hand morally. If I know that I am constantly dealing with finite and vulnerable beings that have desires, emotions, interests, and needs as I have, then this awareness constitutes the first and most fundamental (being the most original) call to a moral responsibility on my part and to the instantiation of moral behaviour. In the words of Rainer Forst:

[The insight into finitude] is an insight into the various risks of human vulnerability and human suffering, bodily and psychological. Without the consciousness of this vulnerability and the corresponding sensibility [...], moral insight that is an insight into human responsibility remains blind.¹⁵

This feature of empathy is a crucial one for morality. Thanks to empathy we do not simply come to understand and feel the mental states of other people, as if they were some type of object that we can manipulate to our will; by means of empathy, as has been said repeatedly, we assume the perspective on the world of another person, we see what matters for this subject. Moreover, for the time in which we empathise, we see these things as mattering for us as well, because we have abandoned our perspective to gain access, as it were, ‘by the inside’ to that of the other. I want to quote the words of John Deigh on this issue, as I find them quite appropriate:

The empathy it requires must involve not only taking this other person’s perspective and imagining the feelings of frustration or anger, say, that he would feel as a result of being interfered with but also understanding his purposes as generating reasons for action even as one realizes that these purposes and reasons are independent of one’s own. Only if this later condition is satisfied can we say that someone recognizes the other person as a separate, autonomous agent. Only then can we say that he has advanced beyond the egocentric view.¹⁶

And later he adds:

¹⁵ Forst (2011, p. 39).

¹⁶ Deigh (1996, p. 175).

In taking another's perspective, the agent sees the purposes that give extension and structure to the other's life and sees those purposes as worthwhile, as purposes that matter.¹⁷

As you can see, Deigh is very clear on the matter: to empathise with another person means not only to simulate her feelings and her mental states in general, but also 'understanding his purposes as generating reasons for action'. In other words, empathy offers us an insight into the agency of the other person, into the ways in which they act, based on certain reasons. We could add also insight into the ways in which, for example, they believe, love, fear something, based on certain reasons.

It should thus be easy to see now in what sense I have said above that empathy is a precondition for moral judgement and moral conduct and hence a necessary part of moral education. Our judgement of the behaviours of others will not be a truly moral one without insights coming from empathy, and our actions towards others will benefit from these insights, in addition. Consider, in fact, the image we normally have of the morally virtuous person. We think (and rightly so) that such a person is, for instance, someone who gets angry from time to time but—to say it as Aristotle would do—with the right people, at the right moment, for the right reasons, and to the right extent, and the same applies to any other emotion. My claim is that without empathy it will be difficult for the morally virtuous person to be truly morally virtuous: how would they know that—to use the same example—X deserves their anger (and how much, at which moment, and for what reasons) because of something they did, if they do not know what passed through X's mind and what it is like for X to be in the situation he or she is in? Our judgements about others would be unrefined and approximate. What is more, without empathy our morality would be short-sighted; we could have, that is, moral intentions, but we would find difficulty in converting these good intentions into actual good moral deeds for the same reasons I outlined earlier: we would be lacking important information that would help us to know exactly what to do. Continuing the analogy with Aristotle, empathy covers, following my proposal, part of the field (and of the tasks) which are characteristic of the *phronesis*. *Phronesis* was for Aristotle a type of practical wisdom or intelligence, akin to, if not even analogous to, the concept of prudence, which carried out the role of the guide of the virtuous person, the inner advisor

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 177.

who told them how and when to act, thereby orienting all of their virtues.¹⁸ *Phronesis* is distinct from *sophia*, as this one is a pure theoretical knowledge directed towards universal truths typical of the sciences: for example, it is by having and developing our *sophia* that we learn the principles of mathematics and geometry. On the contrary, the *phronesis* is concerned with particulars, in the sense that it is concerned with how to act in particular situations. One can, of course, learn the principles of action in the same way in which one learns the principles of arithmetic, that is, in a theoretical way, but applying them to the real world, in situations one could not have foreseen, requires more than theoretical knowledge: it requires a practical wisdom. My claim is that this practical kind of wisdom or intelligence would be incomplete (and thus imperfect) without the indispensable contribution of empathy, which is, after all, a kind of ‘*emotional intelligence*’. Without empathy a true *phronesis* cannot exist, which means that the morally virtuous person must also develop their capacity for empathy. Take the case of sincerity, for instance. It is a common assumption that morally virtuous persons are by definition and *ipso facto* honest and sincere. However, what does it mean to be sincere? Sincerity certainly does not require saying openly everything one has in one’s heart, to any person, at any moment, and without any kind of filter. In fact, such a behaviour would easily result, *inter alia*, in the assertion of indelicate and inopportune comments that would hurt others’ feelings. Far from considering a person acting in this way as being morally virtuous, we would think that they are indeed inappropriate, ill-mannered, and asocial. Hence, the morally virtuous person, anything but insincere, would nevertheless be a person able to tell the truth ‘in the right way’, meaning that they would be capable of doing it without hurting others (or at least by reducing this eventuality to the minimum). In order to carry out such a task they are going to need more than wisdom: they need empathy to perceive the emotionality of others and give voice to more appropriate, honest comment. The same applies to all the other virtues: empathy comes to be an integral part of the *phronesis* and, driven by it, a necessary component of the *ethos* of the morally virtuous person.

Notice that to say that empathy is a necessary constituent of the *ethos* of the morally virtuous person implies that a *defective* empathy would mutilate the moral excellence of this person, and it would compromise their

¹⁸ For this and the other references to the concept of *phronesis* in Aristotle, see the 6th book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

capacity to act morally. Furthermore, as we have seen in the previous discussion, a *complete lack* of empathy would prevent us from exiting from our egocentric perspective and developing a moral stance about others and the world; a world in which others are taken into account in our actions.

The fact that empathy can be of such a crucial importance for the ethos and for the moral development of a person should not strike anyone as surprising. We have in fact seen—especially, but not only, in the case of Huckleberry Finn—that principles are not the sole constituent of morality or, more specifically, that morality consists of the development, justification, and application of moral rules and principles. There are times in which our principles are wrong and need correction, but, above all, we need to develop a moral perception in order to know which kind of rule of conduct (and when) ought to be applied to the actual situation at hand. Does this mean that we should use our empathy *instrumentally*, that is, with the aim of correcting our perspective or refining our moral perception? Yes and no. Yes, because this is indeed useful and it can be definitely helpful to try to overcome our perspectives in some situations. No, because this would not happen in every situation where it is needed. To overcome one's own perspective, one needs, in fact, the willpower to do so and the capacity to do so. These are elements that can be developed only by means of training, in other words, by the development of a good character (*ethos*). Take again the example of Huck Finn. Here, the young boy does not make an 'instrumental use' of empathy to intentionally influence his moral perception. Rather, empathy assumes in this example the role of an inner voice, a force that goes against his best judgement to return Jim to the slave-owners. If our best judgement is in some cases insufficient to inspire us to 'do the right thing' (to quote the famous film by Spike Lee), then it is easy to see that it is also not sufficient to use empathy instrumentally. The aim of a good moral education should hence be the enhancement of empathy *tout court*, so that it can always be present together with our moral principles. We should strive to make a *habitus* out of empathy, because it is only when empathy becomes a habitus that it can substantially (and not contingently) change our way of seeing. Iris Murdoch once said:

The selfish, self-interestedly, causal or callous man sees a different world from that which the careful, scrupulous, benevolent, just man sees; and the

largely explicable ambiguity of the word ‘see’ here conveys the essence of the concept of the moral.¹⁹

Along the same line, I claim that the empathetic person sees a different world from that seen by the unempathetic person. Consider again Huck’s example: the unempathetic person, raised with the ideals of anti-abolitionists in their ears, would indeed see no moral dilemma, no difficulty in deciding what to do with Jim: he must be taken back to his owner, that’s all. On the contrary, the empathic person (the person who has made their empathy a habit based on the model of the Aristotelian virtues) is in fact the only one to actually see a (moral) problem that is invisible to the rest of the ‘contingent empathisers’ (i.e. people who have not developed the same habit and whose empathy is only contingently and irregularly elicited).

The morally virtuous person needs empathy, and if they do, then empathy seems to be a necessary element in the moral patrimony of this person. To see how cogent this thesis is, we will now consider a class consisting of people who seem to completely lack empathy.

10.2 EMPATHY AND PSYCHOPATHY

Psychopaths have been one of the favourite subjects of studies in the field of psychopathology for several decades, and since the mysteries of their psyche are far from being univocally solved, it is reasonable to believe that they are going to be under the lens of psychologists and psychopathologists for many years to come. The typical traits which have always attracted the interest of both specialists and laypersons are their inclination for criminal and generally immoral behaviour and their apparent lack of fellow-feelings. In fact, high levels of callousness, grandiosity, manipulation, impulsivity, criminal versatility, and other antisocial characteristics are commonly present in all the lists describing their behaviour.²⁰ Their criminal inclinations are also well documented. For instance, it has been shown that within one year of release from prison, psychopathic criminal offenders are up to four times more likely to reoffend than non-psychopathic offenders.²¹ Moreover, it has been found that within ten years of release

¹⁹ Murdoch (1992, p. 177).

²⁰ Besides the already cited works of Blair and Cleckley, see also Hare and Neumann (2008).

²¹ Hart et al. (1988) and Hemphill et al. (1998).

77% of psychopathic offenders had committed a new violent crime, as opposed to 21% of non-psychopathic offenders.²² Since these data are taken to be incontrovertible, the problem to be solved has always been to discover the reasons behind them: why are psychopaths so prone to criminality, immorality, and insensitivity? It is on this point that international research has offered the greatest variety of attempts to understand the proximate causes of typical psychopathic behaviour. In such a situation, it was easy for philosophers and psychologists alike to take one of these explanations and, from it, create a canonical model for rationalising psychopathy. In this sense, the positions sustained by Jesse Prinz and Paul Bloom are no exceptions. Over the decades, aspirant explanations have included abnormalities in psychopathic individuals' emotional and physiological responses,²³ in their perception of others' distress,²⁴ in their sensitivity to punishment,²⁵ and in their attentional capacities.²⁶

As a philosopher, I do not (and cannot) consider myself an expert in the field of psychopathology and that is why I will not argue for the superiority of my theory with regard to other positions. However, I will have achieved my aim if I manage to show that my proposal is able to explain the amorality of psychopaths as a result of their deficient empathy and, at the same time, to avoid the criticisms of Prinz and Bloom.²⁷ Since I have explained previously that their theory of psychopathy as a general dulling of all emotions is absolutely compatible with the absence of empathy as being the key deficit of psychopaths, I am going to show over the following pages why it makes even more sense—in addition to being more in accordance with the discoveries of psychopathology and developmental psychology—to think of empathy as being ‘the great absent’ in the psychopathic condition.

First of all, it seems unduly simplistic to think of psychopathy as a condition displaying a general blunting of all emotions. It appears that people

²² Harris et al. (1991).

²³ Fowles (1993), Hare (1978) and Lykken (1957).

²⁴ Blair (2005) and Blair et al. (1997).

²⁵ See again Lykken (1957), Schachter and Latané (1964), Newman et al. (1985), Newman and Kosson (1986) and Shmauk (1970).

²⁶ Newman et al. (1990).

²⁷ I think we should look with suspicion at overoptimistic researchers claiming to have found the unambiguous solution to a problem which is still left unsolved. For this reason, the reading key I propose is just that: a proposal which I find consistent and compelling enough, but not the only one, nor the definitive one.

defending this view have the tendency to see psychopaths as reflecting the popular image of the cold and apathetic manipulator, as reflected in numerous films, television series, and novels. Consider, for example, Dr. Hannibal Lecter as portrayed in the books of Thomas Harris and masterfully represented on screen by Anthony Hopkins; or Dexter Morgan from the TV series *Dexter*; or, yet again, Jeffrey Dahmer, a real psychopath and serial killer who has recently acquired a certain notoriety even among laypersons due to the acclaimed Netflix series *Dahmer*. These kinds of psychopaths certainly exist and are undoubtedly the ones which capture our imagination (which explains their presence even in pop-culture) but are not the only types. There are, for instance, many psychopaths who can hardly be conceived (and described) as apathetic. In fact, whilst psychopaths surely are ‘hypo-responsive’ to *certain* emotions,²⁸ they are far from being hypo-responsive to *all* emotions. For instance, numerous psychopaths have actually been found to be *hyper*-responsive to emotions like anger, pride, jealousy, or envy, what means that they experience these emotions in a very vivid manner, and, moreover, they have a tendency to feel emotions, such as surprise, disgust, joy, and happiness in a similar way to most of us.²⁹ Aaltola,³⁰ in this regard, makes a distinction between *secondary psychopaths*, who are ‘hot-headed’ and aggressive, though not empathic, and *primary psychopaths*, who are extremely controlled and intelligent, while being emotionally detached, fearless, and unempathetic.

Nevertheless, that is not all. There are, in fact, psychologists who support an even stronger position about the emotionality of psychopaths. Arielle Baskin-Sommers, for instance, contends that psychopaths are not apathetic and cold-blooded, but simply very bad at multitasking. In other words, they are inefficient in effectively processing information. By way of example, in one study, Baskin-Sommers and her colleagues John Curtin and Joseph Newman decided to test the supposed fearlessness of psychopaths.³¹ The outcomes were particularly remarkable. The research was conducted with the (psychopathic) inmates of a maximum-security

²⁸ For instance, they have minimal fear receptivity and an inclination not to experience significant anxiety. Furthermore, they tend to be incapable of detecting or feeling the distress of others, even if they caused it (see Viding & McCrory, 2012).

²⁹ Freeman (2013) and Heym (2018).

³⁰ Aaltola (2014).

³¹ Baskin-Sommers et al. (2012).

prison³² and the following fear conditioning task was used to test their purported fearlessness: on a screen appeared the letter ‘n’ (either upper or lower case) and a coloured box (either red or green). Now, a red box meant the convict may get an electric shock, whilst a green box meant that he was safe. The tasks which the inmate had to carry out were twofold: in some tests—while the box was displayed—the inmate had to tell the examiners the colour of the box (thereby focusing on the threat), whereas in others he had to tell the examiners the letter’s case (focusing in this way on the non-threat). It was observed that psychopaths experienced fear responses (indicated by a startle and amygdala activity) when they had to focus on the box (which, as already seen, stood for the ‘threat’), but they showed a remarkable deficit in fear reactions when they had to tell the examiners the letter’s case (in a situation, i.e. where the box came to assume a secondary position with regard to their primary goal). These results are intriguing, since they do not show—as it was and still is often supposed—a general incapability of psychopaths to be moved by emotions (in this case, fear), but rather that psychopaths tend to experience a minor or absent emotional response compared to non-psychopaths when they are focused on something else. In a sense, we could assert that psychopaths seem to have an extremely selective attention and only what falls within the scope of this attention deserves an emotional reaction from them. What remains outside of this, instead, is seen (probably unconsciously) as irrelevant and, for this reason, does not trigger any particular emotion.

Prima facie, it would seem that all these different descriptions of psychopathic emotionality are in conflict. Bloom and Prinz underline the blunting of feelings as a typical element of the psychopathic condition; others, like Freeman and Heym, mention that this is incorrect and simplistic, since there are emotions which seem deeply felt by psychopaths; finally, psychologists like Baskin-Sommers and colleagues argue that what truly characterises psychopaths is, to some extent, a defective attention, and not apathy. So, where is the truth? Who is right? To a certain extent, no one, and everyone. It is true that we should not conceive psychopaths as beings that are devoid of all human emotions, in fact, not even psychopathic criminals seem to fit this description. However, laypeople and scholars

³²This detail is important, since it allows to understand that the psychopaths who were analysed were also offenders and convicted for serious crimes, what should speak in favour of callousness, cold-bloodedness, and lack of fear.

who generally consider psychopaths to be callous and cold-blooded are not totally wrong. In fact, psychopaths can give the impression of suffering from an overall blunting of feelings exactly because of their very selective (defective) attention and inability to multitask and process information not directly of interest to them. Why so? Because we are not used to dealing with these kinds of people. You see, say, a man ready to take an irresponsible and potentially fatal risk for what seems to you an unimportant personal issue and you might conclude that this person is incredibly cold-blooded. You see another who is not paying attention to his partner and you might believe he is callous and insensitive.

Of course, all of this could be explained by the above-mentioned blunted emotionality, and that would be the easy route. Alternatively, we could take the thesis of the ‘defective attention’ in order to illustrate the matter. According to this view, the first man who is risk-averse only acts in such a manner because he is unable to calculate the future consequences of his action. The second, who ignores his partner, is simply focused on something else, which, although perhaps completely secondary in our opinion, occupies his total attention. In other words, many of the psychopathic typical features could merely be the result of this potentially primary *hyperselective*, and thus *deficient*, attention.

Nevertheless, we might wonder if that is the full answer and, in particular, if hyperselectivity and defective multitasking are really responsible for psychopathic amorality. Granted that psychopaths are often inept at making plans for the future or at focusing their attention on aspects that do not directly matter to them, can all this be seen as the cause of their amoral behaviour? It seems not. What is (morally) wrong about the psychopathic way of making plans for the future, or selecting what is of importance and what is not, is their systematic exclusion of everything that is not directly beneficial to them. In other words, everything that matters in the world of psychopaths is what matters to them. All the rest, ‘the others’, can only serve, for psychopaths, as instruments to be used to reach their objectives, but they are of no concern per se. If Immanuel Kant warned, in his second formulation of the categorical imperative: ‘Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end’, indeed, psychopaths do exactly the opposite: the humanity of the other is ever only a means to achieve their own ends, and nothing more.

Hence, to again take into account the example of the psychopath not paying attention to his partner, the problem here is not (or not merely)

that the psychopath is unable to keep his attention high, both on his personal matters and on his partner, but that he really sees his partner as unimportant.³³ The psychopath seems unable to respect the ‘inner world of others’³⁴ for its own sake, to consider it as having its own importance and dignity, regardless of its connections with what matters to him. On the contrary, the tendency of the psychopath is that of seeing the inner world of others as depending on his own inner world and as mattering only because it can benefit him. Namely, what is different in the psychopathic perspective is that whilst the ‘normal person’ sees his inner world as encountering that of others under different forms: conflict, participation, association, love, for example (but as, in any case, important in its own sake), the psychopath assumes an egocentric kind of perspective in which his own inner world is the only one possible (or at least the only one that is of consequence) and the others are there merely to be used or else ignored. That is why the psychopath can be perfectly able to use what many psychologists call ‘cognitive empathy’ and to not only understand what other people think and feel, but to utilise this knowledge to deceive them or even persuade them to pursue his ends; however, he will not be able to feel ‘affective empathy’ for them, he will not truly suffer alongside them, nor for the same reasons, and in many cases he will be unable to be receptive and share their emotional perspectives.

It is thus the egocentric and egoistic closure towards others that characterises psychopaths best and explains their perceived amorality. Furthermore, this retreat into egotism, or, to express it in a better way, this inability to really open oneself to others, can be explained by the lack of affective empathy, which, as we have seen, is the key to reversing this situation and becoming part of a community of shared emotions, feelings, and ends.

However, there is a potentially destructive criticism that can be made regarding this reasoning, and it concerns the particular condition of those people with autism or Asperger’s syndrome. The condition these people have, in fact, could also be described as one of hiding inside oneself. Moreover, the well-known profound difficulties that these individuals

³³ Of course, I could have used the *topos* of the psychopath not feeling guilt, contrition, or regret for the death of the person he has killed, but morality does not always have to do with questions of life and death. As reiterated, morality is the silent ruler of every relationship within and between humans and between humans and other sentient beings.

³⁴ I call ‘inner world’ that series of emotions, feelings, thoughts, desires, interests, and more that characterise our inner life and our personal perspective of the world.

experience in interacting with others on an emotional level may also be explained by a lack of empathy. Hence, if we want to defend the view I have presented, we need to construe a convincing argument against such positions. I believe that such an argument can be found and over the following pages we are going to see the evidence for this.

10.3 EMPATHY AND AUTISM

The view that people with autism and Asperger's lack empathy is rather widespread. Jeanette Kennett,³⁵ for instance, is persuaded that an empathy deficit cannot be the cause of the typical moral shortcomings of the psychopath, since autistics also suffer from the same deficit. Nevertheless, autistics, as opposed to psychopaths, possess moral concern for others and even a sense of duty, which are both totally absent in psychopaths. There is thus no need to be able to put oneself in the shoes of another in order to be capable of moral agency to act morally, which suggests, for Kennett, that a rationalist ethics, such as that of Immanuel Kant, is substantiated by the (psychopathological) experience and must be preferred to the sentimentalist one of David Hume (or Adam Smith, for that matter). Autistics are able to act morally, because, like good Kantians (or at least like good rationalists), they adjust their behaviour following rules of a certain character. What is more, autistic persons:

[...] though lacking empathy, do seem capable of deep moral concerns. They are capable, as psychopaths are not, of the subjective realization that other people's interests are reason-giving in the same way as one's own, though they may have great difficulty in discerning what those interests are.³⁶

This fact certainly constitutes a significant challenge against the view defended in this book and, indeed, it has been expanded upon by many scholars, among whom we find Frédérique de Vignemont and Uta Frith, who have formulated what can be described as an 'autistic paradox' that proceeds as follows:³⁷

³⁵ See, for example, Kennett (2002).

³⁶ Kennett (2002, p. 354).

³⁷ De Vignemont and Frith (2007).

- (a) ‘Humean’ view: Empathy is the only source of morality.³⁸
- (b) People who have no empathy should have no morality.
- (c) People with autism show a lack of empathy.
- (d) People with autism show a sense of morality.

As we have seen, Kennett’s strategy to resolve the paradox is to reject statement (a). Other scholars, like Victoria McGeer, also dismiss (a), but, in addition, reject (b). McGeer, in fact, agrees with Kennett that autistic individuals lack empathy, but refuses to endorse a rationalist ethical account and contends, instead, that autistics can rely on many other affective states which can ground moral agency: for instance, the well-known autistic strong desire for order that underlies their concern with rule-following. Furthermore, she believes that people with autism have concerns that are absent in psychopaths, such as compassion for others or concern with one’s place in the social order.³⁹

Before going further with the analysis and seeing how it is possible (if it really is) to escape this paradox, it will be useful to say some words about autism. To clarify, I will focus on high-functioning autism spectrum disorders, in which there is little or no impairment in linguistic ability (though there may have been language delay) or IQ. So, from what are these kinds of autistics suffering? Generally, they are characterised by a severe social impairment and a limited capacity to engage in role-playing, as well as a marked repetitiveness of behaviour and extremely limited interests. Autistics are typically very uncomfortable in social situations and quite frequently confused by other people’s reactions. Especially after Simon Baron-Cohen’s seminal article *Does the Autistic Child Have a Theory of Mind?*,⁴⁰ there has been a growing consensus tracing back autistics’ difficulties in social negotiation and adjustment to a defective mindreading ability, that is, as we have seen, to the ability of predicting and attributing mental states to themselves and to others. This does not mean that autistics cannot develop a valid mindreading ability. In fact, they can learn to

³⁸As I have made clear in the course of the essay, I am not a Humean and I certainly do not support the view for which empathy is the sole source of morality (i.e. that empathy is both necessary and sufficient for morality, which, incidentally, even Hume did not venture to support). However, I think that empathy is an important element and a necessary component of our morality and, in this sense, Kennett’s argument (and this paradox) also apply to my view.

³⁹McGeer (2008).

⁴⁰Baron-Cohen (1985, 1995).

attribute and even predict mental states of others—although they habitually do that on the basis of a simple correlation between cues and outcomes—but such learning is usually imprecise and, more importantly, difficult to acquire.

Nevertheless, persons with autism usually report feeling bad when they are told that their behaviour was in some way hurtful and always think that hurt should be avoided where possible.⁴¹ Contrary to the vast majority of psychopaths, autistics are also able to distinguish moral from conventional violations and have physiological arousal responses to perceived distress in the same way ‘normal’ individuals do.⁴² Presumably, because of all that, autistics do not share the psychopathic proclivity to criminal and generally antisocial behaviour. However, their compromised ability in mindreading make them often unable to determine both when someone is in distress and what they should do in response to it. A fascinating record of what this means in practical terms comes from the famous neurologist Oliver Sacks, who reports the words of one of his high-functioning autistic patients, Jim Sinclair:

I have to develop a separate translation code for every person I meet. [...] Does it indicate an uncooperative attitude if someone doesn't understand information conveyed in a foreign language? Even if I can tell what the cues mean, I may not know what to do about them. The first time I ever realized someone needed to be touched was during an encounter with a grief-stricken, hysterically sobbing person who was in no condition to respond to my questions about what I should do to help. I could certainly tell he was upset. I could even figure out that there was *something* I could do that would be better than nothing. But I didn't know what that something was.⁴³

This quote is especially interesting, since it shows that when autistics fail to meet certain moral standards and show instead a morally inappropriate behaviour, they do it as a consequence of a failure to understand the moral valences of complex social situations, to adjust their response to the distress displayed by others, to react with the appropriate emotions, and more.⁴⁴ However—and this is crucial—this failure is not the product of an absent general concern for others. Autistics do *care* about others.

⁴¹ See Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2004, especially p. 169).

⁴² See James and Blair (1996, particularly p. 577).

⁴³ Quoted in Kennett (2002, p. 352). Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁴ See again James and Blair (1996, pp. 577ff).

Hence, we have the following situation at hand: psychopaths do not care about others, and this uncaring attitude, together with their cold and callous emotional reactions to fear, violence, harm, and other emotions, is the cause of their immoral behaviour. However, psychopaths do not, contrary to autistics, have any difficulty in mindreading: just the opposite, this is exactly what makes them such good manipulators, charmers, and con-men. They perfectly understand what other people are feeling, thinking, or doing, and even what reactions they are likely to have. Autistics, for their part, care about others, but they are not so good at mindreading. In fact, they may not understand what a person is feeling, and, when they do (even if only approximately, as in the previous example of Jim Sinclair), they usually do not know what to do in order to instantiate moral behaviour. Notice that this shifts the problem of morality to internalism. In fact, sometimes, the behaviour instantiated by a psychopath can seem *prima facie* more morally fitting than that of an autistic and have better results in the praxis (the other person may feel themselves understood, valued, and taken care of), nonetheless, we would not be ready to call a psychopath a morally good person only because he was able to achieve this outcome. Why so? Simply, because his intentions are not good. Nonetheless, what does it mean that his intentions are not good? What is implied by that? Looking at the previous description, it is now easy to answer: because psychopaths do not act from a caring perspective; a perspective that is, at the opposite end, embraced by autistics. In other words, autistics are capable of acting under the motive of altruism, to ultimately benefit others and not themselves, whereas psychopaths are not capable of assuming the point of view of a caring and altruist person. Quoting Andrea Sangiovanni on this issue:

[...] there is no sense in which autistics are left [contrary to psychopaths, ed.] entirely ‘cold’ to the responses of others. Quite on the contrary, they often care very much what others think, and why they are thinking it; what makes them anxious and clumsy in their responses is, first, others’ perceived opacity and unpredictability and, second, the perceived indeterminacy and malleability of social rules and conventions, whose application, of course, varies quite significantly (and to autistics, often unintelligibly) according to context and circumstance. We might say that where psychopaths are morally blind, autistics are merely short-sighted.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Sangiovanni (2014, p. 51).

Psychopaths are morally blind, because they are unable to see the others from the perspective of someone caring: they can only see others from the perspective of someone that wants an immediate profit and the satisfaction of his own machinations.⁴⁶ Autistics, on the contrary, are morally short-sighted, because they can see others from a caring perspective and can also glimpse where good and bad exist, but are often unable to see what should be done in order to realise what is good and avoid what is bad. They see social relationships and human emotional reactions as a complex puzzle that they find extremely challenging to solve, therefore they can *do* wrong without *meaning* any wrong.

Now that we have seen that autistics lack something and that this deficit is responsible for their ‘moral short-sightedness’, it is time to answer the fundamental question: what capacity, what faculty or disposition do autistics lack that diminishes their moral sight and makes them unable, at times, to see or respond appropriately to moral reasons? Are scholars like Kennett, and, in some sense, McGeer, correct when they assert that autistics have an empathy deficit (or even empathy absence)? The answer is: partially. In fact, both psychopaths and autistics lack empathy in some sense, but they lack different kinds of it. More precisely, psychopaths are capable of cognitive empathy, but unable to feel affective empathy, whereas autistics are exactly the opposite: they are able to feel affective empathy but have a very deficient cognitive empathy. Evidence of that is the fact that whereas psychopaths—as reiterated—have no difficulties in attributing and predicting other people’s mental states, they are usually left cold by these people’s emotional reactions. On the other hand, autistics find it very difficult to understand and foresee others’ mental states, but this does not mean that they remain unmoved by others’ affective feedback. Indeed, many researchers think that autistics are capable of affective empathy, even if they are severely impaired in mindreading.⁴⁷ For instance, autistics do have people whose company they enjoy more and, also, others they are not happy to see. Further, autistics can even have ‘love relationships’ and be a couple (even though these relationships are, of course, different from

⁴⁶ Cfr. also Elliott (1992, p. 210) on this matter: ‘it should be uncontroversial to say that a person [the psychopath, ed.] with little capacity to feel attachments will be blind to a part of life which for most of us attaches very closely to our moral commitments’ and ‘His [of the psychopath, ed.] conception of others appears incomplete; other people are less “real”. The psychopath seems [...] *unable to see things through the eyes of others and thus unable to see why the interests of others matter.*’ Emphasis is mine.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Dziobek et al. (2008).

those you and I can have) and they are usually sad to know that someone they like is suffering. However, as we have made clear earlier in the book, although the division between cognitive and affective empathy can be very useful at the level of heuristic and epistemological analysis, it is rarely so clear in the praxis, and, what is more, profound influences on one of the two empathic dimensions have substantial repercussions on the other. Therefore, some scholars, like Hobson and Hobson,⁴⁸ draw on various studies to argue that since deficits in cognitive empathy make it difficult for autistics to understand the mental states of others and even experience them as individuals with minds in the first place, the depth, range, and the likelihood of their affective reactions to the feelings, thoughts, and situations of others will be undoubtedly limited, which they are. No one would deny that autistics have affective reactions that do not meet the range, depth, and similarity of those felt by non-autistic subjects. Cognitive and affective empathy are, consequently, deeply connected phenomena. However, this does not help us to solve the problem: what do autistics lack and how can this influence their moral perception and moral agency? To answer these questions, we have to complicate the matter slightly. This puzzle can indeed be solved only on the condition that we have all the pieces, even if this means increasing the complexity of the puzzle itself.

The fact is that not all people with autism have the same difficulty in experiencing empathy (be it cognitive or affective). For instance, Brewer and Murphy⁴⁹ report that many autistics say they experience typical or even excessive empathy at times. As a matter of fact, one of the subjects they studied was able to describe in detail his intense empathic reaction to his sister's distress at a family funeral, and he was not an isolated case. Nevertheless, other autistic individuals agreed that feeling empathy and understanding others' emotions is difficult for them. A way to explain this discrepancy is to admit that people with autism are not all the same and to introduce another concept, that of *alexithymia*. Alexithymia is, in a few words, a condition characterised by a difficulty in identifying and understanding one's own and others' emotions,⁵⁰ which is exactly the kind of deficit usually attributed to autists. People with alexithymia might suspect they are experiencing an emotion, but are unsure about which emotion it is, and, at the same time, might know that the other is feeling a certain

⁴⁸ See Hobson and Hobson (2014).

⁴⁹ Brewer and Murphy (2016).

⁵⁰ Sifneos (1973), Brewer and Murphy (2016) and Patil et al. (2016).

emotion, but ignore that emotion. Interestingly, whilst alexithymia has been observed to be present (in different degrees) in about 10% of the population at large, this percentage climbs quite remarkably in the case of autists, who are associated with it in a range of 40% to 65%.⁵¹ This means that, approximately, one out of two autistics suffers from alexithymia.

The question arises: can alexithymia explain why some individuals with autism have difficulties with emotions and others do not? The answer to this question can only come from a cross-sectional study, which is exactly what Brewer and Murphy did, by analysing four groups of subjects: individuals with autism and alexithymia; individuals with autism but not alexithymia; individuals with alexithymia but not autism; and individuals with neither autism nor alexithymia. The results of this study are of fundamental importance for any scholar who tends to draw the all-too-familiar conclusion that autists generally have an absent, or at least critically impaired, empathy. In fact, it was observed that subjects with autism but not alexithymia showed typical levels of empathy, whereas individuals with alexithymia (regardless of whether they have autism or not) were less empathic. Thus, it seems that autism is not associated with a lack of empathy, but alexithymia is.

Is alexithymia also associated with a deficient morality? Are alexithymic people, for instance, less prone to help others or to care for them? Not really. Indeed, people with alexithymia were observed to feel even more distress in response to witnessing the pain of others than did those subjects without alexithymia.⁵² The fact is that they have difficulty in witnessing it, but when they do, they seem to express a marked presence of care about others and about their feelings. After all this, it is important to remember that the lack of cognitive empathy seems not so much a characteristic condition of autism per se, but of alexithymia. This can possibly present a significant problem, since the vast majority of the studies on autism conducted so far do not take this difference into consideration, which eventually makes it difficult to deduce the kind of deficit that is the product of autism as opposed to that of alexithymia.

Thus, for instance, Zalla et al.⁵³ tested the ability of a group of autistics to distinguish between moral and conventional rules, using a list of typical such rules, together with some examples of disgust violations stemming

⁵¹ See Brewer and Murphy (2016) and Patil et al. (2016).

⁵² Brewer and Murphy (2016).

⁵³ Zalla et al. (2011).

from Nichols' book *Sentimental Rules*.⁵⁴ What they found was quite interesting: in fact, whilst normal individuals considered both moral and disgust violations as authority-independent but were able nonetheless to distinguish between the two, people with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) did not. Furthermore, other studies have shown that autistics tend to judge unintended harms to be as bad as deliberate harms, in all probability because of their insensitivity to agents' intentions caused as a result of their deficit in empathy.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, here is exactly the problem: is the ability to put themselves in other people's shoes (the lack of which almost certainly explains these results) typical of autistics *simpliciter* or of people with alexithymia? At this stage of research, it is perhaps impossible to give a clear answer to this question. However, the analysis of subjects with ASD has served to highlight the importance of empathy (both cognitive and affective) for a morality that should not be blind (as in the case of psychopaths) but also not short-sighted (even if basically functioning, as in autistics). Using the words of Zalla et al.:

We argue that while the affective component of the empathy is sufficient to distinguish affect-backed from affect-neutral norms, an intact cognitive empathy, which is specifically involved in moral appraisal, is required to distinguish moral from disgust violations.⁵⁶

Hence, though it is undeniable that autistics do not share the same amorality displayed by psychopaths and though they certainly care about others and have an understanding of moral and social norms, their deficits in cognitive empathy have a negative influence on different moral dimensions, such as moral agency, moral development, or moral perception.⁵⁷

This means that although the empirical evidence regarding psychopathy and autism is controversial (and for that matter we should suspect the works by scholars who think that 'the case of psychopaths' or 'the case of autists' unequivocally supports one precise view on empathy) it seems plausible that while members of both empathy-deficient populations may be able to distinguish between moral and conventional violations in at

⁵⁴ Nichols (2004).

⁵⁵ Moran et al. (2011) and Buon et al. (2013).

⁵⁶ Zalla et al. (2011, p. 123).

⁵⁷ Notice that even if the impairment in cognitive empathy were caused by alexithymia and not my autism, the conclusions we have drawn would still hold: people low in empathy (be it cognitive or affective) show, in several different aspects, a deficient morality.

least some cases, they have a poor grasp of the grounds for authority-independent rules for blaming people.⁵⁸ If I am right in this conclusion, then empathy is, continuing our analogy with sight, our *moral eye*. It is the organ that is responsible for the ability to see or to respond to moral reasons and a deficit of it corresponds, as we have seen, to a deficit in morality. In particular, this hypothesis would predict that people with a deficit of empathy, regardless of their reasoning capacity, would be poor at making moral judgements when moral perception or insight is needed, and they would show a marked inability to act morally: in the case of psychopaths, due to a lack of moral motivation (they are not interested in acting in a moral way) and in that of autistics, when the rules they have learnt from others do not yield a clear answer or yield answers that conflict with one another.⁵⁹ To the best of my knowledge, this is an hypothesis that still remains to be proved by some form of psychological study. As we have seen, however, there are good indications that it might be true.

Until now, I hope to have shown with enough clarity that empathy is in fact necessary for moral education. Indeed, populations with a deficit in empathy, such as psychopaths and autistics, have (to different degrees and for different motives) problems with the instantiation of moral behaviour, the acquiring of moral insight or perception, and the development of moral habits. Nevertheless, there is still one issue that deserves our attention: how can moral education or development occur? We have already talked about the inductive discipline method of Martin Hoffman and seen the less conspicuous, but still central role that empathy can play (and indeed plays) even in the imitative method of Jesse Prinz; now it is time to examine how empathy can enhance a caring perspective and, consequently, moral agency.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ See McGeer (2008) and Shoemaker (2011, 2015).

⁵⁹ See also Kauppinen (2017, p. 223).

⁶⁰ It is worth mentioning that I am not a care-ethicist and that the following chapter, along with the whole book, should not be considered a work about care-ethics. In fact, I have explicitly desisted from talking at length about the ethics of care or to use their arguments, since I had the intention to make this work appealing, not just to care ethicists, but to any moral philosopher (and possibly any psychologist) who does not sustain a preemptive formulaic approach to right action in morality (such as the instantiation of one normative principle), and believes, instead, in the centrality of emotions in ethics and in an embodied, relational, particularistic, and contextual morality.

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Empathy and the Acquiring of a Caring Perspective

As I said in the previous footnote, it is not my intention to defend a straightforward care-ethicist approach to morality, however, I think that care ethicists have contributed to the emergence and the consequent examination of some facets of morality that have been disregarded for far too long in the sphere of moral philosophy. One example is the fact that traditional ethics, such as deontological and teleological ethics, have not taken the context of moral subjects into account. The way in which traditional moral philosophers have conceived ethical theories is almost solely compatible with the model of a socially privileged, independent, and able-bodied male, capable of making isolated transactions in the world. The problem is that this kind of experience is not shared by women and by other marginalised subjects, who have a different conception of what moral agency really means. So, whilst utilitarian and Kantian ethics attempt to answer the question ‘what is the right thing to do?’ irrespective of the individuals and the context, care ethics have had the distinction of highlighting the importance of *responsiveness*.¹ Since ethics is conceived here as relational, as dealing with subjects interacting with each other, the knowledge of what is good and bad is generated, beyond various guiding principles, by attentiveness and openness to the other. Hence, the moral concern is always addressed to the other, not to any particular action abstracted from the (relational) context.²

¹Held (2006, p. 83).

²Hamington (2017, p. 265).

For these reasons, care ethics deserve credit from all moral philosophers and psychologists who value the emotional role in moral deliberation and believe that the assumption of a caring perspective is of central importance to moral agency, moral perception, moral development and education, and moral motivation. Since care is a transversal notion and an integral part of our idea of morality, I think that analysing the connection between empathy and care, and, especially, between empathy and the development of a caring perspective, will be a worthy complement to the section about empathy and moral development and education.

It may be surprising to learn that the (arguably) most famous, influential, and prolific care ethicist of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Nel Noddings, was rather reluctant to use the term empathy, especially in her early works. However, I do not think that this constitutes an outright rejection on her part. In fact, the reasons for her early distrust of the term are plausibly to be found in a form of extreme prudence. Assuming that empathy involves something like the projection of the empathiser (in Noddings' framework 'the carer') onto the target ('the one cared for'), there is the risk that this model becomes overly one-sided, and in this sense, an expression of a merely masculine way to see how 'feeling with' works and in general the approach we use to relate to others.³ However, as we have seen, the way we have described empathy and its functioning can very much agree with Noddings' emphasis on an ongoing responsive interaction between the caregiver and the one cared for as being crucial for the instantiation of moral acts. Indeed, the mechanism of projection or perspective-taking is just one among several other methods that can be employed to empathise with others; it is not the only possible one. Instead, our discourse regarding empathy as a result of openness to the other, of being receptive towards the other, is in line with Noddings' arguments. Take, for instance, this passage:

In a phenomenological analysis of caring, it becomes clear that the consciousness of carers, in moments of care, is characterized by two features. First, there is a special form of attentiveness, which I have called engrossment. Second, there is a motivational shift; the motivational energy of the carer begins to flow toward the needs of the cared-for.⁴

³This is not the only difficulty Noddings finds in the concept of empathy. For further criticisms see Noddings (2010).

⁴Noddings (2002, p. 28).

According to this description, caring is constituted by the employment of two capacities: on the one side, the endeavour to understand and, in a certain sense, to feel the needs, interests, desires of another person (the ‘engrossment’), and on the other, the prosocial caring reaction (which, as we have seen, is often defined in the literature as ‘sympathy’ or ‘compassion’).⁵ This is interesting, in fact, if we leave aside the rather peculiar name of ‘engrossment’ given by Noddings, we could state that the caring process is ultimately a form of ‘compassionate empathy’ or something similar. It seems, in fact, to be constituted by empathy plus compassion. I think this is a correct conclusion and I believe that even Noddings could hardly deny that. Nevertheless, this would also be uninteresting: indeed, it seems obvious that if A empathises with B and even feels compassion for B, then, in a certain sense, A cares for B. What would really be interesting is to discover how empathy can (if it can) lead to caring. In fact, this is exactly what we are going to attempt.

Caring is a kind of perspective that only older children can assume (at least, at a conscious level). This presupposes that the caring subject is concerned about someone or something and wishes them well. As an Italian, I venture to say that the caring perspective can be perfectly incarnated by a very common Italian expression of affection which is: *ti voglio bene*. *Ti voglio bene* is less strong than *ti amo* (i.e. ‘I love you’), which is only used for romantic partners, and for this reason it is normally employed to express attachment to people such as relatives and friends. It literally means ‘I want your good’ and conveys a double message: on the one hand, the person using it is telling the other that they positively wish the other well, that they want the other to farewell, and voices in this sense a kind of *wish*; on the other hand, the person who says it is making a clear *statement* that everything they want for the other is for them to be good and to do well. In this sense, it is something stronger than a mere wish. The person who *vuole bene* (‘wants well’) is also stating, indirectly, that they would never do something bad to the other (at least, not intentionally) and that they would actively undertake actions that would lead the other to do well and be good. In fact, when we say that we *want* something—as opposed to when we hope, look forward, or ‘would like to’—we are not merely expressing a hope, rather, we are confessing that we are very interested in something and that we are going to do what is in our power to acquire it. Notice also

⁵ See, in addition to the already cited research by Klimecki and Singer, Darwall (1998, p. 261): ‘Sympathy [...] is felt as from the perspective of “one-caring.”’

that this perspective, the fact of *volere bene*, does not mean that the one who expresses it should do everything the other person wants. In fact, we could *volere bene* to someone we believe is in the wrong, and then our duty, if we really care about them, would be to help them reform. Hence, the caring perspective implies not only a general concern about another and about their welfare, but also the motivation to do something in order to help them; a conclusion that seem to be shared by all care ethicists.

However, there might be a problem with all of this. If it seems natural (or at least understandable) to care about our family, our friends, or perhaps our dearest colleagues, it seems not so compelling to develop a caring perspective for people we do not know, or, what is worse, for people we find disagreeable or unlikable for some reason: a political opponent, a hypercritical colleague, for example. Granted, this is an issue that should not be overlooked, but this also does not pose an impossible problem to solve either. There are at least two ways in which we can develop our empathy (and, with that, a caring perspective), so as to act as a type of antidote to our biases⁶: one will be discussed here, whereas the other will be explored in the section on empathy and moral motivation.

To understand the link between empathy and caring it is imperative to highlight how empathy and caring are both connected to the concepts of *knowledge* and *inquiry*. Indeed, it is obvious that we cannot truly care for subjects we ignore. Ignorance is such an impediment to real care that the act of ‘ignoring’ someone or something has become synonymous with ‘not caring’ about that someone or that something. Hence, caring presupposes by its very essence a form of knowledge, and in order to really get to know a certain subject, we have to investigate carefully (which, in turn, requires an engagement on our part). This appears sound, thus far. The problem with this simple scheme, however, is its one-sidedness. In fact, the conceptual chain, no doubt, can go from inquiry, to knowledge, to caring, but it can also work in reverse: we can interest ourselves and seek

⁶Notice that I talk about biases, which is about prejudices and not about judgements on the whole. In fact, I may have an uncaring attitude about something (e.g. a political question) that is not the result of a superficial *prejudgement* on my side, but is in reality the opposite: the product of a well-grounded justified judgement, the outcome of a serious reflection. In this sense, the refinement or further development of my empathic capacities might not bring about a change in my perspective and this might not be a bad thing at all. Indeed, the role empathy can play in this field is perfectly heuristic: it permits us to gather further and richer information, to widen our horizons, but that is all. Judgement (as we have seen in the section dedicated to it) should not be grounded solely in empathy.

information about someone or something and thereby widen our knowledge because we care about them or it. For instance, I might care about environment because I work for Greenpeace and, consequently, have a deep knowledge of the way climate change is endangering the survival of numerous animal and floral species on the planet, or, on the other hand, I might also start to gather information about the impact of climate change due to an initially shallow, vague interest in nature and wildlife and then become concerned about these issues.

It is important to highlight this double-sided process because it is the same one that characterises empathy. We have seen, in fact, that it is easier to develop empathy for people we know,⁷ but we have also asserted that empathy can play a major role in terms of widening our epistemic and moral perception and in information-gathering. Empathy can make visible features of a situation that would otherwise remain invisible. As is easy to see, this can naturally lead us to care about something that we have initially ignored by making that something perceivable to the empathiser. This Janus-like process that can flow from knowledge or inquiry to empathy and caring, but also the reverse, can *prima facie* seem problematic. How is it possible to solve this contradiction? My answer is that we cannot and we should not, even if we could. The analysis of this process has shown that the line that connects knowledge with empathy (or care) is not a straight one, but a circular one. We can know X and because we are aware of their condition we can empathise with them and/or care about them; in turn, the empathy and/or the care we have for X can enlarge our comprehension and our knowledge of X's condition, which can again boost our empathy, and so forth. For this reason, whilst I agree with Hamington (2017) when he says that empathy is a necessary but insufficient condition for care, I am nonetheless more inclined than him to highlight the potential of empathy in this context. In fact, even though empathy is not sufficient for care per se, it is, nevertheless, essential for its development. However, let us proceed systematically.

Hamington, following Noddings, defines care as 'an action taken that promotes the growth and flourishing of another'⁸ and adds that: 'Empathy

⁷Indeed, this is one of the motives explaining the parochial drift of empathy emphasised by anti-empathists.

⁸Hamington (2017, p. 269).

can be experienced without being motivated to act.⁹ There are several motives for which we can choose not to act, but it is especially the link between inquiry and empathy that Hamington sees as crucial for the undertaking (or not) of the caring action. Hamington sees as a problem the fact that the causal chain is complicated by a nonlinear relationship existing between inquiry, empathy, and action. Indeed, without sufficient inquiry, empathy can—so Hamington claims—lead to an inadequate or misguided caring action: ‘In such cases, my empathy does not run deep and my understanding is superficial and it would have been better had I not acted at all.’¹⁰ To get an idea of what he meant by that, we can briefly analyse his example:

[...] if I see a colleague crying and I offer them a tissue and tell them they should go home and take care of themselves, the gesture is superficial and minimal and possibly aimed at assuaging my discomfort with the display of emotion. [...] Had I engaged in greater inquiry, [...] I might have learned something that would have led to an action experienced as deeper caring by the person crying.¹¹

Indeed, we make these decisions on many different occasions. Sometimes we feel we are just too stressed, busy, or tired to offer the help others need, and this inevitably impacts negatively on our caring capacities. However, I disagree with Hamington in considering this example as emblematic in indicating the limits of empathy for the improvement of caring. In fact, exactly like the act carried out, the empathy felt in this case is also ‘superficial and minimal’. The very fact that Hamington deems the action as ‘aimed at assuaging my discomfort’ is an indication that what we feel when we behave like this is closer to personal distress than to genuine empathy. Hence, the only point that this example manages to make evident is that when we empathise in a superficial, mediocre way, there is a high chance of not developing a genuine care for others and possibly feeling vicarious or personal distress instead of empathy. However, this is certainly not the kind of empathy that should be encouraged, nor the one that I maintain can play a crucial role for the acquiring of a caring perspective. The type of empathy I defend requires exactly those elements which are excluded here: time, effort, and risk. If we want empathy to become a habit, then we cannot

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.

conceive of it as a phenomenon that might happen or not, that is, as something contingent, but as a perspective, a point of view that is possible to acquire and over which we can exert a certain control.¹²

11.1 EMPATHY AND RECEPTIVITY

I have expressed more than once my scepticism about the idea of grounding an ethics in empathy and have distanced myself from philosophers who support this position, such as Michael Slote. However, I have to acknowledge that Slote is the philosopher who perhaps best describes what I mean with ‘assuming an empathic perspective’, and he does it by linking empathy with what he calls the ‘virtue of receptivity’. Unfortunately, although receptivity is the key concept of an entire book written by him—I am speaking here of his *From Enlightenment to Receptivity*¹³—and appears countless times in this work, I was not able to find any clear definition of this term. It is said that receptivity is a virtue, that it is a concept that was almost totally neglected in the history of Western philosophy, and that should be rediscovered, nevertheless—and rather stunningly—I struggled to find a clear-cut definition of this notion. Furthermore, it seems to me that Slote shifts numerous times in the book from the concept of receptivity, to those of openness, empathy, and sympathy. Sometimes he seems to use them interchangeably, whilst other times he appears to want to treat them as different, separate concepts. For example, on pages 34 and 35 of the book, a clear distinction is to be found between the phenomena of empathy and that of sympathy, for the reason—so Slote asserts—that empathy involves receptivity, whereas sympathy does not. Then, to the contrary, on page 44 Slote says that openness and objectivity ‘require one to have or to be able to acquire a certain degree or amount of sympathy’. Later, at least from page 172 onwards, he uses—so it seems—the notions of receptivity and openness rather interchangeably.

However, having read the book in detail, I think it is possible to make several assertions that well summarise—so I hope—Slote’s position.

¹²I am not implying that empathy is *always* under our control, but that it can be. There will always be times in which empathy will arise spontaneously, but I contend that the more we are skilled to assume an empathic perspective, the more we will be able to control the effects of empathy, for we will not be taken by surprise.

¹³Slote (2013).

First, receptivity is a necessary precondition for care, possibly of sympathy, and certainly of empathy, and almost totally identifies with the last one. Second, receptivity can be portrayed as a perspective of openness, open-mindedness and almost, I would say, of approachability towards the other. The receptive person is not hostile, not reticent nor closed-minded, but open to what the other thinks, feels, says, and so on. In this sense, a person who is receptive is in the best position to care about others and, consequently, help them, because this kind of persons are, by definition, free of prejudices. The only prejudice this person has—we might say, using a play on words—is that of not having prejudices. This, of course, does not mean that the receptive subject is ‘by nature’ and, to the same extent, open to any kind of idea presented by others, but that they always try to see another’s point of view as well as their ideas and arguments ‘in the favourable light in which he or she views them’,¹⁴ even when they do not agree with them. In practical terms, this entails that the receptive or empathic subject feels, however mildly, a slight emotion of enjoying approval, since we can only regard favourably something that we approve of, that is, something towards which we are favourably inclined.¹⁵ In Slote’s words: ‘being intellectually/epistemically rational and objective really does require having certain emotions (and likewise certain feelings)’.¹⁶ Notice that receptive empathy does not necessarily require you to radically change your opinion about something, but only to make—so to speak—a temporary deviation from your way of seeing things. It requires more than a simple *epoché*, because you need not only to temporarily abandon your position, but also to change your mind for a moment.¹⁷ Further, and more importantly, (receptive)

¹⁴ Slote (2013, p. 14).

¹⁵ See Slote (2013), pp. 14, 44, 48, and note 12 at p. 60.

¹⁶ Slote (2013, p. 48).

¹⁷ That is why I do not agree with Slote when he sees receptive empathy as something fundamentally different from what he refers to as ‘projective empathy’. Of course, I do not wish to deny that they are two phenomenologically distinct phenomena, nevertheless, stepping into the shoes of the other would be a very useful thing to do in order to see certain matters in the same light that the other sees them. However, I think that Slote, as the good care-ethicist he is, might see in this possibility the same difficulty Noddings saw, that is the fact that ‘stepping into the other’ could be considered as a somewhat unjust invasion, perhaps even a more abstract simulacrum of the fetishised concept of ‘penetration’ of a toxically masculine flavour. Now, I will not discuss to what extent this conclusion can be justified. Instead, I would like to mention the fact that this kind of reasoning risks being overly metaphysically normative and even dogmatic. I believe that in real-life scenarios it is very difficult to tell to what extent we have employed a purely ‘passive method’ grounded in receptivity and a more active one based on ‘projection’. Very often we use a mixed approach that involves the two together.

empathy does not require that you end up agreeing with the other. After having worn the other's shoes for a while, you can always return to yours, but with the awareness of having taken the necessary step towards being truly objective and unbiased towards the other.

On the other hand, imagine you have to empathise with a person whose beliefs are radically different from yours. Moreover, envisage, for instance, a need to empathise with those whose opinions repel you, such as individuals who are profoundly racist, or misogynist, or similar. Would you really be able to see their opinions in the same favourable light in which they see them? To feel—although temporarily—an emotion of approbation? In my opinion, this would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. For this reason, I think that Slote requires too much from empathy and receptivity, namely, a positive feeling of approbation. This feeling seems to have more to do with sympathy than with empathy. We have seen several times in this book how sympathy is often described as being very similar to (when not overlapping with) compassion.¹⁸ This is also the position of Slote, who, on page 34 of his book, asserts:

Thus empathy in its most paradigmatic examples involves having the feelings of another involuntarily aroused in ourselves, as when we see another person in pain. It is as if the person's pain invades us [...] However, we can also feel sorry for, bad for the person who is in pain and positively wish them well. This amounts, as we say, to sympathy for them, and it can happen even if we aren't "feeling their pain."¹⁹

Nevertheless, there exists another meaning of 'sympathy', which is very much widespread, even among laypersons, and that characterises sympathy but not compassion. For this reason, I would not take compassion and sympathy for synonyms and would prefer to assign a rather sharp difference between them. Doing so I do not want to directly criticise the authors who use them interchangeably, but I am of the opinion that, by equating them, we run the risk of losing important distinct features and to deprive the semantic field of the two concepts. In general, compassion seems to imply a stronger feeling of care, concern, and suffering (for the targeted

¹⁸ Remember Darwall (1998, p. 261).

¹⁹ Slote (2013, p. 34).

person) than sympathy.²⁰ Also, compassion is specific for negative situations. We cannot feel compassion for someone who fares well, such as someone who has just won the lottery. However, we can sympathise with them if we know, for example, that this person was poor and that this payout would help them provide for their children's studies. We can, in other words, sympathise with people in positive situations and we can have a general sympathetic attitude with people or groups of people whom we love, like, or support (our partner, our friends, our favourite football team, for example). Finally, according to the concept of sympathy I am advocating, we cannot sympathise with people we do not like, with people we despise, or those we find morally blameworthy. We may empathise with a criminal who is facing a fair trial, we might even have compassion for them, but if we learn that they indeed deserved the punishment awarded for this crime, we would not sympathise with them. Therefore, I would define sympathy as an emotional attitude of affinity and support we feel for subjects we are concerned with, in light of their being individuals towards whom we are positive inclined. Also, very much like compassion, sympathy normally involves a motivational push, meaning that if able to help, the sympathetic person will probably help, depending on how much they are ready to sacrifice.

Having made this point, I think it is rather easy to notice that when Slote asserts that empathy and receptivity are essential for objectivity, he is actually talking about what I call sympathy. In fact, it is under circumstances when we sympathise with someone that we can see their opinions in the same favourable light and approve of them. Think of what you really mean when you utter the sentence, for instance: 'I sympathise with this view'. It is in those cases that we are effectively expressing a positive feeling of approbation, but they are not to be conflated with cases in which we empathise with others. Empathy for other points of view can occur in the absence—so I claim—of any 'positive feeling of approbation'. Further, it can coexist even with disapprobation. Again, examine your own intuitions and think of when you utter sentences, such as: 'I understand why you have this opinion and I can empathise with your feelings at the moment. Nonetheless, I think you're wrong.'

²⁰ See also Nussbaum (2001, p. 302): 'If there is any difference between "sympathy" and "compassion" in contemporary usage, it is perhaps that "compassion" seems more intense and suggests a greater degree of suffering, both on the part of the afflicted person and on the part of the person having the emotion.'

The problem with Slote's argument is that he appears to be equating 'openness' with 'welcoming', which means that he seems to ignore that there is a perhaps slight, but surely extremely important difference between being open towards the point of view of another, and welcoming this point of view (i.e. approving of it). Empathy only requires the first attitude, not the second. It requires to be open and receptive and, what is more, it requires one to investigate the other, in order to attain the most accurate representation of the other's thoughts and feelings. Only then is true empathy (not necessarily sympathy) possible.

11.2 THE 'CIRCULARITY' OF EMPATHY

To really understand what the concept of empathy I am defending implies and requires from us, perhaps nothing would be better than reading the following words by Leslie Jamison. Jamison is not a philosopher, nor a psychologist, and probably this is the reason why she was so able to perfectly describe what empathy entails without resorting to standard definitions, psychological evaluations and questionnaires, and other similar sources. She is a young novelist who had the opportunity of working as a 'medical actor'. In summary, she had to act as if she had some kind of disease, in order to test the skills and the empathy of young doctors (who visited her as a normal patient). In the first chapter of her book, *The Empathy Exams*, she describes the phenomenon of empathy thus:

[...] empathy is always perched precariously between gift and invasion. [...] Empathy isn't just remembering to say *that must really be hard*—it's figuring out how to bring difficulty into the light so it can be seen at all. Empathy isn't just listening, it's asking the questions whose answers need to be listened to. Empathy requires inquiry as much as imagination. Empathy requires knowing you know nothing. Empathy means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see [...] Empathy means realizing no trauma has discrete edges. Trauma bleeds. Out of wounds and across boundaries. Sadness becomes a seizure. Empathy demands another kind of porousness in response. [...] Empathy comes from the Greek *empathēia*—*em* (into) and *pathos* (feeling)—a penetration, a kind of travel. It suggests you enter another person's pain as you'd enter another country, through immigration and

customs, border crossing by way of query: *What grows where you are? What are the laws? What animals graze there?*²¹

This quote is so dense in meaning that it deserves some unpacking. Interestingly, it is also rather circular; in fact, it offers, at the end, the instruments that permit one to understand what was meant in the first sentence. It is said at the beginning that empathy is always perched precariously between gift and invasion. Why so? Empathy—my interpretation of Jamison’s words—is fundamentally a gift, for many different reasons (some of which are mentioned in the citation itself). It is a gift for us, because it allows us to understand others by encouraging us to ‘ask the right questions’ and necessitates that we use our inquiry and imagination, thereby improving our cognitive and sensitive abilities. Additionally, of course, it is a gift for others, for the very good reason that the person who feels the empathy of others feels themselves understood and on the same wavelength as the other. This is always a pleasant experience. However, empathy can also be an invasion, because often the ‘questions whose answers need to be listened to’ are precisely the awkward, uncomfortable ones, and because there is always the danger that the empathiser enters too far into the intimacy and the privacy of another, thereby passing from being an ‘explorer’ to being an ‘invader’, from ‘observer’ to ‘stalker’. Notice, however, that Leslie Jamison does not share the same doubts, the same hesitations about empathy that some care ethicists, such as Nel Noddings, share. The ‘penetration’ intrinsic in the etymology of empathy can become an invasion, but it is essentially intended as a ‘travel’. It is not a violent conquest, but a discreet and respectful journey led by, so to say, a ‘healthy curiosity’—if not sheer *care*—for others.

There is then another issue mentioned by Jamison that deserves our attention and this is the relation between empathy and knowledge or inquiry, which we have discussed earlier on previous pages. Empathy is inherently Socratic: it requires knowing that we know nothing, and since we know nothing, it requires imagination sustained by inquiry. In this sense, empathy is a way of gathering information that needs to be supported by as much information as possible, showing once again that the circle is the form which marks it. Also, exactly like in the Socratic maieutics, the information about others we are seeking by means of empathy is already present: it merely needs to be noticed. Consequently, how can one

²¹ Jamison (2014, pp. 4–5). Emphasis in the original.

detect it? The answer to this question is also twofold. On the one hand, it needs—as previously stated—unbiased inquiry: ‘Empathy—according to Jamison—it’s figuring out how to bring difficulty into the light so it can be seen at all.’ On the other hand, since ‘Empathy means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see’—which infers that something like ‘perfect’ or ‘total’ empathy simply cannot exist, that the entire contextual horizon can never be embraced by our gaze—and since no emotion²² has discrete edges, empathy requires *porousness*. Notice that ‘porousness’ is nothing but the same concept of receptivity/vulnerability I have highlighted several times in previous sections, only this time with a more physical and embodied taste in order to maintain the idea of corporeity evoked by the fitting metaphors about wounds, seizures, and bleedings. It has, moreover, the not negligible virtue of attesting adequately to the ‘passive side’ of empathy. It indicates that empathy is not always a question of projection into the other, that is, of ‘perspective-taking’, but of ‘perspective-receiving’. The word ‘porousness’ suggests in fact that we should behave as a type of sponge and become imbibed or even soaked by the inner world of other.²³ The world of others is indeed already there, ready to be perceived by means of empathy; it is not pure interiority, but present in the common *Mitwelt*.

Hence, empathy has a more ‘passive’ and a more ‘active’ side, the former describing an attitude of openness, receptivity, porousness, and similar towards others, and the latter portraying, instead, an attitude of inquiry, information-gathering, and perspective-taking. However, the two are rarely used separately: most of the time they are used in conjunction, and, furthermore, both have the same relationship between knowledge or inquiry, on the one hand, and caring, on the other. Consider, for example, a person who consciously assumes an empathic attitude towards others. We can affirm with a clear probability that such a person will act this way out of a more general caring attitude or, at least, with the intention of

²² Leslie Jamison speaks of trauma and sadness, but what she says on this matter can be extended to any other emotion, as anyone who has a normal emotional life would confirm.

²³ A world that, as the phenomenological tradition teaches, is never really enclosed in the others’ selves, but constantly ‘pours out’ and ‘spills’ in the exterior, ready to become *shared world*.

being caring and altruistic towards others.²⁴ This is, in fact, one of the most common reasons for choosing to develop and assume such a perspective. Take, then, the case of a person who is naturally extremely empathic, but does not consciously assume this perspective. A person, that is, for whom empathy simply occurs. Both these people, because of empathy for others, will feel, in certain situations, a measure of duty to help, but in a different sense from the Kantian-like duty (which, as philosophers know well, is accomplished out of respect for the categorical imperative). Here, ‘duty’ expresses almost a compulsion, that is, the fact that the empathic person will feel compelled to act. Noddings once wrote that: ‘[...] the caring person, one who is in this way prepared to care, dreads the proximate stranger, for she cannot easily reject the claim he has on her’.²⁵ Now it is possible to specify that it is not care that is the necessary condition to feel this claim, as well as the subsequent ‘compulsion’ or pressure to help, but empathy. We understand now why I have previously mentioned ‘vulnerability’ in connection with empathy: the receptivity and porousness required by an empathic perspective makes us less independent and more connected with the other. Notice, indeed, that ‘feeling with’ requires a bond that is not necessary for ‘feeling for’. *Feeling for* is a kind of sentiment that can be experienced even by independent, self-sufficient, and autonomous individuals; on the contrary, *feeling with* is by definition typical of dependent and relational individuals. One can, for instance, feel sorry for another, while left ‘untouched’ and undisturbed in their contentment (as in the case of ‘rational compassion’). Empathy, instead, makes the intrinsic fragility of humans and their interdependence perceivable both in one’s own person and in that of the other. Furthermore, empathy usually leads us to gather more information about others, and more information usually motivates us to care. Hamington goes so far as to speak of an actual causal chain:

²⁴Remember, in fact, that empathy can also be unconscious and unintentional. There are, for instance, people who are naturally more empathic than others. The sheer fact of being empathic does not count, *per se*, as a demonstration that this person is also a caring or altruistic one, although it can offer strong clues that they will probably not be a cruel one—granted that they do not have a severely biased empathy—for the very good reason that cruel actions require a certain cold-heartedness and closure towards others that runs completely against the preconditions necessary for empathy.

²⁵Noddings (1984, p. 47).

[...] there are times when we are otherwise engaged that we do not wish to endeavor to know more because we realize that such inquiry will pull us in to care. In such cases knowledge can be said to activate empathy, which in turn can lead to caring action. One can avoid the causal chain by retreating from knowledge.²⁶

I would not speak, as Hamington does, of a genuine causal relationship, but I think that it is undeniable that there is, at least, an extremely strong correlation between inquiry or knowledge and empathy and that this correlation (that goes both ways) is, in turn, deeply correlated to care. The only reproach I have against Hamington is that he does not identify the fact that if empathy is indeed fed by knowledge, knowledge can be fed by empathy, too. He recognises that the ‘causal chain’—as he refers to it—between knowledge, empathy, and care is nonlinear, but he seems to ignore the fact that it is actually circular.²⁷

Now, having seen how complex the relationship between the triad of knowledge–empathy–care is, how is it possible to help people to develop care and, with it, moral behaviour? The answer is simple in theory, but not as simple in praxis: in short, we have to improve inquiry and empathy skills, which speaks in favour of a holistic and inclusive moral education. Of course, there are numerous ways to achieve this. One is certainly the previously cited method of inductive discipline conceived by Hoffman (2000), where the child who has caused harm to other children should put him or herself in their place and feel concern for the effect his or her action has caused and might cause in the future. This method that works so well at a personal level can also be productive at the societal one, thanks to a process of *generalisation*. However, we will discuss this issue more at length in the section on moral acting or motivation.

²⁶ Hamington (2017, p. 269).

²⁷ On the contrary, it seems that Noddings was able to acknowledge the circular relationship, at least between empathy and care, even if I am unsure as to whether she conceives it the way I do: see Noddings (2010, p. 149).

11.3 DEVELOPING A MORAL CHARACTER BY MEANS OF EMPATHY

Reviewing the literature, there are numerous different models of moral education grounded on empathy or which at least regard empathy as a central element of moral education. As I do not want to make a rather inadequate list of some of the most valuable proposals for moral (empathic) education, I will only analyse and comment two of them, highlighting what I find valuable in these approaches. This will be useful to demonstrate how wide, multifaceted, and important the role of empathy is for moral education and development. The first model comes from Nel Noddings²⁸ and has four processual components: the process of *modelling*, that of *dialogue*, that of *practice*, and, lastly, that of *confirmation*. As I have said, it is not my intention to summarise this method, but it is important to highlight the fact that although Noddings, even here, does not allude explicitly to empathy (a concept which she finds problematic for different motives), I think that the concept of empathy I support should be presupposed for the proposed approach to work properly. Keep in mind that Noddings is proposing an educational pattern that can and should be taught in family and schools. Empathy is presupposed in the first stage, which is that of modelling, where the carer (suppose a teacher) makes explicit, thanks to the instantiation of certain paradigmatic actions, what it means to care about others. In order to do this, they make use of empathy. The cared-for (suppose schoolchildren or students), in turn, observe the teacher's behaviour and try to follow their example. Afterwards comes the part of dialogue. Here, schoolchildren have the opportunity, by means of an open-ended discussion (which implies both talking and *listening*) amongst themselves and with the teacher, to improve their caring abilities, and, although Noddings does not in fact refer to it as such, empathy—as we are going to see—comes to play a central role in this context. Noddings, in her book *Educating Moral People*, actually distinguishes between three forms of conversation: the *formal conversation*, the *ordinary conversation*, and the *immortal conversation*. I will briefly describe only the immortal conversation, as it is both the most interesting and most 'empathic' of the three.

²⁸ See Noddings (2010).

The so-called immortal conversations are discussions in which crucial aspects of the human being (especially of human ontology and morality) are thematised: death, life, love, hatred, destiny, friendship, and virtues, among others. In order to thematise such complex issues, schoolchildren are invited to put themselves in the position of other people—usually literary figures—and assume their perspectives. It is evident how important empathic skills become in this context: what might these characters have thought and felt? Which intentions and goals did they have? Such questions can only be focussed on and answered—I think—thanks to empathy. The schoolchildren and students have here the opportunity to practice what we have named ‘narrative empathy’ and empathise with fictional characters as if they were real. Notice, also, that empathising with literary figures does not only permit learning how a morally virtuous person should act in certain situations and what actions should instead be avoided (remaining at a level of moral practice) but it even allows for the thematisation of metaethical questions: what does it mean to behave morally? What is (morally) good? What is (morally) bad? Empathising with an individual (even a fictional one) permits the uncovering of the inner world of this other, making explicit their system of values, the reactive emotions they experience for what they have chosen to do or thought of doing, the intentions they had or might have had, and more. Renouncing empathy signifies relinquishing all of this valuable knowledge that is vital for the development of a moral sense, as well as moral behaviour.

Of course, all this knowledge would be empty if it were not followed by practice. The ideal moral person is not that individual who, without exception, simply knows what is good and what is bad, but one who also always does what is good and avoids what is bad. Thus, to integrate theory with praxis, Noddings’ approach includes a third stage, in which students can ‘learn by doing’ and instantiate caring behaviour. Here, the possibilities are countless. An interesting one is that offered by the so-called Compassion-Project, which has as its goal that of improving compassion for people who commonly are on the margins of society.²⁹ To reach this goal, young students are invited to spend two weeks in a social institution, such as in a home for the disabled, a hospital, or a centre for refugees. Consequently, they have the occasion to interact with particularly vulnerable populations and use their empathic skills and their

²⁹ See, for example, Kuld and Gönheimer (2000).

imagination to understand the others' stories and the impact these have had on their lives, as well as how they feel as a result of living the way they do. Students will learn that living as a differently abled person, or as a refugee, or as a person with, say, a serious illness, entails having a different phenomenology and, with that, a different sensitivity. Such people perceive the world differently and need to be treated with a special kind of care. Empathy, *inter alia*, helps to understand how to modulate our behaviour towards them.

The final stage is that of 'confirmation'. Basically, confirmation involves two similar, but nonetheless different aspects. In one sense, it is a somewhat positive version of induction, where the students' motives are credited even though their actions may not be morally praiseworthy. For instance, the teacher reacts to the (moral) mistake of a student not only with some form of punishment, but also by trying to be comprehensive and to understand the reason behind the misjudgement, thereby showing empathy with the student.³⁰ In the other sense, 'confirmation' requires that the teacher respond to the wrongdoing committed by the student with good will, by presupposing that he or she must have had a good reason to do it. Using the words of Noddings:

To confirm others is to bring out the best in them. When someone commits an uncaring or unethical act (judged of course from our own perspective), we respond—if we are engaging in confirmation—by attributing the best possible motive consonant with reality. By starting this way, we draw the cared-for' attention to his or her better self. [...] We confirm the other by showing that we believe the act in question is not a full reflection of the one who committed it.³¹

I think that Noddings' approach is not only possible to be applied in classroom, but that it could also be very effective in educating children and young people in general towards moral behaviour, thanks to the assumption of an empathic perspective. As a former amateur actor, however, I find that besides the important role that literature can play in developing empathy and, with that, a caring perspective—which was masterfully shown even by Martha Nussbaum in her famous and influential book, *Upheavals of Thought*—acting should also deserves more attention. The

³⁰Noddings (2010, pp. 147–148).

³¹Noddings (2002, p. 20).

overlooking of the role that acting can play in the development of empathy and our imaginative skills, in general, seems to be a widespread bias in philosophy.

This is quite surprising, especially because in the year 2000 there was a good attempt by philosopher Susan Verducci to fill this gap.³² As a former student of Noddings, Verducci was interested in finding a way to incentivise and improve the kind of empathy needed for caring and she thought that method acting was the answer. I am very sympathetic to this view, since Verducci is one of the few philosophers explicitly maintaining that empathy must become a habit and that it is possible to assume an empathic perspective. I have been adamant on this matter in the course of the book: empathy should not remain a ‘punctual’ phenomenon—in the sense of occurring only at given times and for a short period of time—but become a habitual perspective. Verducci is persuaded that her method will bring about this outcome:

With practice and guidance, one hopes that students will cultivate not only their capacity to empathise, but the habit of doing so. Ideally, students would develop a way of being in the world that centres on the connections between their own lived lives and those of others.³³

Even if Verducci does not emphasise this notion in her 2000 article as much as I do, we find here *in nuce* a position that I have been further developing and defending throughout my book, that of empathy as a habit, as—in the words of phenomenologists—a *way of being in the world*. Empathy should be a fostered skill that stays alert in the background, ready to emerge when the conditions for its emergence are met. It is not an on/off ability. Instead, it is an ability which, being a habit, is always ‘on’, in a sense, but arises with particular strength when it is triggered by particular conditions or explicitly activated by the individual. In my opinion, we have to conceive of empathy as a ‘muscle’. As with individuals with certain muscular diseases, there are people who are born with a deficit of empathy, but the vast majority of people have this muscle and are able to

³²Verducci (2000).

³³Verducci (2000, p. 97).

train it and, with training, to make it stronger and more reliable or, conversely, to waste it.³⁴

However, how can acting contribute to the training and the enhancement of empathy? Perhaps because of the influence of her mentor, Verducci also theorises a four-stage model. First, comes the careful study of the script, in which actors conduct a textual and contextual examination.³⁵ By contextual I mean that actors attempt to acquire a profound and accurate understanding of the characters, based on dialogues, actions, and description contained in the script, and by asking themselves questions to help them understand the psychology of the characters and, thus, empathise with them: ‘What could a woman like X want?’, ‘What might Y have been thinking in that moment?’, for example. The contextual examination itself refers to the fact that contextual elements, such as the writer or the time period in which the script was written, have to be taken into account. Second, acting can indirectly contribute to the refining of our empathic skills because of the requirement by actors to accurately simulate feelings and emotions by means of facial expressions, vocalisations, gestures, and similar, sometimes even managing to feel them ‘on their own skin’, so to say. Indeed, actors are used to immersing themselves in different contexts and their experience with the simulation of emotions and feelings through body language constitutes worthwhile training when it comes to ‘real-life’ empathy. A third contribution stemming from acting is also the improvement of our imaginative skills, which of course are of fundamental importance for empathy. In reality, what is perhaps the most crucial feature of an accomplished, talented actor, meaning the realism with which he or she is able to impersonate a certain character, depends on these skills, for a very good reason. The fact is that no script, no screenplay can say everything one needs to know about a certain character and about his or her background history. The actor can only receive some clues about the figure he or she has to embody, and starting from that basis, ‘a real person’, as it were, and not a stereotypical character, must come to life. In order to do that, one has to be capable of ‘filling the gaps’ of the script with his or her imagination and to discover ways of conveying a certain personality through

³⁴ For a current, up-to-date and well-documented contribution on how to train empathy, see the work of Jamil Zaki and his lab, especially Zaki (2019).

³⁵ Verducci (2000, pp. 90–92).

perceivable signs, such as those previously cited: facial expressions, tones of voice and gestures, for example.

Another central characteristic of empathy that is found in method acting as well, and that can be developed as a result of this approach, is the ‘dual experience’ that one needs in order to empathise correctly. This phenomenon was identified and described with different degrees of emphasis by the vast majority of the scholars working on empathy.³⁶ It is nothing else than the experience we have when, on the one hand, we put ourselves in the shoes of another person and imagine really being them, and, on the other, we do not lose track of who we actually are, thereby inhabiting, at the same time, our body and our *persona* (to use a term dear to Husserl), along with those of the others. Actors usually live this kind of experience on a daily basis and are therefore skilled at accomplishing it smoothly and flawlessly, which of course is advantageous when empathy must be applied in real-life scenarios.

11.4 CONCLUSIONS

In this section we have dealt with the theme of the role empathy can play for moral development and moral education. We have seen that the allegations made by critics of empathy are dubious and questionable for many different reasons. The attempt made by Jesse Prinz to substitute a moral education based on empathy with one grounded on the processes of imitation and emotional contagion is unsatisfactory on several fronts: not only does imitation need to be (and is, in fact) grounded on a more complex and accurate mechanism, which empathy is and emotional contagion is not and cannot be, but mere imitation is also not sufficient for a moral kind of education. We have further examined the cases of psychopaths and autistics and argued that their deficits and impairments (to varying degrees) in their empathic faculties are at the basis of their complex links with morality, which, in the case of psychopaths, can lead to sheer amorality, and in that of autists to an ‘imperfect morality’. Finally, we have closely observed the relationship between empathy and care and have analysed some methods of moral education which seem to enhance an empathic and caring perspective, thereby promising better results than the very basic methods of moral education proposed by Prinz and Bloom.

³⁶ See, to name a few, Darwall (1998), Coplan (2011), and Hoffman (2000, 2011).

Taking all that into account, and although, as I said at the beginning of the section, it is perhaps impossible to conclude with absolute certainty that empathy is strictly necessary for moral development and education, it emerges from our analysis that there are more persuading and numerous clues indicating that it is necessary, than evidence disproving this thesis. For this reason, I think that the burden of proof falls on the shoulders of the anti-empathists, who, at present, do not seem capable of providing any convincing argument against the centrality of empathy for moral education and development.

There is, however, another theme that has been referred to many times throughout, and which deserves further attention: the connection between empathy and moral motivation or agency. In other words, it is now time to investigate whether (and to what extent) empathy is necessary (or at least important) in order to act morally.

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PART V

Moral Conduct and Motivation



Empathy and Moral Conduct and Motivation

The questions concerning both what we need to be motivated to act morally and what is required to carry out moral actions are certainly extremely difficult ones. To say that I will offer a unitary and complete theory of moral agency would be an intolerable act of *hybris* on my part. Intolerable, because, first, there are already enough theories of that kind in the long history of (moral) philosophy by philosophers much more skilled and experienced than myself and, second, because this effort would require more than one section of a book dedicated primarily to empathy. Instead, what I will attempt to offer is the following:

- (1) A (hopefully) convincing answer to the criticisms made by anti-empathists about the role played by empathy in moral agency and motivation.
- (2) A rough outline of a theory of moral agency in which empathy plays a crucial role, which although undoubtedly close to some sentimentalist positions, is actually more complex than those and can accommodate typical concepts of rationalism as well as virtue and caring ethics. This will be accomplished based on a reinterpretation of the Kantian theory of moral agency and especially of Kant's doctrine of the categorical imperative and on the outline of (at least to the best of my knowledge) an original form of virtue ethics in which empathy plays a fundamental part.

Let us begin with the first point. We have seen that anti-empathists, like Paul Bloom and Jesse Prinz, see the use of empathy within the field of moral agency and motivation as objectionable, to say the least. Prinz, in particular, believes that empathy is both useless and ineffective for moral conduct. It is useless, because other emotions are very much apt to motivate us to act morally; and it is ineffective, because these other emotions are also much more efficient than empathy when it comes to instantiating moral behaviour. Remember, in fact, that for Prinz, moral judgements are all based on emotions such as shame, guilt, anger, and disgust, which are by their essence motivational states with a precise behavioural profile. Notably, they are negative emotions, which are elements that we typically work to avoid in our lives. Therefore, if we anticipate that the instantiation of the behaviour X will make us feel ashamed, or sad or something similar, then we will feel a strong inclination to avoid X.

Personally, I do not have anything against this view. I also think that moral conduct can be motivated by emotions which must not be empathic. To deny this would mean to ignore what is simply a matter of fact. Nonetheless, the point is that Prinz needs more than this to deem empathy as useless in this context. In fact, there is nothing which rules out the possibility that empathy can be a strong motivator for moral behaviour, as other (moral) emotions are. In fact, there is a certain triviality in asserting that an action (be it moral or not) can be *heteroelicted*, that is, caused, activated by different stimuli. Much more interesting would be to test whether empathy always and necessarily is at the base of our moral motivation and, along with it, our moral conduct. The simple answer is that it is not. *Pace* committed pro-empathists, such as Michael Slote or Simon Baron Cohen, anti-empathists, including Paul Bloom and Jesse Prinz, are right in affirming that moral conduct does not always rest on empathic grounds. Instead, where they fail is in their argumentative choices. Prinz chooses, in fact, to criticise empathy by using a few experiments which, while they undoubtedly serve to prove *some inadequacies* on the part of empathy, equally, they cannot be taken as an overwhelming evidence of the *general inadequacy* of this phenomenon. Ironically, I find Bloom's attempt to fuse a rather utilitarian approach to morality with his conception of a 'rational compassion' as more philosophically intriguing, but on the whole, he also proves to be blind to certain advantages of empathy for morality. For instance, similarly to Prinz (to whom he is much indebted),

he asserts in his book *Against Empathy* that, although we need what he calls a ‘motivational push’ to be a good person and acting morally, this push does not need to rest on empathy: other emotions are apt to suffice.¹ The problem here is that Bloom seems to ignore the fact that these emotions can also be felt as a result of empathy with other people.

12.1 HOW THE SHORTCOMINGS OF EMPATHY ARE ALSO ITS STRENGTHS

In effect, what kind of strategy could be implemented in order to respond appropriately to the criticisms of the anti-empathists and to better strengthen my position? Of course, I could employ a similar technique and use cherry-picked experiments and data that confute the results of the ones cited by Bloom and Prinz. By way of example, the vast amount of research undertaken by Daniel Batson on empathy may be fruitfully employed to show that empathy has considerable potential when it comes to moral (altruistic) motivation. However, in doing so, my answer would be a mere commentary of the theses of other scholars.

A more promising line of reasoning might instead be that of identifying the contradictions in the anti-empathic claims and, from those contradictions, building up an argument in favour of a certain role that empathy can play. Bloom, for instance, has plenty of such contradictions. Consider, for example, pages 87 to 89 of his above-mentioned book. Here, he attempts to make a case against the spotlight nature of empathy. For Bloom, this characteristic of empathy makes its focus narrow and its outcomes unreliable, because spotlights illuminate only a portion of the space and leave the rest in darkness, thus making empathy a biased process. To substantiate this claim, Paul Bloom chooses to cite a few interesting experiments.² In one of them, subjects were given ten dollars and then told that they could give as much as they wanted to another person who had nothing. This person was anonymous and identified by a number that the subjects of the experiments drew at random. However, a number of the subjects drew the number first and then decided how much to give, whereas another group decided first how much to give and then drew the number. Interestingly, this *prima facie* small and apparently insignificant difference seemed to play a

¹ See Bloom (2016, p. 44).

² Both experiments originate from Small and Loewenstein (2003).

surprising role. In fact, people who drew the number first gave much more (60% more) than those who decided first. The researchers hypothesised that this difference had to be attributed to the fact that the focus on the number (and not on the money) helped the subjects of the experiment to imagine a specific needy person, as opposed to just an abstract individual.

The same kind of mechanism was observed in another study, in which people were asked to donate money to help build a home for a family. One group of them was told that the family has already been selected, whereas another one was told that the family would be selected. Again, this subtle difference resulted in a conspicuous discrepancy: the first group actually gave significantly more money than the second one, and here it also must be presumed that the discrepancy has to be ascribed to the shift between a concrete and a more abstract target. Bloom claims that this spotlight nature presupposes empathy to be ‘innumerate’ and to prefer the individual at the expense of the multitude, as can be noticed in other experiments comparing how we usually respond to the suffering of the one versus the suffering of the many. Bloom uses, in particular, a study by Tehila Kogut and Ilana Ritov,³ where psychologists asked a number of subjects how much money they would be ready to give to financially support a drug that would save the life of one child, and another group how much they would give to save eight children. These two groups gave approximately the same. However, there was also a third group of people that were told the child’s name and even shown their picture. In this case, the donations rose dramatically and exceeded even the donations for the eight. For Bloom, this is exactly one of the shortcomings of empathy we should be wary of. After all, for his consequentialist mentality to prefer the one to the many is a serious mistake, and the problem with empathy (and with sentiments in general) is that they are *innumerate*. Bloom puts it provocatively with a mental experiment of Humean taste: ‘[...] imagine reading that two hundred people just died in an earthquake in a remote country. How do you feel? Now imagine that you just discovered that the actual number of deaths was two thousand. Do you feel ten times worse? Do you feel *any* worse?’

³Kogut and Ritov (2005).

The argument is simple, but thought-provoking. We are generally sensitive to differences in number, and if we learn that an accident ‘A’ (or a natural cataclysm) has caused the deaths of ten times more people than accident ‘B’, we are ready to deem A to be a far more serious accident than B. The fact is that sentiments do not follow this intuitive rule and, for this reason, they should be denied a role in moral judgement, education, and conduct. I confess that in my past, as an anti-empathist, I was very sensitive to these kinds of arguments: they were so convincing in their clarity and simplicity that it took me some time to understand that under this apparent cover of good sense and rationality, other biases were hidden. Here, the bias expressed by Bloom is a rationalist one. It is one thing to affirm that morality cannot be exclusively based on sentiment; it is another to assert that morality can be based on reason alone. As we have seen, my model contemplates that empathy and other sentiments play a role together with rational considerations. The true mistake is to conceive the rational and the sentimental sphere as two separate and opposed dimensions of which one has to be preferred over the other. On the contrary, if we depart from this mechanistic perspective, we will discover what feelings can do for our rational considerations, if they are well balanced in the character of a morally virtuous person. Unwillingly and indirectly, Bloom offers us exactly the opportunity to argue in favour of this position when he quotes Mother Teresa to show how biased and innumerate our emotions are: ‘If I look at the mass’—so Mother Teresa affirms—‘I will never act. If I look at the one, I will.’⁴

Reading this citation, it is odd to believe that Mother Teresa had no idea of the sheer number of people needing help in Calcutta. It is absurd to think of her falling prey to sentimental biases as the ‘spotlight’ and the ‘innumerate’ ones and helping the one individual to the detriment of the multitude. In light of this, how should this quote be interpreted? I think that what Mother Teresa wanted to say here goes beyond the dichotomy between reason and sentiment(s), and, in so doing, she displays the same concern I have. As I read it, Mother Teresa wanted to emphasise the centrality of day-to-day progress, of taking one step at a time. In other words, if you look at the totality of needy people there are (no matter if in Calcutta, in India, or in the world) you will find it difficult to feel any motivation to help. Most likely, you will be overwhelmed by the thought that you are just one person with scarce and inadequate resources and that

⁴Bloom (2016, p. 89).

the people you would like to help are too many to even be counted. Therefore, the best you can do in such a situation is to avoid looking at the mass and focus only on the *hic et nunc*, on the person(s) you can help at a given moment, in a given place. The same applies to mountain-climbing or trekking: if you keep gazing at the top of the mountain, you will hardly reach it as it will always seem too high and too far away. On the contrary, if you only concentrate on where to put your foot for the next step, then, little by little, inch by inch, you will reach the top almost without realising it.

However, this is not the only message that this quote suggests. Indirectly, in fact, this citation also reminds us that any element capable of focussing our attention on the *hic et nunc*, without making us lose sight of the general situation and of our goal, is useful for the purposes of moral conduct. In other words, if we agree on the fact that it is easier to help others and instantiate acts of altruism and solidarity if we focus on the next step and not on the mountain, then everything helping us in that sense will, at least, have an instrumental necessity. Once we acknowledge this, reading the opinions of Paul Bloom again can be instructive, in fact, one becomes aware of the implicit paradoxes contained there. It is true: our emotional capacities are not able to conceive of the death or the suffering of thousands (or even more) people adequately and, in that sense, our emotivity (as well as our empathy) certainly is innumerate. Nevertheless, the cure to this potential shortcoming of empathy is contained in the shortcoming itself, and it is strange to observe that Bloom seems to ignore this. The secret is personalising the victims, giving them a face, an identity, an individuality. In this way, the aspect observed and showed in the above-mentioned studies ceases to be a weakness and becomes a strength. Apparently, even Paul Bloom seems to contradict himself when talking about this feature. On page 45 of his book *Against Empathy*,⁵ he in fact wrote that as a young graduate student, he was deeply influenced by the rational, consequentialist arguments of Peter Singer. Thanks to the Australian philosopher, he convinced himself that spending money on luxury products, expensive meals, or fancy clothing was really no different than seeing a child drowning in shallow water and doing nothing for fear of ruining his own expensive shoes. The argument was extremely rational and utilitarian and Bloom loved to repeat that in front of friends, colleagues, and students alike, until the day when one of his students simply

⁵ Bloom (2016, pp. 45 and f).

asked him how much of his money he actually gave to poor and needy people. Bloom, embarrassed, had to tell the truth: nothing. Thus, the rational argument that managed to persuade him to believe that enacting behaviour X was morally right was apparently not enough to motivate him sufficiently to instantiate that behaviour. He was, that is, rationally convinced, but not emotionally moved and not adequately motivated. Aware of this failing, Bloom decided that it was time to give to a charity. Accordingly, he asked an international aid agency information as to how he could support their cause. He expected to find graphs, statistics, and data about their operations, but, instead, received a small photograph of a young boy from Indonesia and a short letter in which they wrote that the child in the photo was the life he would save by contributing to the agency. As a result, what did our utilitarian champion do? Let us hear it in his own words:

I'm not sure if the feeling this prompted was empathy, but it was certainly a sentimental appeal, triggering my heart and not my head. And it worked: Many years later we were still sending money to that child's family.⁶

As you can see, even Paul Bloom, with all his *vis polemica* against empathy, had to admit that by giving a kind of 'face'⁷ to the target of our potential moral actions (such as acts of altruism or similar) the motivational trigger may increase. This should be taken as good news, even by who is maybe the staunchest critic of empathy as, in fact, it means that empathy is able to motivate appropriately, it just needs to work with particulars. However, this is exactly Bloom's problem with empathy. Remember that his main attacks on empathy—back to which all other criticisms can be traced—regard two characteristics: empathy's narrowness and its biased/parochial nature. The big problem for Bloom is not that empathy is unable to motivate, but that the way in which it motivates is unsuitable for morality. Empathy, in fact, can only motivate to help 'that precise person' at that given moment, but it is useless (if not deleterious) when it involves making decisions in order to help 'the most' effective way possible, which, for Bloom, means nothing else than to help the greatest quantity of people in the most efficient way. Why is that? Paul Bloom believes the answer to this

⁶ Bloom (2016, p. 46).

⁷With the word 'face' I do not only intend, as it were, a proper face, but also anything that can give an identity, or at least contributing to the specification, the 'personalisation' (in the Latin sense of the term) of a given subject.

question to be fairly obvious. On the one side, he thinks, exactly like Jesse Prinz, that empathy is incapable of widening its scope in order to embrace humanity itself and not just that precise human being one is observing. On the other, he combines this criticism with the idea that empathy is inherently partial, that is, the fact that we are more inclined to feel empathy for people we know and love, than for those we do not know or consider hateful or just different from us. Showing the same taste for hyperbolic metaphors as Prinz, Bloom boldly affirms: ‘Asking people to feel as much empathy for an enemy as for their own child is like asking them to feel as much hunger for a dog turd as for an apple – it’s logically possible, but it doesn’t reflect the normal functioning of the human mind.’⁸

Now, this assertion by Bloom may seem *prima facie* quite undeniable: how could one person possibly feel as much empathy for their enemy as for their own child? However, this is a strawman: even the most convinced pro-empathists would not go so far as to affirm that we can feel the same amount of empathy for any individual. Thus, it is perfectly normal to feel more empathy for, say, one’s own family members than for enemies. It is so normal that this can, in fact, be taken without question as the reason why we find it easier to help our family as opposed to people we do not like.⁹ Nonetheless, this cannot constitute, per se, a criticism of the motivational role of empathy: at best, it only serves to highlight the fact that the strength of empathic moral motivation is directly proportional to the strength of the empathy we feel. This is a much more modest assertion that few would be ready to deny, but that also does not seem to be the argument Bloom needed to stab empathy at the heart.

However, perhaps there is another way to read this argument: the point is not that empathy is variously limited, and so we feel different amounts of it for different categories of subjects, but that it is also, under many different aspects, biased. In other words, Bloom wants to emphasise what he takes to be an impossibility for us as human beings: to empathise across the parochial boundaries that surround us and, in some cases, define us, such as, *inter alia*, national identities, political ideologies, family- or friendship-ties.

However, even granted this explanation, Bloom’s argument does not cease to appear as a strawman to me, and I claim that this is what it fundamentally is. In fact, it is one thing to say that empathy is intrinsically biased

⁸ Bloom (2016, p. 190).

⁹ Slote makes nearly the same assumptions in his 2010 book *Moral Sentimentalism*.

and quite another to state that we tend to have prejudices stemming from different sources (social, political, ideological, for example) and that empathy seems to prove unable to overcome them. Even though Bloom wishes to assert the former (as he often does in the course of his book), it appears that he merely offers a redundant series of (pseudo)evidence for the latter. In other words, all the limits that Bloom attributes to empathy are not limits integral to empathy as such, but to the social, cultural, political, economic, religious, and historical structures within which empathy (not differently from any other moral attitude) exerts its influence.

What is more, Bloom's arguments are almost never based on conceptual grounds; they are, on the contrary, of an empirical, experimental nature. For example, you will often find in his work arguments that sound like the following: 'You cannot empathize with more than one or two people at the same time. Try it.'¹⁰ all with the intention of undermining the credibility of the thesis that empathy is capable of overcoming the biases set by parochialism, narrow-mindedness, proximity, and others. Nevertheless, you will struggle to find even a single piece of evidence that it is conceptually and consequently inherently impossible for empathy to overcome prejudices. Yet, this is exactly what he needs to uphold his position. If the only arguments Bloom presents are of a practical, empirical nature, then one only needs concrete, applied examples of the contrary to confute his theses. The fact is, there are plenty of examples of that kind. Consider the supporters of *Peace Now*, for instance, or think of the story that more than any other—at least in the occidental, Christian world—has influenced the image we have of the good empathic person: that of the Good Samaritan. A person whose capacity for empathy and compassion managed to overcome differences in culture, religion, ethnicity, to effectively help an enemy. History itself—among many horrors—is full of bright examples in which one's own empathy is the primary cause of the acknowledgement of a common humanity that ties the *Self* with the *Other* and that breaks down every barrier. Think, for instance, of Oskar Schindler, who, although a member of the Nationalist Socialist Party, saved 1200 Jews after the shock and the horror the brutal persecutions in Cracow caused him. Or consider the example of Giorgio Perlasca, a committed Italian fascist who fought as a volunteer in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War and also in the Spanish Civil War (siding with the general Francisco Franco), but who

¹⁰ Bloom (2016, p. 33).

refused to give his support to the racial laws promulgated by Benito Mussolini. Perlasca hid his aversion for these laws which threatened to make Jews appear as inferiors and worked with the Spanish Chargé d’Affaires, Ángel Sanz Briz, saving the lives of thousands of Jews.¹¹ This was achieved, in particular, to the provision of safe-conducts (“protection-cards”), and, according to what he told,¹² to the thwarting of plans for the arson and extermination of the Budapest ghetto, which would have caused the death of around 60,000 Hungarian Jews.

12.2 GENERALISING EMPATHY

Stories like these are possible because human beings possess an extremely powerful capacity that can be efficaciously used in tandem with empathy, and that is the capacity of induction, generalising from the particular to the universal. Generalisation-plus-empathy leads to a *we-perspective* starting from a *me-* or a *you-perspective*. The first is a very well-known method that has been mentioned in the section on moral education and development. Basically, if I know, from experience or imagination, that action X, for me, would be unpleasant and unnecessarily cruel and that I would try to avoid it, then, empathy for individuals who are undergoing X may easily lead me to judge that X is wrong and give me reasons and enough motivation to try to stop X. The second method is similar: I see, for example, that someone is suffering and this consideration brings me to the awareness that I would suffer, too, were I to experience the same circumstances. This gives me a reason to consider, for the first time, that we are not so different and that if I wished to be helped in that situation, maybe that other person might want or need help, too; which of course gives me some motivation to engage in helping behaviour.

However, one might still contend—as Paul Bloom does—that this can be a rather common behavioural pattern in interpersonal relationships, but it can hardly become a central one with respect to making the right, moral choice in contexts where the lives at stake are so many, so far away, so anonymous, that they present themselves as data, as numbers in a newspaper article or graphics on the news. This is indeed true, but the question here is: why should it be that way? I claim that there are numerous examples which attest to the fact that the display of a certain, particular

¹¹ See Borschel-Dan (2014).

¹² See for instance Mancino (2010). For further inquiry, see Deaglio (2013).

detail—for instance, a single person with whom one can empathise—is sufficient to elicit empathy, and this empathy, in turn, becomes the motivational spark for moral judgement and agency. Take into consideration the immense empathic power present in photos. Who can possibly erase from their memory, for example, the image of poor Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old child found drowned on a shore in Turkey in 2015? The photo, so harsh in its merciless, but direct realism, portrays the lifeless little body of the child, with his arms at his side and his face down on the sand. This heartrending picture was the key to reawakening the conscience of many politicians and decision-makers in Europe and beyond, to attracting the interest of the mass media, and to explaining, better than any graph or data analysis could possibly do, what really happened in the Mediterranean Sea every day as a result of the European Migrant Crisis. That touching image, the inescapable awareness that that poor child might have been our child, that he deserved better, that no one should suffer the same fate, in short, the empathy we felt for a child we did not know personally, and for his family, made us understand that we are not special, that migrants deserve to have the opportunity to build a future that we also would wish for ourselves. We can really say that there was a European policy on migrants *before* and *after* Alan Kurdi, so powerful was this photo.

Nevertheless, the power of empathy is not limited exclusively to the medium of photos or to a target composed of human beings. Its capacity to elicit thoughts that focus on the fact that basic emotions, such as joy and suffering, make all living and sensible beings similar is very well known by animal activists as well. Consider, for instance, various sentences that are commonly used in videos by animal rights or vegan associations: ‘Imagine being a chicken. The first day of your life on earth you are castrated and then forced to live your entire existence in a small place overcrowded by other chickens like you, while literally dragging yourself over your own excrement, waiting to be slaughtered’ or ‘Imagine being a pig and seeing the butcher stunning your mate and then killing them in front of your eyes, knowing that you would be the next.’ It is crystal-clear that this method is employed precisely in order to elicit empathic distress in us, in the hope that this distress will lead the viewer of the film or the reader of the article, to not only feel with animals, but to feel for them and, eventually, do something for them. Indeed, this actually works. When asked, most people who have become vegan answer that they did so out of

respect, empathy, or love for animals.¹³ Therefore, not only can empathy lead to compassion (which should not be surprising), but even when it leads to an experience of empathic distress, this distress can often be preliminary to altruistic behaviour. Personal distress does not necessarily bring to the instantiation of egoistic behaviour.

Paul Bloom does not seem to realise that what could *prima facie* seem a serious shortcoming of empathy—its being partial and limited, its ‘spot-light nature’—can in fact be turned into an incentive for moral conduct. Primo Levi rightly affirmed that there is no proportion ‘between the pity we feel and the extent of the pain by which the pity is aroused: a single Anne Frank excites more emotion than the myriads who suffered as she did but whose image has remained in the shadows’.¹⁴ I agree with that statement, but why is the Diary of Anne Frank so important? Why do we read Anne Frank and Primo Levi? It is because they are *archetypes*. They have become paradigms, *symbols* of the discriminated, of the persecuted, of the unjustly oppressed. Moreover, as symbols, they *stand for* all the persecuted in any part of the world, at any time, they *represent* them. In this way, the empathy we feel for the young Anne Frank or for Primo Levi, who faced with a rare dignity his imprisonment in Auschwitz, despite all the humiliations and deprivations he had to suffer, becomes the cornerstone for, *inter alia*, a rejection of violent and intolerant ideologies and a resistance against discrimination, oppression, and persecution of any kind. Empathy tells us that Anne Frank and Primo Levi were not ontologically different from (or even worse than) us *qua* Jews; on the contrary, in spite of the Nazi propaganda, they shared our same humanity. They had the same desires and hopes we have, they loved and suffered as we also do. Yet, here is the deception: it was not a deviant, perverted use of empathy that led to the horrors of Nazism, but a distorted, corrupted use of reason. Philosophical and evolutionary-biological arguments were used to spread racism and to defend the *Endlösung*, the Final Solution. In other words, it was not reason that was perverted by the biases of empathy, but the natural empathy that people have that was corrupted by insidious and dangerous rational arguments. Thus (*pace* Bloom and Singer), reason cannot per se constitute a guarantee for morality. On the contrary, if we accept that

¹³ See, for example, a survey conducted with 726 vegans in Australia, where it is shown that the main reason for people choosing a vegan diet is ethics for the animals: <https://vomadlife.com/blogs/news/why-most-people-go-vegan-2016-survey-results-reveal-all>

¹⁴ Levi (1988, p. 56).

the capacity to empathise with others is as much essential to our human nature as it is that of reasoning, we will find ways to coordinate these two with the aim of reaching moral excellence. Therefore, when Bloom affirms—rather trivially—that policies in general, as well as social, economic, political decisions, should be taken on the base of reason and utilitarian calculations and not on the base of empathy, we can simply respond that empathy must not be employed in the same amount at every stage of the process of deliberation. Hence, for instance, the example of Primo Levi might empathically motivate me to fight against racial prejudices, but then it would be my reason that would suggest the best way to do it, such as campaigning for or against a certain law or donating my money to a certain ONG.

Take into consideration another crucial point. When Paul Bloom asserts that empathy is innumerate, and for this reason it cannot be taken as a solid and reliable guide for moral agency, he seems to ignore that this is more a bias inherent to human beings *per se*, than to empathy. By this I mean that having to deal with large numbers always pose difficulties. For instance, learning that every year in the world about nine million people die from hunger does not only constitute a challenge for our empathy, but even also for our cognitive abilities, like our imagination. How can one picture such a vast number? It is literally overwhelming. Nowadays, the sheer quantity of information we can acquire by simply browsing on the Internet is astonishing and the truth is that our moral sense is not ready to deal with such large-scale numbers. Our morality, with all its baggage of rational principles and moral sentiments, such as a sense of guilt or compassion, evolved over thousands and thousands of years in small communities, namely, the family and the village. We are, therefore, shaped by evolution to deal with much smaller numbers. As we have seen, the solution proposed by Bloom is simply to stop relying on empathy: it is untrustworthy. My view on the matter, instead, cannot be the one suggesting the complete eradication of empathy (which, since empathy is a capacity with such a long evolutionary history, would simply be nonsensical and conceivably impossible) but, rather, I think that empathy can be of help in the sense I have described earlier: as a motivational incentive acting, *inter alia*, by means of the generalisation of paradigmatic cases.

Empathy, in other words, can be a very useful tool for morality. However, there is more to be considered. It has been mentioned previously how the criticisms that Bloom advance towards empathy are flawed, since he accuses empathy of biases that are inherent to us or to our culture

and society, not to empathy *per se*. Narrow-mindedness, for instance, is a flaw of intelligence (possibly stemming from a bad education), not of empathy. As we have said, only the empathy of parochial people is parochial. The empathy of a person who is not racist or parochial embraces, instead, any person, independent of ethnicity, culture, religion, and other differences. Yet, this is not the only problematic criticism by Bloom. In fact, he insists various times in his book that empathy should be abandoned because focusing on ‘personal tragedies’ intensively covered by the media steals away resources which could be more fruitfully and productively employed in other more serious matters. For instance, earlier, in his 2013 article and before his famous book *Against Empathy*, he asserted that the 2005 Natalee Holloway case (which involved the disappearance and probable murder of a high-school graduate while on a trip to Aruba) used far more television time in the United States than the concurrent genocide in Darfur. In cases such as these, Bloom argues that empathy induces us to identify with the suffering of a single individual even one that we do not know but whom we can, thanks to the media, readily identify with and who seems more ‘like us’. This phenomenon inevitably leads to an immoral misallocation of priorities, as well as resources and attention that could and should be granted to other issues.

If I understand the argument correctly, the charges against empathy are twofold: on the one hand, Bloom accuses empathy of being easy to manipulate (mass media can exploit our empathic capacities and make us focus on the one as opposed to the many), and, on the other hand, he accuses empathy of being inherently biased towards the easy identifiable ‘singular tragedy’ than to the less ‘appealing’ everyday tragedies, such as the number of people starving everyday in the world. These are astute criticisms, but unfortunately for Bloom, I believe that they totally miss the target. In fact, it is not—or at least not directly—our empathy, but rather our attention that mass media manipulate. Of course, it is easier to empathise with a young girl than with people dying in Darfur if her story is everywhere to be found, if you can see and hear the interviews with her parents, if you learn about her background, and more, whilst the terrible troubles of a far foreign land are given little coverage. However, to say that empathy should be blamed for that situation is to mistake the consequence for the cause. In fact, by simply changing the focus, and by giving attention to the matters that deserve it the most, we would soon discover that the intensity of our empathy would also vary accordingly. Remember the famous old saying: ‘we are what we eat.’ In

the same spirit we can say that ‘we empathise only with what we focus on’. This is also the reason why younger generations are on the whole much more open-minded and much less racist than their parents or grandparents. It is due to the fact that they are more used to contact with people of other cultures and ethnicities and because they might have had the opportunity to grow up in an educational system emphasising empathy and respect for people from, for example, an immigrant background.

Furthermore, I do not share Bloom’s belief regarding the fact that empathy is responsible for the misallocation of resources. This is an opinion of Singerian taste: basically, when you help someone under the incentive of empathy, you are, with all probability, guiltily ignoring the fact that you could help many other suffering individuals. Perhaps, this is the reason why Bloom labels empathy as ‘morally corrosive’.¹⁵ Since empathy, for Bloom, always leads to doing less good, then we should stop making use of it. He goes so far as to defend a position which is not only counterintuitive, but also extremely fundamentalist, namely: ‘If you are struggling with a moral decision and find yourself trying to feel someone else’s pain or pleasure, you should stop.’ Thus, no matter how morally good your act might be, if you do it while trying to empathise with the target of your act, you are already doing wrong. It is easy to see what kind of peculiar consequences this principle entails: any single act made out of empathy would be deemed morally bad, or at least less good, because the individual carrying it out would have missed the opportunity to do better somewhere else and/or to someone else. There is a strange logic behind the thought that, say, paying for the lunch of a homeless person you meet on the street turns out to be bad or less good if, with the same money, you could have paid for the lunch of ten children in Burkina Faso. Even if we were ready to accept that logic, as Singer, Bloom, and other Utilitarians appear to do, we would still have to admit that calling an act *less good* is not the same as calling it bad or *morally corrosive*. Moreover, we should also be careful in ruling out the possibility that someone may make the best decision in utilitarian terms (e.g. paying for lunch for ten people in Burkina Faso) precisely under the influence of empathy. In actual fact, this takes us to another question.

¹⁵ Bloom (2016, p. 39).

12.3 IS EMPATHY NECESSARILY BIASED?

I think we have shown with enough clarity the partiality of Bloom in his treatment of empathy: many of the criticisms he makes cannot be directed towards empathy *per se*, and the examples he uses only show that empathy does not always lead to instantiating moral actions. However, this is merely contingent: there is a plethora of other cases in which empathy effectively acts as a wonderful motivator for moral conduct. Notice, also, that all the criticisms expressed by Prinz and Bloom have the same two presumptions at their core, the assumption that empathy is intrinsically biased and the assumption that empathy is a kind of fixed biological trait, not amenable to modification. Bloom, in particular, affirms that empathy is ‘bred in the bone’ and that occurs automatically and involuntarily.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in a preceding article in 2013 he writes rather affectedly and dramatically: ‘But empathy will have to yield to reason if humanity is to have a future.’¹⁷ The only way to interpret his theory, according to which (1) empathy is a fixed trait because it is bred in the bone, (2) it is uncontrollable because it occurs involuntarily, and (3) it nonetheless must yield to reason, is to think that although we cannot control our empathic reactions, we can control what we do with them. It goes without saying that—according to Bloom—what we should do with them is simply to silence them, so that they cannot interfere with our purely rational moral decision-making.

The notion of the fixity of the moral emotions (and of emotions in general) is a perspective Bloom and Prinz share, at various levels, with some important names in the history of philosophy, such as David Hume,¹⁸ Immanuel Kant,¹⁹ and Henry Sidgwick.²⁰ In what follows, I would like to oppose this view in two different ways: the first is to show that empathy is not the fixed trait that Jesse Prinz and Paul Bloom believed it to be. Notice, in fact, that their criticisms hold only if the negative impacts of empathy cannot be regulated while retaining the positive impacts, otherwise it would make little sense to be ‘against empathy’. If I can show that

¹⁶ See Bloom (2014).

¹⁷ Bloom (2013).

¹⁸ Although they both disagree with him regarding the way in which emotions guide action.

¹⁹ Kant famously believed that, since we cannot choose what we feel but only what we do, emotions and feelings cannot be part of morality, which is based on intention and responsibility.

²⁰ Sidgwick thought, like Kant, that we cannot have a strict duty to feel an emotion, since it is not in the power of our will to produce it.

it is possible to modulate our empathic responses, then the anti-empathic position will be confuted. The second line of thought I would like to develop concerns an aspect of empathy, which is often downplayed, ignored, or even denied by anti-empathists, is its ethical valence. I am going to argue, indeed, that empathy is essential to our flourishing as ethical individuals and that it can even be considered (*pace* its critics) a *moral virtue*.

Let us start for the moment with the first argument: that about the supposed fixity of empathy. What does it mean that empathy is seen as ‘fixed’ by anti-empathists? It means, *grosso modo*, that, when activated, it constantly produces identical (or approximatively identical) effects in identical (or, again, approximately identical) situations. Which of course also means that empathy is not susceptible to voluntary behavioural modification, neither individually nor societally: if certain conditions are met, empathy will occur as a result, and its outcomes will always be predictable given the circumstances that triggered it. In order to test whether this line of thought is correct, there is no better way than to turn to the scientific literature on the matter. Does the scientific evidence clearly show that empathy is fixed (and biased) as anti-empathists hold to be true? Well, let us consider some of the most prominent experiments cited by Bloom and Prinz and which for them patently demonstrate the bad influence empathy has on moral agency/conduct. Take, for instance, the experiment by Batson et al. (1995) cited by Prinz (2011).²¹ In this experiment, subjects watched a (fictitious) interview of a terminally ill child, and they were then given the opportunity to move that child up on a waiting list for a medicine that would improve the child’s quality of life, though not reverse the terminal condition. Then, subjects were given a further opportunity: they could decide to whether or not to move the child up on the waiting list, at the cost of displacing other children who had been on the list longer and whose condition was more serious. The experimenters divided the subjects into three groups: to one of them, no further communication was given, whereas the other two groups received, in one case, a communication to be objective and, in the other, that of taking the perspective of the child: ‘imagine how the child who is interviewed feels’.²² After listening to the interview, subjects had to fill out an emotional reaction questionnaire,

²¹ Interestingly, though the paper by Batson contained two experiments, only the one more salient to the argument Prinz makes is mentioned.

²² Batson et al. (1995, p. 1048).

rating themselves on such emotions as ‘sympathetic’, ‘warm’, ‘compassionate’, or ‘tender’.²³ When given the opportunity to help the child by moving them up the list, 73% of those who were primed with the ‘high empathy/perspective-taking communication’ chose to do so, while only a minority of those in the control conditions did not.

Now, if this experiment undoubtedly shows that priming empathy boosts motivation and induces helping behaviour, it also shows that empathy does it in a biased manner, violating principles of justice and fairness. However, based on the arguments I have made previously, we know now that the only thing which is biased here is the way subjects of the experiments were manipulated. They were, in fact, only given three options and the only one which involved the use of empathy was already a biased choice. They could actually empathise, but only with the interviewed child. Nevertheless, as we have argued previously, the results would have been different if they had been given the opportunity to empathise both with the one child and with the other children waiting on the list. The result of the experiment is not caused by an inherent partiality of empathy, but by the partiality of the experimenters’ request.

This same explanation applies to most of the studies cited by Bloom and Prinz. It is not the parochialism or even the racism of empathy that is tested (let alone proved) in such studies, but the racism/parochialism of the subjects put to the test. Wittgenstein famously asserted in the *Tractatus* that ‘the limits of my language mean the limits of my world’; in the same spirit we can affirm that the limits of my concept of humanity and of the category’s application of ‘fellow human being’ mean the limits of my empathy. If I consider, for example, a certain ethnic group to be essentially different from mine, empathy for members of this group will hardly occur. Nevertheless it should be noted (as I have already mentioned in this work) that among the possible cures for racism one is, indeed, empathy. In fact, empathy is often the key to comprehension that the other is not so different from me, that we share a common humanity.²⁴

²³ On the validity, reliability, and actual utility of such auto-evaluations, I will always have huge doubts. Even if we grant that people are absolutely honest in their evaluations (and this is a rather big ‘if’), how can we be sure that we all agree on giving these adjectives the same valence and intensity? Personally, I find ‘being sympathetic’ stronger than ‘being warm’, but I am not sure that this is the opinion of the experimenters. Furthermore, I think that it is also very difficult to make sharp distinctions between such similar emotional states.

²⁴ I have made several arguments in favour of this thesis throughout the course of this book and others will ensue.

Another quite famous study which constitutes one of the cornerstones of Bloom's argument is the experiment conducted by Klimecki et al. and reported in a 2014 article. As you will probably remember from the previous discussion, subjects here were asked to watch a combination of low-emotion and high-emotion videos, the former depicting everyday scenes with low emotional content, the latter scenes of human suffering. Specifically, they were asked to do so twice, once after what was referred to as 'empathy training', which required them to resonate with the plight of the other, and the second time after ostensible 'compassion training', which involved feelings of benevolence and friendliness in a state of quiet concentration. While watching the videos, the subjects underwent functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scanning. The researchers discovered that empathy training increased self-reports of empathic reactions as well as the strength of negative affect, while compassion training increased self-reports of positive affect. These results were interpreted by Bloom as demonstrating that (1) empathy and compassion are fundamentally different mechanisms; (2) compassion is better than empathy because it has a positive impact on the subjects, whilst empathy has a negative one. The problems with this interpretation are many. First of all, the experiment does not test what would happen if the subjects were exposed to video depicting individuals experiencing positive emotions: this is a serious shortcoming, since it is not obvious that here compassion would be 'better' (let alone 'possible') nor that the neural circuits would be different. Furthermore, the study does not engage the subjects in a behavioural task, thus it remains unclear whether empathy or compassion would be more effective as a moral motivator.

To sum up, all these experiments suffer from several critical weaknesses: either they do not test empathy, but something else, such as sympathy and compassion, or they test cognitive but not emotional empathy and vice versa, or they do not test behaviour at all. Moreover, absolutely none of these studies show that our empathic reactions are fixed; if anything, they prove exactly the opposite. For instance, the experiment by Klimecki et al. shows that our empathic responses may vary depending on whether we engage in empathy training or in compassion training. In fact, our empathic responses are sensitive to interventions (intentional or not).

Hence, empathy is far from being fixed and its effects can be controlled. Already this constitutes a significant undermining for the theses of the anti-empathists. Nonetheless, it is possible to go further. There is a theme we have touched upon a few times in this book and that we have not

properly examined until now. I am speaking of what empathy essentially is. We have said in fact that empathy is a psychological mechanism (certainly it can be described as that) and that it is a capacity that people have to varying degrees (from people with high empathy, to people with low or impaired empathy). In addition, we have mentioned that it functions as an ability or a skill, one that can not only be enhanced and refined, but also reduced, depending on what kind of education one receives or which kind of training (or experiences) one undergoes. The question I am going to ask now is whether empathy can be defined as a *virtue*. Paul Bloom and Jesse Prinz would obviously deny that, but they are not alone. Heather Battaly (2011) is probably the staunchest critic of this view, having dedicated an entire article to the issue. In what follows, I will argue against Battaly that empathy should be considered a moral virtue and that this proves once again the centrality of empathy for morality.

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Empathy and Virtue

The way Battaly construes her argument against empathy is rather complex, but I will try to summarise it in a way that is clear and hopefully faithful to the author's intentions: if empathy is a virtue, then it must be intentional or at least have some voluntary component. In fact, as Aristotle had rightfully noticed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we praise or blame people depending on their virtuous or vicious behaviour, and we do that because we hold them responsible for their actions. Of course, one can only be responsible for something that one has control over. *Ergo*, virtues are traits of character that we must have control over. For this reason, all the concepts of empathy which describe it as a fundamentally automatic and involuntary phenomenon must be ruled out, for they cannot, by definition, regard empathy as a virtue. Necessarily, the only notion of empathy remaining, the one which conceives it as a phenomenon in some way controllable, is that of empathy as perspective-taking.

However, the situation is not that simple. It might, in fact, be that perspective-taking is not a virtue, but a skill. Battaly resorts once again to Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to illustrate the analogies and the differences between the two concepts. A skill can be defined as 'an acquired ability to reliably attain a particular end'.¹ In fact, we are not born with skills, we have to train and develop them, and once we have developed them well enough, skills grant us special abilities to attain various ends: to

¹Battaly (2011, p. 290).

successfully play football or chess, to speak a language, to do derivations in logic, for example. This also implies that a person who accidentally—even though repeatedly—attains a certain end cannot be considered as actually skilled,² for the very good reason that skills are based on the agent's knowledge, training, and experience, not on chance. Finally, skills cannot be but voluntary abilities, for the agent must exert control both over their acquisition and over their exercise and improvement. Concerning these characteristics, skills and virtues are similar: since virtues must be acquired and developed with practice and are also voluntary.

However, virtues and skills have several differences as well. Two are the most crucial. First, skills are, essentially, abilities, that is, they signal what one is able to do; virtues, in contrast, are dispositions, which means that they designate what one would do given certain circumstances. This entails that whereas the virtuous person always displays their virtues when the situation requires it, the skilled person might decide either to show what they are capable of or simply forego the opportunity, depending on what they want. Thus, for instance, the courageous person will always react with courage by confronting danger every time it is appropriate, given the circumstances. Whereas a person skilled in, for example, playing football will use this ability when they need, want, or are forced to but may simply forego all other opportunities to play.

The second difference between virtues and skills regards the reason, the motivation behind one's own actions. The virtuous person is moved exclusively by the idea of the good. In other words, virtuous actions are performed by the virtuous individual only because they are morally good, not for ulterior reasons. For instance, a person who gives money to the poor only to be praised and admired by others is not truly generous. On the contrary, those who are skilled not only can perform their abilities out of egoistic motives, but can even pursue morally bad ends, as conmen, thieves, or professional assassins *inter alia* attest. Hence, these being the different features of virtues and skills, how should empathy be considered? Battaly has no doubts: empathy is a skill. In fact:

Suppose that, other things being equal, an agent foregoes opportunities to engage in imaginative perspective-taking. Does this demonstrate that she is not a good imaginative perspective-taker—that she lacks empathy so construed? It does not.³

² Cfr. Aristotle (1992, 1105a22–1105a26).

³ Battaly (2011, p. 296).

The example she uses is that of an expert therapist, very skilled in perspective-taking, who one particular day, out of boredom and complacency, knowingly forgoes opportunities to engage in perspective-taking with their final client of the day. Does this show that they are not a good perspective-taker? No, as in fact, they are an excellent one. What we say is rather that they did not choose to use their ability, that they were not in the right frame of mind, or something similar. But we cannot deny their skills.

The other main reason, for which we cannot consider empathy to be a virtue, is that it does not necessarily aim at the moral good, as virtues should do. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, one can be good at perspective-taking and use this ability to deceive others. Given all that, Battaly's answer cannot be but categorical: empathy is not a virtue, but a skill.

I shall not criticise so much the content of Battaly's view on virtues, because—good Aristotelian as she is—I think she is fundamentally right. In particular, I agree that virtues are, under many important aspects, under our voluntary control and that they are dispositions to act in a certain way given the appropriate circumstances. Finally, of course, I agree that the truly virtuous person aims for what is good. What I shall criticise, instead, is her opinion that empathy cannot share these characteristics of virtues. I think, in fact, that if we analyse these features more closely, it will soon become clear that they are also common to empathy and that Battaly's choice to restrict empathy to the sole phenomenon of perspective-taking is unduly limiting.

Let us begin with the first characteristic: the question of voluntary control. As highlighted previously, Battaly thinks that the only definition of empathy which depicts it as a mechanism potentially under our intentional control is that of empathy as perspective-taking and we have seen the problems that this entails for Battaly. However, there are various ways to overcome this criticism. First of all, we should make clear that the characterisation of empathy I have given over the course of the book can preserve the feature of voluntary control while affirming that empathy is more than just perspective-taking. We have said, in fact, that empathy is a complex phenomenon, involving a variety of different psychological mechanisms. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, empathy has been divided into low-level empathy and high-level empathy. Perspective-taking is surely the main methodology employed in HLE, but it does not feature in LLE, which benefits from more automatic and conceptually poor mechanisms, such as instant-reading (and interpretation) of the target's facial expressions, and gestures. Hence, empathy is more than mere

perspective-taking. However—Battaly might reply—then you should abandon describing empathy as under voluntary control; in fact, it seems that LLE occurs involuntarily and automatically. The key to confuting this critique is to highlight my notion, according to which empathy can and must become—following the example of virtues—a *habit*. I may not have direct control over LLE (although, as made clear earlier, I have a degree of control over my empathic reactions), but I do in regard to HLE and also the triggers of empathy. In other words, I may not be able, for example, to choose to feel a hint of sadness as a result of contemplating the unhappy face of a young woman. Nonetheless, I can choose to observe her face, her behaviour, to take her perspective, and to become attuned to her. In addition, if I do these things habitually, I will sooner or later develop a habit of empathising. Does this disqualify empathy from being a virtue? It does not. Indeed, Aristotle (who is Battaly’s representative for the correct definition of virtues) thought that this was exactly the distinctive feature of the virtuous person: the virtuous individual does not have to reflect on what should be done in a given situation; instead, by way of habit, they are used to instantiating certain virtues when the situation requires it and does so almost automatically. Hence, insofar as we consider empathy to be an ability that can be developed and become a habit, it does not conflict with Aristotle’s view on virtues.⁴ Empathy is ultimately, and in many regards, under our control and can become a disposition to enact in certain ways given the appropriate circumstances.

What is the situation regarding the third condition, however? Does empathy always aim for what is good? Here my answer will follow two lines of thought. Let us begin by saying that even asking such a question would be a serious misinterpretation of the doctrine of virtue by Aristotle. It is not, in fact, the virtues which *ipso facto* aim for what is good (how could a virtue ‘aim’ at something?) but it is the virtuous person who pursues certain aims, and the aims of the virtuous person are always good. In actuality, the virtuous person is guided by wisdom/prudence (*phronesis*), which is crucial in order to recognise what is morally good and to use one’s own virtues in order to realise that good in the praxis. This means that the virtuous person is truly virtuous only when they are guided by

⁴ *Nota bene*: empathy is also able to satisfy the condition of the golden mean between two extremes, one of excess and the other of deficiency. We may, in fact, assert that empathy is the mean between a kind of *over-sensitivity* or even *identification* with the other (excess) and pure *insensitivity* or *apathy* (deficiency).

phronesis.⁵ Consider, in fact, of what would happen if an ill-intentioned person were also courageous. Their courage would give them the strength to fulfil their bad aims, thereby making them even worse from a moral point of view. *Phronesis* is what steers virtues to the good. Hence, since all virtues need a guide, why should empathy constitute an exception? I agree with Battaly that empathy can be used to pursue morally bad ends, but since this is true for other ethical virtues as well, I claim that empathy should ‘simply’ be led by *phronesis*.

Nevertheless, there is more that is worthy of consideration. Before moving on with the analysis of empathy as a virtue, however, it will be useful to introduce what I think is the concept of empathy *in its fullest sense*. Many of the arguments I have made in the course of the book were meant to set the stage for the introduction of this concept to be analysed more in depth here, in the section dedicated to moral motivation and conduct. I have stated, for instance, that empathy implies the *lingering in the inner world of others*. Now it is time to ask ourselves: why is it so important to do that? It is important, because empathy mainly regards what we might call (using a term by Blum, 1980) the ‘weal and woe’ of others, their suffering, and their well-being, which we can recognise, understand, and feel. Therefore, everyone (or almost everyone) of us is concerned about their own well-being. Emotions, like joy, sadness, pride, and envy, can all be connected to a special concern we have to fare good. We are happy when our general well-being is high, sad when it is low or when we suffer, proud when we have achieved something that we deem valuable (and so, directly or indirectly, good for our well-being), and envious when we believe someone fares better than us. Linging in the inner world of others permits the identification of and, ultimately, the feeling of the same concern the other has for their own well-being ‘from the inside’, as it were. Thus, thanks to empathy, we become concerned for the target of our empathy. Empathising in this sense, with a sad person, for example, does not simply mean that we should feel their sadness, but that we should feel this sadness as *mattering*. We become, in the words of Batson,⁶ *empathically concerned* about the other’s well-being. Quoting the words of Aaron Simmons (who mentions the link previously referred to regarding empathy and caring):

⁵ Cfr. Aristotle (1992, 1144b).

⁶ See esp. Batson (2011) and Batson et al. (1987), although you will find this concept in many of his works.

[...] empathy in its fullest form is typically if not always essential to caring for another's well-being. When we feel concern for another's suffering, we necessarily empathize with her insofar as we share in her feelings of concern for her pain or distress.⁷

If empathy can become a habit in the model of ethical virtues, and if in its fullest form means to linger in the other long enough to see the concerns of this other individual as things that matter,⁸ then also the criticism about foregoing opportunities will not carry weight. In fact, if I fail to feel empathy for others when the circumstances are appropriate, I could not be called empathic in the proper sense. My relationship with the virtue of empathy would be *akratic* at best, but I would not have reached the 'moral excellence', so to speak. Hence, although concern can certainly exist without empathy (I might very well be concerned not about an individual, but about something, for instance, or I might feel concerned about a person without wanting to empathise with her), true empathy cannot exist without concern. At this point, some scholars might want to object by asking: is this conception of empathy not too similar to what was elsewhere called 'sympathy' or 'compassion'?

In effect, if we intend sympathy as 'a feeling or emotion that responds to some apparent threat or obstacle to an individual's good and involves concern for him, and thus for his well-being, for his sake',⁹ in some sense this is true. Although, as mentioned earlier in the book, sympathy can also occur without necessarily feeling empathy. It can by way of depicting exactly what I have labelled 'concern without sharing of feelings' or even a positive emotion of wishing well and/or practical support directed to the well-being of others. This last definition makes it different from compassion, which, as the name suggests, always implies a sharing of (negative) feelings (*pace* Bloom's writings). I would therefore maintain the concept of sympathy as being closely related but nonetheless distinct from empathy. Instead, I see no other origin for compassion other than empathy itself. This should be viewed as good news, as it simplifies the wide and complex range of fellow-feelings. It does not mean, however, that

⁷ Simmons (2014, p. 98).

⁸ *Nota bene*: not everything the other is concerned about can be seen as mattering 'in a good sense' by the empathiser. Empathy is not limitless and we, as empathisers, may very well have principles so strong to prevent us from empathising with, for example, dictatorial or racist ideas, pedophilic desires, and so forth.

⁹ Darwall (1998, p. 273).

empathy always leads to compassion: in fact, only empathy with a person who is suffering can possibly bring about compassion. Indeed, we all know that we can feel empathy even with a person who is faring well: in this case, compassion will not possibly arise. Nevertheless, in situations in which we strongly empathise with a person's plight, our empathy will take the form of compassion.

I am well aware that there are scholars who would not accept my arguments: not only anti-empathists, but even authors who are mere sceptics about empathy, such as Michael Stocker, Martha Nussbaum of *Upheavals*, or Stephen Darwall (at least in his less recent works), would probably object by saying, with Darwall's words: 'Empathy can be consistent with the indifference of pure observation or even the cruelty of sadism. It all depends on why one is interested in the other's perspective.'¹⁰ However, as already made clear previously, that which occurs in the case of sadism is not true (affective) empathy, and now we have even more evidence to notice that this notion is not valid. If the sadist really empathised with the feelings of fear, horror, and pain of his victim, he would not be able to go on hurting this.¹¹ What occurs in the case of sadism, torture, but also indifference is, at most, cognitive empathy, that is, the pure understanding that the other is suffering, but this suffering that is recognised is not shared in, nor felt from the inside; hence, true affective empathy is, in this case,

¹⁰ Darwall (1998, p. 261).

¹¹ The assertion that empathy is consistent with sadism, indifference, or torture is simply nonsensical. Indeed, there is clear and conclusive proof of this, even in real-life scenarios. Consider, for instance, the first person who comes to mind when imagining a very empathic individual. For me, it is my partner. She is the kind of person who is very attentive to the feelings of others and understands their mood and state of mind before they even mention it. She is never indifferent to others' feelings because she immediately takes these to heart and gives them importance. She cannot avoid feeling sad when someone in the room is unhappy or in a negative state. She always gives to beggars (as well as to charities) because she imagines what it must be like being poor. Also, every time we watch a film together in which, for example, one of the characters, for whatever reason, gets hurt, she covers her eyes and moans almost as if she was the one getting hurt. For the same reason, she hates violence in all its forms and every time an insect appears in one of the rooms of our house, she forces me to remove it without killing it. For this and many other motives, I am totally persuaded that she can be defined as a very empathic person. Now, would it be possible for my partner and people like her to become skilled torturers or sadists, when the mere sight of a person using violence against another physically repels them? I believe that the answer is obviously negative and the fact that several philosophers have thought this to be a likely conclusion simply shows how philosophical considerations can sometimes drive us away from sane, common sense.

totally excluded. I think that the reason why so many authors have been persuaded by the fact that empathy could coexist with sadism and indifference was the fact that they did not see empathy as a complex phenomenon, constituted by both a cognitive and an affective part. Probably, they have understood empathy as a monolithic phenomenon, and since we have *prima facie* evidence of the fact that there is an aspect of what looks like empathy deployed in the work of, for example, the professional torturer, they have concluded that empathy has nothing to do with moral concern. Now we are able to see things differently.

However, there is one point on which I fully agree with Darwall: the fact that: ‘It all depends on why one is interested in the other’s perspective.’¹² Ultimately, it is our will, our intention (together with our level of development with the mechanism of empathy) which decides how much we empathise with our target. The person who prepares to torture another human being will start with the unyielding stance of not having empathy for the other. He or she will free their mind of any true sharing of feelings and, thereby, of a real concern for the other. The virtuous person, instead, will always aim for the golden means: not too much empathy—which would lead to identification and/or personal distress—and not too little—which would induce a kind of emotional indifference. *In medio stat virtus*.

13.1 EMPATHY AND *PHRONESIS*

This also means that empathy will necessarily need the contribution of practical wisdom and reason in order to lead to morally good acts (and judgements). Nevertheless, this should not be seen as a shortcoming: in fact, reason and *phronesis* must guide all virtues. This constitutes an answer also for all the scholars who criticise empathy by favouring other emotions: no emotion is ever infallible, and all emotions need the precious contribution of rational arguments and prudence, exactly as empathy does. Reading the works of anti-empathists, it is evident how simplistic their idea of empathy often is. They tend to see it as a type of emotion which can indifferently arise at any moment and with any person: we can indifferently empathise with, for example, an Adolf Hitler and his ideas as we can do it with, say, a Martin Luther King and his principles, and for this reason they think empathy is profoundly unreliable in ethical matters. Now, apart from the fact that in these cases ‘sympathy’ would be a more appropriate term

¹²Darwall (1998), p. 261.

than ‘empathy’, since here we want to express the fact that people might be positively inclined and have a general attitude of support towards the ideas of these two figures, we can now (re)affirm that empathy never occurs in empty space. Behind the fact that someone prefers to ‘empathise’ (again, it is the incorrect verb, but let us keep it, for the sake of the argument) with Hitler rather than with MLK, we must understand that there has been a certain background of education and of experience that has ultimately led this person to make what we would judge as the wrong moral choice. The empathy of this individual is misdirected because, arguably, their education was misdirected. This individual, in other words, did not experience any positive moral development, and the ‘moral’ principles at the base of their convictions and sentiments are crippled as a result. However, as already reiterated, the situation is different in the case of someone who has achieved moral virtue. We have stated previously that Battaly is wrong in believing that the only form of empathy under our voluntary control is perspective-taking; in fact, there are numerous tasks that we can voluntarily perform which are conducive to empathy, such as paying closer attention to the affective cues in others’ behaviour, regardless of whether they are human or animals.¹³ Thus, once again, *phronesis* reveals itself as central. Indeed, it is a way in which we can control our empathy with others: insofar as we are capable of reflecting, of reasoning about how and with whom we ought to empathise and put, as it were, our empathy to the test.

The merit of the work by anti-empathists, far from being that of freeing ourselves from empathy, is that of making extremely visible the limits of our human condition and how much room we have for improvement in how, when, with whom, and for what reasons to empathise. There are so many ways that we may empathise wrongly: we may empathise too little and become indifferent, too much and become physically distressed even by the most trivial things, or we may empathise excessively with those we consider similar to us and not enough with people we consider different, thereby becoming parochial. The list is long. Nonetheless, failures, biases, shortcomings, and weaknesses are not the prerogative of only one of our faculties, but of our very humanity. They can affect our reasoning or any

¹³ It is evident that some people fail to empathise with animals because they do not see them as emotional beings in some sense similar to us. However, by paying closer attention to their behaviour and by knowing the cues they use to express discomfort and distress, for instance, we can enhance our abilities to empathise with them. However, I shall not argue this at length in this book, as I do not consider myself expert enough in the field of animal ethics. Other authors will be more suited to support the case.

emotions we have as much as they affect empathy, hence, the only thing we can do is learn to avoid these shortcomings as much as possible, not to abandon one of our abilities simply because it does not lend itself to what is an impossible perfection.

There is also one sense in which the moral potentiality of empathy is clearly higher than that of compassion or (at least in the traditional use of the term) of sympathy. I am referring to the fact that empathy allows us to understand, share, and reflect on positive emotions as much as well as negative ones. We are not only able to empathise with feelings of suffering, but also with feelings of joy, pride, admiration, among others. It is a pity that neither philosophic nor scientific literature has ever dedicated the space to empathy in this positive context that it deserves. I think that a series of psychological experiments coupled with appropriate philosophical investigations would surely be in order. In what follows, I will try to make a brief argument that will hopefully pave the way for further studies in this direction.

13.2 EMPATHY WITH POSITIVE EMOTIONS

We have emphasised several times the ways in which empathy can foster moral behaviour by making us notice people in need, by motivating us to help them, by developing a caring perspective, and so on. This is a natural consequence of the fact that a moral act stands out more vividly when it is performed to help a person who fares badly; it takes, in essence, the form of the good fighting the bad, of a positive force combatting a negative one. However, concern for others and moral behaviour does not only require us to help people in trouble and, consequently, to empathise exclusively with them, but also that we share and reflect on positive emotions. The ability to feel, for example, joy with others, to anticipate in our mind what positively motivates them, is a fundamental part of the moral life. In fact, if I understand what makes others happy, I will know what I have to do in order to make them stay that way and to help them when they do not fare well.¹⁴ Also, if I share other people's positive emotions,

¹⁴Of course, an easy and obvious objection would be to mention that not everything that makes other people happy is necessarily also good. One can have immoral desires, for instance. However, in the framework of a virtue ethics, or at least, granted the fact that the empathiser is not an immoral person and would consequently never support immoral demands (at least not deliberately), this objection loses its meaning.

feeling good as a result, I will be more motivated to help them—a form of positive conditioning. The effects of positive conditioning are well documented in the scientific literature on the subject, and nonetheless, it is hard to find a work that tries to couple the beneficial effects of positive conditioning and empathy. On the contrary, there are authors who take the power of positive affect to be a proof of the inadequacy of empathy in comparison. Prinz, for instance, has no problems in affirming that ‘a small dose of happiness seems to promote considerable altruism’,¹⁵ but he never wonders whether empathy could be connected to happy feelings. In fact, it seems that he considers empathy as connected with the negative ones only: ‘The meager effects of empathy are greatly overshadowed by other emotions. Consider, for example, positive affect.’¹⁶ Further, after having cited a study in which people feeling happiness show a far greater willingness to help others in comparison with people in the control condition he states:

This conclusion is embarrassing for those who think empathy is crucial for altruism because vicarious distress presumably has a negative correlation with positive happiness. It could be that vicarious distress reduces helpfulness by diminishing positive affect.¹⁷

These words demonstrate beyond all doubts that Prinz excludes *a priori* a possible link between empathy and positive affect: for him, empathy only arises in relation with negative feelings and, so it seems, it is deeply connected with vicarious distress. However, the philosopher does not provide a definitive proof for this so integralist an affirmation. It goes without saying that a person only capable of sharing the pain and suffering of others and not their joys would not only be miserable, but likely, over time, barely able to function as a human being due to the high quantity of vicarious distress they would be feeling. Nevertheless, the point is that empathy can arise equally along with both positive and negative feelings. Hence, the studies which show the fostering of, for example, altruistic behaviour as a result of the influence of positive feelings¹⁸ are not per se

¹⁵ Prinz (2011, p. 220).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The same could be said about the research on the power of anger and indignation, that Prinz also mentions as conclusive proof of the inadequacy of empathy, without considering that anger and indignation may very well result from empathy with others.

‘against empathy’, as Prinz presents them. On the contrary, they show how empathy with positive feelings can be of great help for morality. To cite the illuminating words of Gregory Peterson on this matter:

The ability to share positive emotions is a prime feature of affiliative relationships, and much of our decision making and action necessarily incorporates into it not simply the negative but also the positive impacts of our actions. This too is a learned and developmental process: we learn to become good friends and, later, good spouses and partners and good parents. Without such awareness, our efforts fall flat or even backfire, despite the best of intentions.¹⁹

This is a concept I have repeated several times in this book: morality does not always and necessarily involve dealing with universal themes, such as global warming and war. It does not necessarily lead to the correct choice of social or economic policies. It can do so, of course, but morality in general and moral behaviour in particular regard primarily how we behave towards others, what kind of acts we instantiate in a given relationship (between friends, colleagues, relatives, but also between perfect strangers). I can help a person in trouble because I empathise with their suffering, but I can do it also because I imagine the relief, perhaps the joy that this person will feel as a result of my helping behaviour and empathise with this image of them I have created in my mind, feeling an anticipatory happiness as a result.

In the quote I gave, Peterson also emphasises the importance of the developmental dimension of empathy, and he is right: by means of repeated empathic processes over time we learn to deal with the emotionality of other people in an increasingly better way. We become aware of what troubles them, of what makes them happy, of what makes them sad, or angry, or proud, and so on. Moreover, we become aware of all these elements not in a ‘cold’ and detached manner, but in a ‘warm’ and affective one. I feel,²⁰ for example, that what I would like to say may sound rude and inappropriate, so I change the tone and the words to maintain my message but without hurting the person in front of me. I feel that one of my students needs encouragement, I know how much he wants me to appreciate his work

¹⁹ Peterson (2017, p. 250).

²⁰ Notice that thanks to our empathy with the target we really *feel*, we do not merely *know*.

and I empathise with the feeling of joy and pride he will probably feel after my praise about his work, so I praise him.

13.3 EMPATHY AS A VIRTUE

Hopefully, everything I outlined in the last chapter has helped to defend the position in which empathy is to be considered a virtue. In fact, it is capable of satisfying all the conditions required by Aristotle (and Battaly) for being considered as such. At this stage, we can add one more definition by Gregory Peterson. He describes a moral virtue in this way:

A moral virtue is an active disposition (character trait) that (1) is learned over time, (2) integrates implicit and explicit processing, and (3) is a necessary component of full moral functioning.²¹

Of empathy as being an active disposition we have already spoken. Let us now briefly see whether it also fulfils all the other prerequisites. Empathy, if it is to be considered a virtue by Peterson, should be learnt over time. However, is this indeed true? It seems, in fact, that people are born with different degrees of empathy: we have already seen the case of autistics and that of psychopaths, and even among the non-autistic and non-psychopathic population there are important variances. Would it not be more correct, then, to define empathy as a capacity rather than a disposition learnt over time? In effect, it depends. There are at least two ways in which we can interpret the word ‘capacity’. If we define capacities as Battaly does, then it is obvious that empathy cannot be a capacity. On the contrary, if we use our ordinary, simple concept of capacity as being synonymous with ability, then we might say that empathy is a capacity that can be trained. Battaly²² indeed describes capacities, first of all, as essentially *involuntary*, because they are either innate or acquired in the usual course of development and because we do not have control over their acquisition and activation. Thus, they also cannot be improved as a result of training and practice. Vision, for her, is a classic case of capacity: innate, involuntary, and impossible to perfect through effort (if you are short-sighted, for instance, the only solutions are glasses, contact lenses, or surgery, not training). In this sense, it is evident that empathy cannot be considered a capacity in the proper

²¹ Peterson (2017, p. 247).

²² Cfr. Battaly (2011, pp. 290–291).

sense, because we have already highlighted the fact that we have control over it and that empathy can be improved in the course of life with practice.²³ Instead, empathy can be seen as an ability and, as we have seen above, can become an active disposition.

Peterson's second condition is that virtues should integrate implicit and explicit processes. What he wanted to express with this rather cryptic formulation clearly stems from the following quote about the virtue of courage for Aristotle:

To be courageous, then, is more than reflexively throwing oneself into the line of fire when the situation appears to require it; it involves an accurate and continually updated awareness of which situations those are, when they arise, and whether the current situation demands such action or not. It also involves recognition of when a situation requires active deliberation or not, and such capacity and awareness of the need for deliberation is the result of the honing of both our implicit and explicit processing capacities.²⁴

Therefore, the phrase 'implicit and explicit processes' describes the general behavioural background behind the acquirement and practice of virtues. The virtuous person is not the kind of person who acts without thinking, instead, they always know what to do thanks to this mixture between implicit processes, including the 'continually updated awareness' about the kind of situation they are facing and about what they should do, on one hand, and explicit processes, such as that of deliberation and the practical action they will then carry out, on the other. We have seen that empathy can meet these requirements, the empathic person being exactly that kind of person who, by using both their LLE and HLE, by carrying out processes, like perspective-taking or narrative empathy, shows more than just a series of automatisms for which empathy is activated unconsciously. Their control over empathy expresses itself in their constant and updated dealing with implicit and explicit processes.

²³ Of course, scholars who consider empathy to be only a basic, automatic, immediate, and involuntary mechanism, in line with what we have defined with the acronym 'LLE', that is, low-level empathy, may very well agree to label empathy as a capacity and make it depend on conditions over which we have no influence, such as the presence of a certain number of functioning mirror-neurons in our brain or something similar. But those—like myself—who think of empathy as also involving conceptual abilities, such as perspective-taking and imagination, cannot be satisfied with this view.

²⁴ Peterson (2017, p. 246).

However, it is this third feature that is the most important one: in fact, if empathy were not a necessary component of full moral functioning, then it would only be a skill, and not a virtue. Fortunately, the answer to this issue has been developed in the course of this whole book up to now: empathy is, under many different aspects, a necessary component of full moral functioning. It is necessary for our moral education and development, it is a necessary component of moral perception, it is necessary in many cases of moral judgement and moral conduct. Hence, we can conclude that empathy is, even using Peterson's standard in addition to that of Battaly, a moral virtue. Nevertheless, I wish to argue further than this. Until now, in the section dedicated to moral conduct and motivation, we have emphasised, in particular, the role that empathy can play as a powerful motivator and illustrated the situations where it favours moral agency. However, although this was certainly useful to contrast the views of anti-empathists thinking that we would be better off without empathy, the extent to which empathy can in fact be considered necessary for moral conduct remains open to dispute. Are its moral effects for our agency not merely contingent? We have answered earlier that they can be and that for empathy to be necessarily moral, especially in the field of moral agency, it should be guided by practical wisdom. It is now time to construe a special kind of argument. If we can show that empathy is, in many cases, exactly what is required from a person to act morally, then we can conclude that a well-developed morality *needs* empathy, that empathy contributes to the flourishing of both morality globally and of the virtuous person themselves. In what follows, I will attempt to present just this argument.

13.4 THE IMPORTANCE OF *FEELING WITH*

Consider, for instant moment, that anti-empathists are right. Perhaps, we might be able to develop morality, as well as to act and to judge morally without empathy and use, instead, deontological or utilitarian principles together with what Paul Bloom (2016) calls 'rational compassion' (which is, as we have seen, a type of active concern for other people stemming from the rational evaluation of their needy conditions). Now ask yourself: would it be better that way? Would that be an advantage or a disadvantage for morality? I am inclined to think that setting aside empathy from the moral sphere should be considered a great loss. If we take morality to regulate the actions and intentions of individuals with bodies and sensitive appetites, who live an emotional life and do not always follow the dictates

of pure reason and logic, but who also value care, attachment, and the resulting vulnerability they get from them, then empathy ought to be and, in fact, is necessary for moral behaviour. Many of the recent discoveries in neurosciences show how complex our brain is and how difficult it is to distinguish between a purely rational and a purely affective part of ourselves. Thoughts, beliefs, and emotions seem, on the contrary, to be often intertwined and to influence one other. Without empathy we might reach some morally significant results, but not in every single case, and, what is more, we would not act *perfectly* and *completely* morally. This concept may sound odd to many, so, in what follows, I will try to explain what I mean by this.

Suppose that a couple, Samuel and Alice, are talking. Alice seems quite upset, so, Samuel, who loves her very much and always tries to take care of her, asks her, with a concerned face, what is wrong. Alice initially denies that something is wrong and attempts to change the subject, but Samuel persists. After a couple of minutes, Alice starts to open up and tells Samuel her problem. Samuel listens to her problem very carefully, without interrupting her. After Alice has finished her story, Samuel takes a couple of minutes to meditate on the matter and then exclaims: ‘Maybe you could...’ and offers Alice what he believes is the best solution to her problem. However, surprisingly enough for Samuel, Alice reacts with irritation: ‘Oh, why do you never listen to me?’ Samuel is puzzled:²⁵

‘What... Why do you say I never listen to you? I listened to your story for ten minutes without saying a word!’

‘Oh, poor you!’ replies Alice with more than a hint of sarcasm.

‘No, I mean... I really care about you. I was just trying to figure out a possible solution for your problem. I wanted to help you!’

‘Yeah, I see how you try to help me! You’re always the same! Too focused on yourself to really understand what the other needs. Forget about it. It’s my fault! I knew I shouldn’t have talked to you about it,’ replies a disappointed Alice.

Samuel, astonished and hurt, is speechless.

This and other situations of the kind are, with all probability, common to many people. Let us try to analyse what went wrong in the communication between Samuel and Alice. It is clear that Samuel cares for Alice and the moment he hears that she has a problem, he immediately prepares

²⁵The example is narrated using dialogue to better convey the emotional load.

himself to help her. Therefore, after having listened to Alice's story very carefully, he reflects upon the possible solution and eventually offers Alice his advice. The schema is quite simple and can be summarised as follows: 'I realise that you have a problem. From what I think I've understood, your problem is "x". I am convinced that the best solution for "x" is "y". So, why don't you try to do "y"?' Taken per se, there is nothing wrong with this line of thought: everything seems rational and logical, and yet, Alice is convinced that Samuel has not understood her. There seems to be nothing offensive in this reasoning, and nonetheless, Alice feels offended and thinks Samuel is selfish. However, all this makes sense when we become aware of the fact that actually something is missing from this line of thought, and it is empathy. Samuel takes the problem, analyses it, and gives the solution. Even if he said that he cares for Alice (and he really does) he does not take Alice completely into account: his focus is solely on the problem.

This fact is of exceptional importance for our claim, because, put in another way, we might very well affirm that Samuel, in this precise case, has a form of rational compassion, but no empathy for Alice. He cares for her, he feels badly for her and feels the desire to help her, and he accomplishes this desire by helping her out in what he thinks is the best way. However, he does not empathise with her, and this lack of empathy is perceived by Alice, who, as a consequence, feels hurt and reacts with sarcasm. Samuel does not show empathy because he treats Alice's problem as a mechanic would treat a breakdown in a car, or as a surgeon would treat a cancer at the stomach, that is, by focusing on the problem, ultimately for the sake of the other, but without thereby feeling with the other. If Samuel had really tried to empathise with Alice, he would have realised that what she really needed was not a ready-made solution, but simply some moral support. In other words, she just wanted to be listened to and then hear soothing words of concern. She wanted to feel herself cared for and not just to see the effects of care. This kind of aid can be offered only by empathy. That is why I argue that *feeling with* alone can indeed possess moral value. Moreover, frequently, when we are troubled, it is not the *feeling for* that we seek (which, after all, can often be overly paternalistic and make the object of compassion feel pitied), but the *feeling with*. We want people to be *tuned into* us.

My claim is that to help others with compassion, but not with empathy, can sometimes work perfectly fine, but on many other occasions, and generally over time, it can lead to several problems: it can create a distance between

the person who feels a rational kind of compassion and the target of the compassion. On the one side, there is an individual with warm feelings of concern and who is very much inclined to help, but who does not feel, in the slightest, the same feelings as the suffering person, and on the other side, the afflicted individual, who does not feel the helping person is tuned into their feelings and ends up simply feeling pitied. The *sympathetic* but not empathic person (or, in the sense given to this term by Bloom, the *compassionate* one) is that person who wants to help another, but does not know how to do it, because they are not ‘on the same wavelength’, as it were, with the other. On the contrary, the *empathic* person is that person who knows what to do and who feels a certain amount of motivation to do it, because it is hard to ignore what one feels. If, in addition to the already significant stimulus of empathy per se, one reaches also the level of sympathetic care (and we have seen above how empathy and caring sympathetic concern are often intertwined), then altruistic behaviour will necessarily follow.

Kant famously remarked in the Critique of Pure Reason that ‘thoughts without content are void; intuitions without conceptions, blind’.²⁶ I think that even one opposed to empathy would find a similar connection between empathy and compassion: empathy without compassion can sometimes be morally void (because it does not always necessarily lead to altruistic behaviour), but compassion without empathy is blind (because we cannot really act morally towards another person without first being in tune with them).²⁷

13.5 EMPATHY’S ROLE WITHIN A RATIONALIST ETHICS

Having mentioned Immanuel Kant, I would like to remain slightly longer on this matter with the aim of emphasising some points that have not been sufficiently examined in depth by the literature and to develop a few original (at least to the best of my knowledge) arguments that can further our discussion.²⁸ As a paradigmatic case of a rationalist, Kant did not reserve a special role for sentiments and emotions in his ethics. His moral

²⁶ Kant (2003), Second Part–Transcendental Logic; Introduction, Idea of Transcendental Logic, I. Of Logic in General.

²⁷ Indeed, how can you help a person without understanding what it feels like to be in a certain situation? Empathy has the advantage to provide a special kind of knowledge: *knowing how it is*.

²⁸ This part is intended to highlight the role that empathy can play not only in the frame of a care- or virtue-ethics, but even of a rationalist one.

philosophy can, in fact, be explained with no need to resort to this notion, and in this sense empathy cannot be considered at all as a central concept in his ethical construction. Nevertheless, even he, the staunchest defender of the law of duty, could not help but underline a special part that empathy plays in morality. Notice that Kant never used the term ‘empathy’ for the very good reason that it was not widespread at that time; however, his concept of *Teilnehmende Empfindung*, usually translated with ‘sympathetic feeling’, or simply ‘sympathy’, is essentially comparable to our modern concept of empathy. In fact, he writes in *The Metaphysics of Morals*:

Sympathetic joy and sadness (*sympathia moralis*) are sensible feelings of pleasure or pain [...] at another’s state of joy or sorrow (shared feeling, sympathetic feeling). Nature has already implanted in man susceptibility to these feelings. But to use this as a means to promoting active and rational benevolence is still a particular, though only a conditional, duty. It is called the duty of humanity (*humanitas*) because man is regarded here not merely as a rational being but also as an animal endowed with reason.²⁹

From this quote it can be noticed that, for Kant, empathy is a natural feeling and that we can use it *instrumentally* in order to achieve what duty alone (i.e. the categorical imperative) would not be able to achieve. This is the reason why Kant calls this kind of duty a ‘conditional’ one. This duty is conditional because it is to be pursued only *at the condition* that it helps us to accomplish the commands of the categorical imperative, whilst it has to be neglected when it contrasts with the latter. It seems, therefore, fair to affirm that Kant sees empathy as a sort of emotional ‘crutch’ or ‘prosthesis’ for the moral man, something that can be instrumentally useful for morality, but not absolutely. While I agree with the philosopher from Königsberg in acknowledging an instrumental moral utility to empathy, I also find that by developing Kant’s view, we can reach two other important conclusions about the moral dimension of empathy that may be summarised in two postulations: (A) empathy is a fundamental part of our humanity (what Kant calls ‘*humanitas*’), and (B) empathy is, what is in some cases, required to not only act morally but to act in a morally, so to speak, ‘more perfect’ way. These two elements are so deeply connected that they can be viewed as two sides of the same coin.

²⁹ Kant (1991, p. 250), emphasis in original.

Consider again the example of Samuel and Alice. This case illustrates the intrinsic value of empathy compared to rational compassion or sympathy. Empathy has a special and unique importance on its own, regardless of whether it can lead to compassion, or not. When we are in need, we do not want someone helping us with the superior and detached smile of a bodhisattva, we want a certain sharing, a commonality of feelings, we want—in a sense—to be ‘welcomed’ in the hearts of others. We want them to be open and receptive, even vulnerable towards us. Consider the last sentence from the quote by Kant: ‘It is called the duty of humanity (*humanitas*) because man is regarded here not merely as a rational being but also as an animal endowed with reason.’ What does Kant mean by that? As I interpret him, he means that whilst morals grounded in the law of duty regards a human being as purely a rational being, free from their bonds with matter, the body, and their emotionality, an ethics enriched with empathy conceives a human being for what they really are: ‘an animal *endowed* with reason’, specifically, a sensible, embodied, and emotional being with desires, needs, and feelings, that is also *gifted with* reason. In other words, reason comes to be one of the features which characterises humanity among others, but not the only feature, nor the only one of significance. Empathy, thereby, makes visible the limits of people’s *autonomy*, which is a central concept in Kantian ethics. We are not completely autonomous: we have emotional and social needs that can be satisfied by an application of the categorical imperative only insofar as it can promote benevolence. According to Kant, we have a duty to foster merely what we have labelled HLE, since LLE is not intentional. Given that his distinction is extremely similar to the one I have made and can thus illustrate my point even more clearly, it is useful to quote it in full:

Now humanity can be located either in the *capacity* and the *will to share in others’ feelings* (*humanitas practica*) or merely in the *susceptibility*, given by nature itself, to feel joy and sadness in common with others (*humanitas aesthetica*). The first is *free*, and is therefore called *sympathetic* (*communio sentiendi liberalis*); it is based on practical reason. The second is *unfree* (*communio sentiendi illiberalis, servilis*); it can be called *communicable* (since it is like the susceptibility to warmth or contagious diseases), and also compassion, since it spreads naturally among men living near one another. There is obligation only to the first.³⁰

³⁰ Kant (1991, p. 250).

It can be observed that, for Kant, it is not empathy that is the element to be ‘located in the capacity and the will to share in others’ feelings’, but *humanity* itself! For the philosopher of reason and of the law of duty, our very human essence expresses itself, *inter alia*, in *sharing in others’ feelings*. Once we admit to ourselves how closely this ability is linked with our own human nature, it is clear that anti-empathic positions cannot be maintained. How can one ‘eliminate’—as anti-empathists insist we do—such an intrinsic capacity?

Notice, also, how near the Kantian’s concept is with the one we have developed in the last section, as a result of a reinterpretation of the Aristotelian ethics: the ability to share in others’ feelings, according to Kant, is based on practical reason and is voluntary, exactly like virtues, which for Aristotle, are based on practical wisdom, and, more importantly, exactly like our concept of empathy. However, there is a *caveat*: Kant is adamant about the fact that only what we have called HLE can become a duty, whereas we have no obligation towards LLE. It is easy to understand why Kant chooses to sustain such a position: if LLE is involuntary (‘unfree’ in his words) and given in different measures by nature, how can one have an obligation to something over which they have no power? I partially share this view, in the sense that I also agree that LLE is less controllable and that we find people who seem, by nature, to more or less have a ‘gift’ for this. Unlike Kant, however, I think that we can have a certain indirect influence on LLE, which, if it does not make it voluntary (because it remains a fundamental automatic mechanism), at the very least makes us capable of improving it or not. In other words, LLE is grounded in our openness to the others and their inner world, and in our attention to their behaviour, to their embodied emotions expressed in gestures, vocalisations, facial expressions, and more. Although we cannot decide when LLE occurs, we can do much for the fulfilment of its preconditions. Depending, for example, on how open and attentive we are, the activation of LLE will be more or less probable, in a directly proportional manner. Hence, although I agree with Kant in affirming that we do not have any duty to feel LLE, we do have an indirect duty to favour our attentiveness towards others, so that LLE can follow. In this way, although LLE remains automatic and involuntary, it is at least able to be influenced.

Going on with the reading of this part of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, it seems that Kant walks into a paradox. As I do not want to misinterpret

what he has said by making a personal summary of his argument, I think that the best way to proceed is to cite his words in full and then comment on them:

It was a sublime way of thinking that the Stoic ascribed to his wise man when he had him say, “I wish for a friend, not that he might help *me* in poverty, sickness, imprisonment, etc., but rather that I might stand by *him* and rescue a man.” But the same wise man, when he could not rescue his friend, said to himself, “What is it to me?” In other words, he rejected compassion.

In fact, when another suffers and, although I cannot help him, I let myself be infected by his pain (through my imagination), then two of us suffer, though the evil really (in nature) affects only *one*. But there cannot possibly be a duty to increase the evil in the world and so to do good *from compassion*. This would also be an insulting kind of beneficence, since it expresses the kind of benevolence one has toward someone unworthy, called *pity*; and this has no place in men’s relations with one another [...].³¹

The quote is dense with different meanings, so it behoves us to analyse it carefully. Let us start with the example of the Stoic. It is clear that what Kant wants to highlight here is the fact that the virtuous person should not desire a friend that can help them when they do not fare well, but wish for a friend that they may help when this friend finds themselves in dire straits. In other words, the virtuous person is the altruistic person *par excellence*. Until this point, there is nothing so worthy of note: traditionally, altruism and benevolence are characteristics of the virtuous person. However, Kant then mentions that although the virtuous person is very concerned about others, and especially about their friends, they can easily shift to indifference when they understand that they cannot be of help, thereby rejecting compassion. This behaviour, which could be deemed rather odd, is explained by Kant by means of simple logical reasoning: the problem with compassion is that it doubles the suffering in the world. In fact, if one person suffers and I am in no position to help them, but I start to feel compassion for them, I will only add to my suffering, without relieving theirs. Compassion, in other words, acts as a multiplier of pain. Yet there is a distinct problem with compassion that I have already highlighted previously, while discussing the example of Samuel and Alice:

³¹ Kant (1991, p. 250), emphasis in original.

the fact that compassion³² can easily become—even if Kant does not use this word—‘paternalistic’ and express the kind of benevolence towards someone perceived as ‘unworthy’ or at least inferior. In this case, compassion turns into pity.

Hence, following Kant’s line of reasoning, one should avoid sharing the suffering of another, as this just multiplies the suffering and eventually leads to pity, which is, as we have seen, the wrong kind of benevolence. Nonetheless, Kant then makes an unexpected move which seems *prima facie* to give his argument the characteristic of a paradox:

But while it is not in itself a duty to share the sufferings (as well the joys) of others, it is a duty to sympathize actively in their fate; and to this end it is therefore an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic [*ästhetische*]) feelings in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principles and the feeling appropriate to them. It is therefore a duty not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sick-rooms or debtors’ prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist. For this is still one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty alone would not accomplish.³³

Reading this paragraph, it is possible to see that whilst the first sentence seems to ideally continue Kant’s argument about avoiding the sharing of feelings, the rest of it asserts exactly the contrary: ‘it is [...] a duty to cultivate compassionate natural [...] feelings’; ‘it is [...] a duty not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found’, and so he continues. At the end of the quote, comes the strongest assertion: this ability to share the others’ feelings is ‘one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty alone would not accomplish’. Therefore, this sharing of feelings is, for Kant, not only a duty, but a natural, innate, congenital impulse that help us to accomplish what *duty alone* (and we know that the whole framework of the Kantian ethics is based on duty) cannot accomplish. In other words, duty is considered per se not sufficient to carry out everything that a

³² Especially if it is a ‘rational’, thus cold and detached kind of compassion, like that supported by Bloom. Nevertheless, Kant goes even further: for him, the very same concept of compassion is subject to this kind of bias.

³³ Kant (1991, pp. 250–251).

morally virtuous person should do. Moral agency extends beyond the borders of duty, and hence we have an indirect duty to do what goes beyond duty. The result is a complex and almost paradoxical formulation for what is undoubtedly a complex and almost paradoxical concept. Let us attempt to analyse this to some extent.

After having criticised compassion and the sharing of other people's suffering, Kant seems, at this point, to reconsider his previous claims entirely. How is this possible? In my opinion, there are two feasible ways in which we can interpret Kant's reasoning. The first is by coming back to his distinction between *humanitas practica* and *humanitas aesthetica*. Remember, in fact, that Kant made it clear that whilst the capacity to share in other people's feelings is free and sympathetic (*humanitas practica*), the susceptibility towards feelings (*humanitas aesthetica*), which is more similar to a very basic form of empathy or even to an emotional contagion, is unfree and communicable. If we interpret Kant as placing his concept of compassion in the second category and not in the first, the paradox will disappear. In fact, Kant may continue attacking compassion as representing an unwelcomed form of benevolence because of its involuntary nature and its tendency to increase the suffering instead of mitigating it, while still insisting that frequenting locations that cause empathetic feelings to rise in us is a kind of indirect duty. The problem, indeed, is not in sharing feelings (even negative ones) per se, but sharing them by means of compassion. This is the easier explanation, but, I believe, also the wrong one. If I am not mistaken in my reading of Kant, in fact, his claim is a bit more complex than this. Notice that when he asserts that it is an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural feelings in us, he not only uses the adjective 'compassionate' but he specifies that these feelings are 'aesthetic'. This specification should make us reflect, since it is exactly the adjective he associates with the mere, and I quote: 'susceptibility, given by nature itself, to feel joy and sadness in common with others', namely, the *humanitas aesthetica*. Thus, it seems that for Kant we have an indirect duty to feel even compassion, but only—and this is crucial—insofar as it leads to 'sympathy based on moral principles and the feeling appropriate to them'. The paradox, in this case, can be solved in the following way:

- A. We have a duty only towards *humanitas practica* (which, using our terminology, can be referred to as simply 'empathy', or 'high-level empathy', to be more precise), not towards *humanitas aesthetica* (which is portrayed as a degree of low-level empathy).

- B. ‘Compassion’ is another term than can be used for *humanitas aesthetica* (as Kant himself indicates), therefore we do not have a duty to feel it. Furthermore, compassion increases the evil in the world by multiplying the felt suffering and can lead to ‘an insulting kind of beneficence’, namely, pity. Acting out of compassion is, as a consequence, not only not obligatory, but even to be avoided.
- C. *Nevertheless*, compassionate (and empathic)³⁴ feelings can be used as means to sympathy, and since active sympathy is a duty, the instrumental role that these kinds of feelings play is an important one, so important that their development and use in fact form an indirect duty.

Observe that both explanations are equally functional to our purposes. In effect, by choosing the first one, we would interpret Kant’s defence of high-level empathy as nothing less than a duty: ‘we have obligation’ says Kant, to the *humanitas practica*. On the contrary, low-level empathy, gathered together with ‘compassion’, would be discarded. With the second kind of explanation, together with HLE, even the role of LLE would be reconsidered. In fact, even though *humanitas aesthetica* cannot—taken per se—constitute a direct duty, cultivating it can be an indirect duty insofar as it favours the already cited ‘sympathy based on moral principles and the feelings appropriate to them’, and because, ultimately, this is an impulse implanted by nature itself that helps us do what the representation of duty alone would not be capable of accomplishing.

Beyond the bare fact that it is extremely thought-provoking to observe how the most famous example of rationalist ethics existing in the history of philosophy assigns such a special role to empathy,³⁵ Kant’s considerations invite some reflections as to why empathy comes to be that weighty. Are not the dark sides of empathy more numerous than the bright ones? Judging from Kant, they are not. Again, take the paradigmatic case of Kantian compassion. The philosopher from Königsberg interprets compassion in the traditional (and, I should add, more appropriate) sense of

³⁴ Kant’s lexicon does not allow for this distinction, but ours does, and we have to acknowledge that Kant gathers compassion and low-level empathy under the same umbrella term.

³⁵ Which, incidentally, constitutes another piece of evidence of the fact that my arguments about empathy do not necessarily conflict, in principle, with ethics different from (neo)sentimental or virtue-ethics.

‘suffering-with’, Latin *com-passio*, German *Mit-Leid*, that is as empathy for the person in pain (be it physical or psychological). His example with the Stoics and the subsequent reflection about compassion as a multiplier of suffering seem to bring him close to the claims made by anti-empathists about the vicarious distress one gets by empathising with the plights of others and the negative impact it has on our psychology, as well as on our capacity to actually do something morally good. However, Kant then adds something more: ‘places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found’ are to be sought out, so that the painful feelings one will receive as a result will not be avoided.

We have already highlighted this apparent paradox: at first it seems that such a sharing of feelings should be shunned, then the philosopher urges us to seek it out. The point is that, in order to accomplish our duty, we also need appropriate feelings that accompany the actions we carry out and that help to enhance our moral motivation. Although risky, empathy, in all its forms, is either a direct or an indirect duty, in fact, even when it takes the form of compassion (and Kant says clearly that we should not refrain from ‘sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist’), it is the necessary complement of the categorical imperative. Nonetheless, one might still ask how can this be reconciled with Kant’s previous arguments. I think that the answer has to be sought in the fact that although the *humanitas aesthetica* (i.e., LLE) is not in itself under our direct control, as I have highlighted earlier, it can be controlled after its occurrence. In other words, the moment I know that I am experiencing feelings of suffering out of empathy with another, I can do something about it, I can stem it. If I am right about that, then Kant’s assertion about the Stoics may still make sense: if the virtuous person knows that feeling with another will be not only useless, but even deleterious, they will not do it. Furthermore, if I have some sort of control over my LLE, then I will in principle be able to prevent it from becoming pity. Notice, besides, that what is central for Kant is that we avoid acting out of empathy, of this ‘feeling with’. We should, that is to say, act *with* empathy, but not *out of* it. The categorical imperative must be our only guide,³⁶ nevertheless, empathy, far from being a stranger to the moral landscape, integrates the law of duty with extra moral motivation and insights.

³⁶Of course, this purism applies only to Kantian and Neokantian ethicists. As we have seen in the course of the book, one may still act morally directly out of empathy.

13.6 EMPATHY AND MORAL PERFECTION

I would like to emphasise one point in particular from Kant's last quote that would otherwise run the risk of being ignored: that about feelings appropriate to moral principles. What does it mean for feelings to be appropriate to moral principles driving the moral subject? It seems clear that, for Kant, the virtuous person should also be a sympathetic one and that this sympathy should be active, namely, not only involving a generic psychological tendency to abstractly sympathise with the others, but a practical commitment to really help them in the praxis. If this is true, then empathy has, as already highlighted, an irreplaceable (instrumental) role to play as a powerful motivator for moral conduct and complement to the categorical imperative, but it also has—and this is my argument, which I believe is very much in accordance with Kant's—the role of a constitutive element of the morally virtuous person. In other words, my claim is that even if it makes no sense to affirm that a person has not acted morally when they had good intentions and chose a morally apt means of realising those intentions, if they failed to empathise with the other when it was needed, then their action cannot be considered morally perfect, because it was not perfectly appropriate for the situation. In some cases (as we have seen with Samuel and Alice's example), empathy is even what is required to truly be of some help and reach one's own moral aims.

Consider the case of telling lies. We know that the categorical imperative imposes a duty to always be truthful and never lie to anyone. However, imagine for one moment the following scenario: suppose that Mark decides not to lie to his wife Jean because it is 'his duty' (so he tells his wife) to do so. Indeed, the categorical imperative commands total honesty. My claim is that in such a situation Jean would (and actually should) feel offended. Mark's behaviour seems to be very much comparable to that of the (in)famous 'husband with one thought too many' created by Bernard Williams at the end of *Persons, Characters and Morality*.³⁷ There, Williams famously discusses the case of a man who, faced with a dangerous situation, can only save one of two people in equal peril, one of them being his wife. The British philosopher observed that a moral justification defending the man against the charge that he ought to have been impartial provides the rescuer with 'one thought too many'. Put in another way, a morally good husband should not think about impartiality when it comes

³⁷Williams (1981).

to saving the life of his wife over the life of another person with whom he is not acquainted. Similarly, Mark's appeal to the categorical imperative to justify his decision not to lie to Jean seems '*less than moral*' or at least '*oddly moral*' because it is grounded in what we feel is the wrong motive: it is another 'thought too many'. A good husband should avoid lying to his wife not only because it is his duty to do so, but because he loves her, he cares for her, and he feels with her. 'How would she feel if I told her a lie?'; 'How would I feel if she lied to me?' These should be the thoughts driving a good husband, and not something like: 'What would happen if I universalised my maxim to lie in order to protect myself from bad consequences?'

These considerations teach an important lesson: there are cases in which empathy offers the right kind of moral justification for our actions, and in which other more general and universal moral principles fail to do so. However, we have to admit that even inflexible anti-empathists, like Jesse Prinz and Paul Bloom, might concede such a conclusion, that is, they may very well agree on the fact that close personal relations need the fundamental contribution of empathy, but that its role in the moral sphere should be limited or even suppressed. Indeed, this thought seems to emerge from some of their statements. Prinz, for instance, is ready to admit that empathy might enrich the lives of those who experience it and help foster close relations in personal life, but then adds that it cannot serve the central motivational role in driving pro-social behaviour.³⁸

Bloom seems at times to share Prinz's position, but eventually displays a more radical position than that of Prinz. In fact, if on page 130 of his book *Against Empathy* he shows a certain openness towards the role of empathy in personal relationships,³⁹ between pages 131 and 132 he then states: 'I am going to concede that there are facets of intimate life where empathy does add something of value. But on balance, my conclusion here will be consistent with the overall theme of this book: It often does more harm than good.'⁴⁰ Hence, anti-empathists might still object that what I have proved with the example of Mark and Jean and the following discussion is merely the beneficial role empathy can play in intimate relationships, but not in the domain of morality in general. However, the positions of Bloom and Prinz are far from being unproblematic. To say

³⁸ Prinz (2011, p. 229).

³⁹ See Bloom (2016, p. 130).

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 131–132.

that intimate relationships are one thing and morality is something completely different is troublesome at least. It is troublesome because either one concedes that morality does not have anything to do with personal relationships, and this would be an outlandish conclusion, or one admits that there are at least two different categories of morality: a ‘private morality’ for individuals to whom I am personally related and a ‘public morality’ for, say, matters such as social and economic policies, the environment, and charities. Since I cannot believe that any reasonable person would be ready to embrace the first option, I am inclined to believe that Jesse Prinz and Paul Bloom are in favour of the second. The question is whether it really makes sense to hold such a position. Should we not strive towards a unitary ethics that can be used in all kinds of situations and with both strangers and acquaintances? If the answer to this question is positive (and I think it should be), then an ethics which acknowledges the positive role that empathy can play and, nonetheless, does not refrain from employing moral principles, especially when it comes to make decisions which extend well beyond the personal sphere, appears to be the best solution. Our empathy does not simply disappear when, for example, we reflect about voting or not for a certain policy: it accompanies our choices together with our moral principles. Limiting its influence in these matters, as we have shown several times in the book, is a short-sighted resolution.

Nevertheless, both Prinz and Bloom demonstrate, at times, a desire to go even further than that. For them, even in the context of personal relations empathy proves not to be always and necessarily useful. Consider, for instance, the doctor-patient relationship.⁴¹ Generally, we hope for competent doctors and the question of whether they are empathic or not does not seem to matter; what matters is the result. At least, for most of us, it seems obvious that it is better to be cured and survive, even if we have no esteem for the doctor who saved our life, than to die at the hands of the most empathic of doctors. The patient is here simply expressing a personal (and understandable) interest to survive, and since this is the only outcome that matters, the question about the character of the doctor (are they empathic or not?) and the nature of their treatment (does it involve a concern for me as a patient or not?) becomes secondary. In this context, morality is completely excluded: it is just a transaction, figuring on the one

⁴¹ I am indebted to Prof. Michael Brady, who made this objection to me in an international workshop at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, and gave me the chance to formulate, what seems to me a convincing answer.

side a patient who wants to recover, ‘whatever it takes’, and on the other, a doctor ready to do exactly that in order to save them.⁴²

If we regard the relationship between doctor and patient in this way, then it is not surprising that empathy is out of the question. However, there are two objections which are possible to be raised here. The first regards the definition of morality itself. My claim—which I think reflects the normal moral intuitions even of non-philosophers—is that the morality of an action cannot be reduced merely to *what* one does (in this case, saving the life of a patient instead of letting them die), but must encompass also *how* one does it and *why*. There are, in fact, many conceivable ways of saving a life: for example, one can do it unintentionally, and in this case we would not be ready to judge such an action as moral. Alternatively, one can do it *à la* ‘Doctor House’, in a cold, detached, even unfriendly, and unkind manner, or, conversely, expressing warm caring and concern. Also, of course, one can do it following altruistic motives or very egoistic ones. All of these potential variations have an impact on the morality of an action, which, as we have already stated, always differs by degrees. For instance, we are more inclined to deem as morally good an action stemming out of an altruistic concern for the other, than one out of an egoistic motive. Also, we are more prone to call morally virtuous a person who displays care for others than a sociopath. Thus, the question regarding whether one would prefer a competent but insensitive doctor, instead of an empathic but incompetent one, is misplaced. Morality, in fact, does not have to do with competence. Furthermore, morality is not totally reducible to the outcome of an action (‘saving the patient’s life’, for instance). That is why I would like to propose a different question be asked: competences and abilities being equal, would you prefer a doctor like Gregory House or an empathic one? In particular, which of the two would you judge as a ‘morally virtuous person’ or, to use our habitual words: ‘a good person’? I think that in this case no doubts would arise.

However, anti-empathists might still want to object that if you are very sick, you are not—and should not be—interested in any mirroring of your feelings. In fact, you may be very worried, perhaps even frightened, and

⁴² Notice that the doctor’s desire to save their patient might very well have nothing to do with a genuine concern for this person. We can also imagine the doctor acting out of a very egoistic interest to save their own reputation and career, or to reach the coveted position of head physician.

you do not want your doctor to be as afraid as you are. This is actually a point that Paul Bloom made in his 2014 article for the *Boston Review*:

As I write this, an older relative of mine who has cancer is going back and forth to hospitals and rehabilitation centers. I've watched him interact with doctors and learned what he thinks of them. He values doctors who take the time to listen to him and develop an understanding of his situation; he benefits from this sort of cognitive empathy. But emotional empathy is more complicated. He gets the most from doctors who *don't* feel as he does, who are calm when he is anxious, confident when he is uncertain.⁴³

Prima facie, this criticism might seem to be valid. Indeed, no one would deny that doctors should be good at cognitively empathising, but emotional empathy is another matter. If emotional empathy is defined as a mirroring of the others' feelings, then it definitely appears inadvisable for a doctor to cultivate it. However, I hope I have shown in previous chapters that high-level empathy must not be regarded as a mere mirroring of feelings. If it were, it would be something different: it would be identification or emotional contagion at worst, or, alternatively, low-level empathy, at best. Empathy means feeling what another feels, but without thereby forgetting one's own identity and the role one plays in a given context. Emotions, once empathised, must—so to speak—'be brought home'. Empathy's effects do not end with the simple sharing of feelings: taking the other perspective, entering, as it were, in their world, dwelling, lingering in it, and coming to experience the concerns of the others, is actually what can fuel the empathiser's care for the target. Hence, an empathic doctor would understand and feel what is like to be a worried, frightened patient, but then act as a good doctor would. By doing this, they would reveal a more fully developed morality than the unempathetic one, for they would help the patient for good (moral) reasons—a desire to heal the person and not just defeat the disease or demonstrate their skill. They would also help in a good (moral) way, that is, by feeling with the patient, giving them the respect and consideration that they deserve and, more importantly, need. The good doctor is not someone who echoes the feelings of the patient, but someone who feels the patient's subjective concern and is able to act, taking this into due consideration.

⁴³ Bloom (2014). Emphasis in the original.

Harkening back to the beginning of this book, we made it clear that emotions generally have an ‘intentional object’. Now, in the case of a frightened patient, the intentional object of their fear is the illness which threatens their life. However, the doctor treating the patient, and who empathises with them, will not feel the same emotion towards the same object: the doctor’s fear, if present, will be directed to an eventual failure on their part: ‘what if the treatment I prescribed doesn’t work? What if I’m wrong with my diagnosis?’ In other words, the doctor who faces a distressed patient and wants to emotionally empathise with them will, for a moment, as a result of empathy, feel the fear of their patient: their worries, their anxiety, perhaps even their desperation, and this will not only inform them about the state of the patient, but also help them in developing a caring, concerned perspective towards that person. On the other hand, after this process is concluded and the emotions are recognised and felt from the inside, the doctor will return to their own perspective and will only be worried about what might concern them as a doctor, although the perspective of the patient will remain in the background and influence their decision. For instance, having empathically experienced the patient’s fear, they will be particularly careful in communicating to that person with respect to any urgent needs based on their condition, for example, over a difficult operation.

There is, however, another reason why we find a doctor like Gregory House to be extremely competent, but also, all things considered, a ‘jerk’ (if you allow me the ‘philosophical term’): his defective character. House is intelligent, brilliant, extremely knowledgeable, but he is not kind. He is not empathic. He is, or at least he seems, extremely egoistic, and he is definitely arrogant. Do these character flaws, this lack of virtues entirely prevent him from doing good things and acting morally? No, they do not. He is capable of instantiating morally good actions. Do they—at least at times—undermine his capacity to do what is good or negatively affect the morality of his actions? Indeed, they do. His lack of empathy makes him unable to truly understand how the patient feels and to react, not simply according to the progression of the illness (that, he can do), but according to the psychological conditions of the patient. The patient of an unempathetic doctor will often feel not listened to, perhaps even not cared for in the right way. This is why Leslie Jamison, in the first chapter of her above-mentioned book *The Empathy Exams*, affirms that the most important entry on the checklist with which she rated medical students was number 31: ‘Voiced empathy for my situation/problem.’

Let us leave aside the example of doctors and consider a more general picture. Referring back what we said previously: true care and benevolence can only stem from empathy, not from a detached and cold kind of sympathy. In fact, if the sympathetic action needs to avoid becoming a pitiful one, that is, the kind deed of a superior towards an inferior, one needs to situate oneself in the same place as the target before one can help them to emerge, to visit them in their darkness before one can bring them into the light. Morality cannot be reduced to the mere instantiation of certain actions, to questions about right and wrong. It is also a matter of internalism, of (caring, loving) principles driving our acts, of virtues building up our character. I think that this conclusion was discerned even by Kant, who, in the paragraph following the last one we quoted, writes:

Would it not be better for the well-being of the world generally if human morality were limited to duties of Right, fulfilled with the utmost conscientiousness, and benevolence were considered morally indifferent? It is not so easy to see what effect this would have on man's happiness. But at least a great moral adornment, love of man, would then be missing from the world. Love of man is, accordingly, required by itself, in order to present the world as a beautiful moral whole in its full perfection, even if no account is taken of advantages (of happiness).⁴⁴

How should we interpret this passage?

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Empathy and the Importance of Affectivity

This last citation from Kant offers us enough food for thought to go further than him and, indeed, to go past him. We have already said that what has moral significance goes far beyond what can be made an object of duty. Now we even have Kant's confirmation of this. However, there is more that deserves to be highlighted. The fact is that the attitudes we possess, the values we adhere to, and even the feelings we experience constitute an irreducible part of our moral self and reflect on us morally as much as the actions we perform. We have made it clear earlier on that empathy is to be considered a virtue and mention has been made of the many different forms necessary or at least useful for morality. We also stated that resorting to HLE is a choice (it does not occur automatically) and in that sense we are responsible for its development and use. Until now it has been easy to understand what is meant by saying empathy is a part of our moral self and reflects on us morally. However, what about LLE? Does the faculty to automatically perceive the thoughts and feelings of others also reflect morally on us? Is it also a part of our moral self? My claim is that it is exactly like our emotions. It would be a mistake to consider what we experience, as opposed to what we choose or initiate, as stranger to the moral landscape. It is true that with relation to the emotions (and to LLE) we are in a certain sense 'passive', because we feel we 'undergo' a certain emotion and we do not decide to have it. Nevertheless, emotions also depend largely on our beliefs and on the attitudes we come to assume, and these are elements under our control. This in turn explains why we can, for

example, overcome our fear of something once we acknowledge it as being entirely unfounded, unjustifiable, and misplaced, or why we can influence our LLE by choosing to be more or less open and receptive. Since we have some sort of control over our emotional reactions, we are also partly responsible for them. To quote Lawrence Blum on the issue: ‘The moral self cannot be seen on a model of pure activity; [...] it cannot be identified solely with that of which we are the initiators or authors.’¹

However, I do not want to reduce this concept to a matter of responsibility. What I mean by saying that our basic faculty of empathy, as well as our emotions, are part of our moral self is that we inevitably see ourselves as constituted essentially (even though not exclusively) by our emotional reactions. Consider, in fact, what happens when we change our ideas about something or our set values. In those cases, we cannot tolerate experiencing certain emotional reactions in ourselves any longer. Vetlesen gives the example of a racist who ceases to be one. ‘To effect such a change’, he argues, ‘he would have to come to see his former attitudes and emotional reactions toward, say, a black person as entirely baseless and inappropriate. That is, he would increasingly view his past reactions as incompatible with his emerging understanding of himself, of the kind of person he aspires to be.’² In the same way, the absence of empathic reactions, regarded both in its high-level and low-level form, would reflect negatively on the moral self of the individual. Not showing empathy, especially when it is required by the circumstances, would inevitably display either a defective moral development on the part of the non-empathiser, a lack of interest for the target, or even the determination to go against what morality would require in that situation. The first and the third conditions are certainly morally reprehensible; the second one is morally reproachable only in those cases in which the lack of concern constitutes a moral violation. However, lack of interest is potentially dangerous for morality when this lack of interest takes the form of a general apathy and is propaedeutic to lack of concern. Of course, the moral person is not obliged to take interest in anything (especially when it is something morally neutral), but they should be a ‘concerned’ person, in the sense of being concerned about what matters at a moral level. Now, let us take a step back for a moment and return to our discussion on moral judgement and moral perception. It seems, in fact, that we must judge or

¹ Blum (1980, p. 177).

² Vetlesen (1992, p. 155).

at least perceive that some state of affairs requires the instantiation of some moral act on our part (say, an act of altruism) before we can make the decision to instantiate that act. Not without reason, Blum, who defines ‘altruism’ as ‘a regard for the good of another person for his own sake’,³ writes that: ‘It is true that altruistic emotions involve judgment in some way—e.g., the judgment that someone is in pain, in need, suffering.’⁴ Now, the problem here is that judgement seems *prima facie* to be grounded in cognition and reason: it indeed appears that we judge on the base of rational considerations. For this reason, classic cognitivists, like Solomon,⁵ conclude by equating emotions to special kinds of judgements or by affirming that emotions are grounded in judgements. However, we cannot overlook the fact that often it is the other way around: our judgements are actually grounded in emotions. I follow Vetlesen when he says:

In explicating what is here meant by “grounded”, I defend the thesis that as far as *moral* judgment is concerned, the exercise of judgment *presupposes* and is *made possible* by our “having” (or, better, having the ability to have) certain emotions.⁶

If this is true, then it is obvious that moral judgement cannot be constituted by a merely cognitive or a purely emotional component. Indeed, if judgement is a cognitive act, but is grounded on emotional reactions, then this can only mean, quoting Vetlesen once again on this matter, that: ‘[...] neither cognition alone nor emotion alone can move us to genuine moral judgment. Both components are needed, and to hold that one is “primary” to the other is to violate the principal *equality of importance* of the two faculties in question.’⁷ Now my claim, which I share with Vetlesen, is that empathy is the faculty which, by being at the base of moral perception, provides the emotional insight to moral judgement, and, *ipso facto*, that is, *qua* fundamental component of moral judgement, provides a good motivational foundation to moral agency, especially to altruistic actions. Nevertheless, how does it do that? Let us start with how *empathic apprehension* works. Blum argued in *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality* that:

³ Blum (1980, p. 9).

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 185.

⁵ Solomon (2002).

⁶ Vetlesen (1992, p. 157). Emphasis in the original.

⁷ *Ibidem*. Emphasis in the original.

Altruistic emotions are intentional and take as their objects other persons in the light of their ‘weal’ and, especially, their ‘woe’. [...] And so the altruistic emotions have a cognitive dimension: the subject of the emotion must regard the object as being in a certain state.⁸

What Blum wants to express here is that altruistic emotions, such as empathy,⁹ compassion, or concern, have the others as intentional objects, and since they see the others in light of their weal and woe—they are, in other words, sensitive to this dimension—they cannot but picture a certain subject as being in a certain state. It would be impossible, in fact, to feel compassion for someone thriving. So, when compassion, for instance, arises, it does it in virtue of the fact that the subject implicitly or explicitly sees another individual (or group) as in some way and to some degree suffering. In this sense, altruistic emotions always have a cognitive component, in addition. Now this ‘seeing’ the other person as ‘in some way and to some degree suffering’ is not just a mere *perceptual* seeing, but a *moral* kind of seeing. Without this, as Vetlesen rightly emphasises: ‘no object for (moral) judgment would be given in the first place’.¹⁰ In other words, the reality of suffering, which calls for moral action, is disclosed by an empathic seeing. The question now is whether this seeing is simply a cognitive form of seeing or rather a joint cognitive and emotional one. Vetlesen holds the latter to be true and I agree with him. Nonetheless, why is that the case? Vetlesen’s argumentation, although brilliant, does not satisfy me entirely, therefore, in what follows, I will develop a personal line of reasoning which, I think, fits very well with the one offered by Vetlesen.

Consider, once again, the example of a person suffering. One might want to object that when we perceive an individual as suffering, we do not need to resort to any emotional faculty in order to do so, nor to perceive that individual as an addressee for moral judgement or moral action. We might simply notice some very telling perceivable cues (e.g. their tears, their sobbing, or even their cries of pain) or we may even consider what had happened that had brought them to this state in order to see them as

⁸ Blum (1980, p. 12).

⁹ Notice that for Blum empathy (which he names ‘sympathy’ but actually describing it as many would nowadays describe empathy) is already to be considered fundamentally altruistic; in fact, it is completely addressed to the other and requires us to exit from our own solipsistic perspective and to take on that of another.

¹⁰ Vetlesen (1992, p. 158).

suffering and as thereby also an object of moral judgement and/or agency. In this case, altruism would result from a purely cognitive ascertainment of the facts. However, this is not how human beings work.¹¹ Indeed, it is very hard to perceive suffering from a detached point of view. Remember, for instance, the famous example by Adam Smith: ‘When we see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer.’¹² This is also why I have often emphasised the fact that it is extremely difficult, especially in some situations, to sharply differentiate cognitive from emotional empathy. For Smith, empathy is an inescapable part of our human nature and, if this is true, it would be nonsensical to require us to abandon the empathic perspective, in order to assume a moral one. This would mean that in order to be moral, we would need to cease being human, to renounce, as it were, our human nature.¹³ Further, we have one more reason to reject this position: we have already analysed Blum’s view, in which attitudes, values, and emotions are all fully a part of the moral self, as well as empathy. Thus, once again, it seems absurd to conceive of the necessity to suppress a part of ourselves in order to see a situation as requiring from us some form of moral judgement or action. Nevertheless, the objector might have another arrow in their quiver. It might indeed be argued that no one is demanding that we renounce empathy, nor even the concept that it is an actual part of our moral self or even of our human nature (as Smith, Hume, and others contend), but only that it is not necessary for moral perception.

¹¹With the exception, of course, of human beings with psychic pathologies which negatively impact their emotionality.

¹²Smith (1984, p. 10).

¹³Consider the following words by Smith (*Ivi*, p. 9): ‘That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it.’

14.1 EMPATHY AND EMOTIONAL PERCEIVING

I hope that we have argued sufficiently in support of the fact that empathy is necessary for moral perception in the section dedicated to this issue. Now I would like to take a step further and see how empathy connects with moral agency, especially with altruistic actions, and it is here that the argumentation by Vetlesen, who starts precisely with the issue of moral perception, happens to be useful and even more insightful than ever. The critics of what could be called the *holistic* version of moral perception¹⁴ may in fact still contend that (maintaining the same example) suffering *qua* object of moral perception can be conceived in terms of pure cognition, whereas the emotional concomitants of that suffering, such as empathy, concern, compassion, or care, are namely only that: mere concomitants. This view presupposes a kind of shift in the process: at the beginning, the subject is depicted as disinterestedly perceiving the phenomenon (be it suffering or others), then, at a second stage, as acting or reflecting on that perception in an emotionally charged manner.

The problems with this picture are at least two-fold. On the one hand, this requisite shift from detached and ‘cold’ perception to emotionally coloured action or reflection is merely assumed, but not explained. Indeed, why this shift would occur and in what way are questions left unanswered. On the other hand, this model contradicts what we intuitively know about how moral perception—but, I would add, perception in general—really works and that we find in the texts of the phenomenological tradition. We should, in fact, always remember that we are almost never in a purely contemplative position, in which we disinterestedly perceive a certain phenomenon from the condition of an ascetic-like apathy. Perception—especially in the social, relational, interpersonal sphere, and especially when dealing with the emotions of others—is always emotionally laden. We can think here of the assertion by Heidegger in *Being and Time*: ‘*Verstehen ist immer gestimmtes*’, which can be translated as ‘understanding always has its mood’, and ‘*Verstehen ist immer befindliches*’, which underlines the fact that understanding is always accompanied by some state of mind and is never free-floating.¹⁵ Thus, we always feel something, if only implicitly or unconsciously, and, what is more, emotional cues from

¹⁴The definition is mine and is meant to highlight the fact that we can morally perceive in the best possible way only when our cognitive and emotional faculties work in tandem, viz. when we use empathy.

¹⁵Cfr. Heidegger (1977, 142H, 339H).

others cannot leave us indifferent. The existence of a shift is a mere utopia.¹⁶ Of course, we can take on what Peter Strawson would call an ‘objective attitude’ and preclude ‘the range of reactive feelings and attitudes which belong to involvement or participation with others in inter-personal human relationships’, but ‘being human, we cannot, in the normal case, do this for long, or altogether’.¹⁷ To quote the illuminating words of Vetlesen on this issue:

[...] suffering is not a “neutral” phenomenon in the first place, and there is not “disinterested” access to the human reality of suffering. The access is pervaded by interest, by taking an interest in a piece of lived human reality. [...] to say of a person that he or she is suffering is already to see that person in a certain way, and to want to exempt our emotional faculty from this seeing is to undermine it, extinguish it, indeed to prevent its very emergence. Stronger still, I argue that to “see” suffering as *suffering* is already to have established an *emotional bond* between myself and the person I “see” suffering.¹⁸

The idea is an interesting one. The point is that perceiving the suffering of another person is an act mediated by emotions: there is no neutral access to this kind of perception. Suffering appeals to us, calls on us in a way very similar to the concept of the ‘face’ in the philosophy of Lévinas, in a way that we cannot resist, nor avoid. If we do that, then it is because we are unable to really conceive of that suffering as such, in other words, as something that matters. Vetlesen imagines, for instance, the case of a man, Davis, who accidentally stumbles upon a person being beaten by another. After having watched the scene, Davis proceeds with his walk, as if nothing had occurred, content to have given the incident a fleeting look. As it is understood, Davis feels nothing in particular: he simply does not care about the situation. Does this constitute a confutation of the claim that suffering inexorably triggers empathy or at least some emotional reaction in us? It does not. Cases, like that of Davis, merely show that there are subjects with impaired emotional capacities and that this impairment prevents them from carrying out the correct processes of moral perception, or, to put it basically: to morally perceive *tout court*. To

¹⁶ Remember, for example, the words of Merleau-Ponty quoted in the first part of the book on this matter. Cf. Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 353).

¹⁷ Quoted from Vetlesen (1992, p. 160). Originally to be found in Strawson (2008, p. 10).

¹⁸ Vetlesen (1992, p. 159). Emphasis in the original.

use Vetlesen's terms, it is a matter of 'a *subject failing to do justice to his object*' and also 'The described incident would refer us back to him, questioning his ability to *see* suffering *as* suffering, that is, to see the human reality it entails.'¹⁹ Davis and those like him are—so the very adequate adjective Vetlesen acquires from Robert Lifton—*numb*,²⁰ meaning that their emotional capacities are either suppressed or in some way inhibited or damaged. The recognition of a phenomenon which calls on us morally (like the suffering of a person, which normally requires a moral act of altruism) and our emotional reaction to it driven by empathy are so deeply connected that we cannot conceive that a person may affirm, without an implicit contradiction, that they acknowledge a phenomenon demands a moral response, but do not feel any emotional reaction; that they can perceive, for instance, that the suffering of an individual requires them to do something, but that cannot feel empathy towards that individual. That is why Strawson rightly asserts that: '[...] a thoroughgoing objectivity of attitude, excluding as it does the moral reactive attitudes, excludes at the same time essential elements in the concepts of *moral* condemnation and *moral* responsibility'.²¹ It excludes moral responsibility, because a subject's moral *Zurechnungsfähigkeit* (to use a term by Habermas translatable with 'accountability') depends on the ability of people to perceive moral phenomena thanks to the adoption of a participant reactive attitude, and it excludes moral condemnation for the same reason: if one is not capable of 'seeing' something as morally good or bad, how can one morally judge it? All this, in its turn, is closely related to the issue of moral agency: a person who cannot perceive a situation as requiring some moral act will either renounce action or act without taking a moral stance, without the intention of doing what is morally right. To better explain this claim of mine, take once again the case of Davis. As we have seen, Davis, incapable of perceiving the suffering of another as implicitly requiring from him a moral act, simply passes by, foregoing his opportunity to instantiate moral behaviour. Nevertheless, even in the hypothetical situation that he made the right decision by helping the suffering person in some way that we deem morally right, if he had done this in the absence of moral perception and without adopting a subjective reactive attitude (which is at the base of moral perception), we would not be ready to call his action as moral. On

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 160.

²¹ Strawson (2008, p. 22). Emphasis in the original.

the contrary, we would affirm that he had performed a moral act only *accidentally*, namely, without knowing it, nor wanting it.

In this process, empathy plays a fundamental role. I agree, in fact, with Vetlesen in defining moral perception with the following words:

Moral perception [...] is recognition of the way in which a situation affects the weal and woe of the human beings involved in it. [...] moral perception has its source in human *receptivity*, in the primordial capacity of human beings to be attentive to, to be alert to. It is thanks to this underlying active receptivity, this sensuous-cognitive-emotional openness to the world, that moral perception is provided with a direction, is “tuned in” to deal with specific features of specific situations.²²

This quote should already suggest why empathy is so central for moral perception. The point is that a person’s failure to show a morally adequate reaction derives in fact from their prior failure to be open, receptive, to empathise, and consequently to perceive the phenomenon at hand as a morally significant one, and therefore, also as one which calls for response and action. As Vetlesen insists: ‘the failure at the manifest level of action-response originates in a failure at the primordial level of receptivity’.²³ The lack of receptivity towards others, when it is not caused by other strong emotions gaining priority in the mind of the subject (e.g. when someone is so worried about something that might happen to them that they lose sight of what is happening to others around them) is to be attributed to a lack (or at least to an impairment) of empathy. Empathy is, in fact, exactly that: receptivity, openness to others. Empathy can be described, using the word of Vetlesen, as ‘an open-ended, dynamic mode of relating to the world, in particular to the human and thus eminently moral world’.²⁴ Once again, I cannot refrain from paraphrasing Heidegger. The German philosopher makes clear in his work that without *attunement*, to the world, there would be no experience, no perception of the world and of the individuals populating it. We would, in fact, never be affected by anything. Affection can occur only when the ‘situated being-in-the-world’

²² Vetlesen (1992, p. 162). Emphasis in the original.

²³ *Ivi*, p. 162.

²⁴ Vetlesen (1992, p. 175).

ascribes ‘import’ (to borrow a term by Taylor)²⁵ to entities in the world, when these start to matter to them in the ways that their emotions have outlined in advance. Indeed, an emotionless apprehension of things is excluded. Of course, Heidegger’s considerations were meant to be applied to the totality of the world’s affection. My claim is that there is a particular class of affections which regard the affections we feel as a result of imagined or actual relations with others. These affections are all guided by a special type of receptivity, which is a receptivity towards the ‘inner world’ of others (their thoughts, intentions, values, beliefs, feelings, and emotions) and is called empathy. Thanks to empathy, people and their inner reality start to matter for us.

However, an argument could be advanced towards the following view: it seems that we can have emotional reactions, which attribute a certain meaning to occurrences in the world that do not require the presence of empathy. For instance, I can get angry at the sight of a policeman senselessly hitting a person and judge that it is immoral, even in the absence of empathy, for the person being hit. This is a mechanism well described by Prinz: if we divide token actions (such as hitting a harmless person) into *types of behaviour* (in this case, ‘police brutality’) and we attribute to these types of behaviour an appropriate emotion (e.g. indignation), then we can abstain from using empathy, which becomes superfluous. In fact, every time we see an action instantiating a certain type of conduct, we will react with the correspondent emotion. However, the point here is how do we establish that a token behaviour is an example of, say, police brutality or not. It is certainly agreeable to affirm that indignation can result from the observation of police brutality, but how do we reach the conclusion that what we are observing is indeed a case of police brutality? It is in this context that empathy turns out to be extremely useful. In fact, it is undoubtedly true that there are some guiding principles which help, in the praxis, to determinate whether a given action belongs to the class of prohibited or, in any case, condemnable actions, or not, but principles alone are not sufficient. There is and there always will be a vast grey area in which empathy can and must let its voice be heard. Situations are often

²⁵ See Taylor (1985), *Self-Interpreting Animals*. Esp. Vol. 1, p. 48, where he defines ‘import’ with the following words: ‘By import I mean a way in which something can be relevant or of importance to the desires or purposes or aspirations or feelings of a subject, or otherwise put, a property of something whereby it is a matter of non-indifference to a subject.’

not so clear: in these cases, entering into the open-ended, dynamic process of empathy with both the victim and the perpetrator, assuming their perspectives and trying to feel what they feel, is the best way we have to shed some light on the event and arrive at a moral judgement (which should lead to the instantiation of a moral action).

14.2 THE CASE OF DEATH PENALTY: HOW EMPATHY CAN CHANGE OUR MENTALITY

Notice that if it is true that principles and ideas can shape the sensitivity of people, the contrary is also true: that sensitivity and empathy can modify rules, principles, and ideas. If we think of what was considered an instantiation of justice two centuries ago, of what was considered right and fair, and we compare it to the norms of justice we have nowadays among Western civilisations, we will soon understand how fluid our categories of right and wrong and the principles categorising certain actions in types of behaviour are. What was considered right or morally permissible 200 years ago is now seen as morally reproachable, and to maintain that this is due to a change triggered by ideas is only looking at one side of the coin. Ideas can only influence us when they touch our emotionality, and our emotionality is extremely responsive to empathy and to empathic arguments, whether anti-empathists like it or not. Let us consider, for instance, what two European intellectuals have written about the death penalty. I begin with Tolstoy, who wrote in his *Confessions* the impressions he had when he assisted in the death of a robber-murderer named Francis Richeux in Paris in 1857, before a crowd of 15,000 people:

When I saw the head separate from the body, and how they both thumped into the box at the same moment, I understood, *not with my mind but with my whole being*, that no theory of the reasonableness of our present progress can justify this deed; and that though everybody from the creation of the world, on whatever theory, had held it to be necessary, I know it to be unnecessary and bad; and therefore the arbiter of what is good and evil is not what people say and do, and is not progress, but is my heart and I.²⁶

²⁶Tolstoy (2012), retrieved from <http://www.executedtoday.com/2012/04/06/1857-francis-richeux-leo-tolstoy/> Emphasis is mine.

This theme and the potent images he saw on that day continued to torment the writer throughout his life, so much so that years later he had to come back to it in *What Is to Be Done?*:

Thirty years ago in Paris I once saw how [...] they cut a man's head off with a guillotine. I knew that the man was a dreadful criminal; I knew all the arguments that have been written in defence of that kind of action [...] but at the moment the head and body separated and fell into the box I gasped, and realized not with my mind nor with my heart but with my whole being, that all the arguments in defence of capital punishment are wicked nonsense [...] and I by my presence and non-intervention had approved and shared in it. In the same way now, at the sight of the hunger, cold, and degradation of thousands of people, I understood not with my mind or my heart but with my whole being; that the existence of tens of thousands of such people in Moscow—while I and thousands of others over-eat ourselves with beef-steaks and sturgeon and cover our horses and floors with cloth or carpets [...] is a crime, not committed once but constantly; and that I with my luxury not merely tolerate it but share in it.²⁷

Both quotes start with a vivid gory image: the head of the sentenced man, which, cut off from the rest of the body, thumps into the box at the base of the guillotine. Tolstoy was prepared for this: he knew that the law provided for this kind of punishment, but at that moment the impression he had was so strong, that it changed everything. He understood—so Tolstoy says—not with his mind but with his whole being, that this deed was in some way unjustifiable, that no theory or principle could account for such an act, and that his heart was the supreme judge. This is extremely important since it shows—as I have made clear many times throughout the course of the book—that access to moral values can often be reached not by means of rational principles, but by means of empathy and affectivity. The second quote shows how the moral insights acquired in one context can be transferred to other settings and other situations by analogy and generalisation, following a pattern which I have outlined earlier. The human capacity for analogy, driven by imagination, generalisations, and so forth, is also at the base of empathy's ductility and of its application to much wider frameworks than the interpersonal relationships between single individuals. Nevertheless, anti-empathists might still want to argue that this case does not necessarily prove the importance of empathy.

²⁷ Ibidem.

Tolstoy might very well have experienced another kind of emotion: horror, for instance, and this horror led him to revise his assumptions and arrive at a new kind of moral judgement. To this criticism, two answers can be given. On the one hand, I am strongly of the opinion that Tolstoy did feel empathy on that occasion. In a letter sent to the Russian litterateur Vasily Botkin, in fact, in which he recounts the same episode, expresses himself thus:

I have seen many horrors in war and in the Caucasus, but if a man were torn to pieces in my presence it would not have been so repulsive as this ingenious and elegant machine by means of which they killed a strong, hale, healthy man in an instant. There [in war] it is not a question of the rational [will], but the human feeling of passion, while here it is a question of calm and convenient murder finely worked out, and there's nothing grand about it.²⁸

I think that what the great novelist wanted to assert here is that whereas in war he could empathise with the man who killed (however brutally) another man, he could not do the same in the case of the death penalty. I think that here we are in the typical situation as described by Hume. When Tolstoy empathises with the soldiers he does not experience a sentiment of disapprobation towards them: their actions are understandable, since soldiers find themselves under the influence of strong emotions and act to defend their lives and those of their comrades. On the other hand, when empathising with people executing another person, he cannot avoid feeling strong disapproval. He is unable to specify why exactly this sentiment arises, but he knows, as he says, 'with his whole being', that something is profoundly wrong.

However, this is not the only mechanism based on empathy that Tolstoy utilises. Even his communication is entirely grounded in empathy. It is clear that the aim of the Russian writer is to convince others of the moral truth he feels he has discovered, that he wants to persuade more people that a morally virtuous person should not support the death penalty. This being the case, how does he accomplish his goal? He does so by means of empathy. He does it by communicating what he saw and felt, by explaining what his emotional reactions looked like, so that the reader can perceive the scene as he perceived it and feel what he also felt. His considerations about the death penalty are steeped in empathy: there was empathy in his

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

original experience and there is empathy at the base of his communicative method. This also means that empathy is fundamental for acquiring moral insight and expressing a moral judgement and, given that Tolstoy began to fight against unfair laws (and also against poverty) as a consequence of this epiphany, and that he managed to convince others of the inherent immorality of capital punishment, empathy also plays an essential role in moral motivation and conduct.

I mentioned above that I would consider two intellectuals arguing against capital punishment. Until now we have analysed the writings of Tolstoy. It is now time to shift our attention to another famous Russian novelist: Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky's case is perhaps even more interesting than Tolstoy's, in fact, as at one point he himself was given the death penalty and so lived the experience of a 'dead man walking'. Accused of subversive activities for having taken part to a radical intellectual discussion group called the Petrashevsky Circle, Dostoevsky was arrested and sentenced to death. Thus, on December 22, 1849, Dostoevsky was led before a firing squad, certain he was going to die, but received a last-minute reprieve and was sent to a Siberian labour camp instead, where he worked for four long years. The (literally) near-death experience changed him forever and in one of his most famous novels, *The Idiot*, he makes the protagonist of the book express a heartfelt critique of capital punishment. The prince Myshkin is talking about the terrible impression he had observing the guillotine in action in France, when his interlocutor raises the following point: 'Well, at all events it is a good thing that there's no pain when the poor fellow's head flies off.'²⁹ The answer of prince Myshkin is too long to be cited in full, so I will quote only the most important passages:

Do you know, though,' cried the prince warmly, 'you made that remark now, and everyone says the same thing, and the machine is designed with the purpose of avoiding pain, this guillotine I mean; but a thought came into my head then: what if it be a bad plan after all? You may laugh at my idea, perhaps—but I could not help its occurring to me all the same. Now with the rack and tortures and so on—you suffer terrible pain of course; but then your torture is bodily pain only (although no doubt you have plenty of that) until you die. But HERE I should imagine the most terrible part of the whole punishment is, not the bodily pain at all—but the certain knowledge

²⁹Dostoevsky (2001), *The Idiot*, retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2638/2638-h/2638-h.htm>, part I, chapter II.

that in an hour,—then in ten minutes, then in half a minute, then now—this very INSTANT—your soul must quit your body and that you will no longer be a man—and that this is certain, CERTAIN! That’s the point—the certainty of it. Just that instant when you place your head on the block and hear the iron grate over your head—then—that quarter of a second is the most awful of all.³⁰

The prince makes his opinion even clearer in what follows: ‘I feel it so deeply that I’ll tell you what I think. I believe that to execute a man for murder is to punish him immeasurably more dreadfully than is equivalent to his crime. A murder by sentence is far more dreadful than a murder committed by a criminal.’³¹ The reasons for that are explained in the following lines, that I will not quote, but only briefly paraphrase, as follows. If you take the case of a person attacked by robbers at night in a dark wood you can imagine that this person will, even though terrified by the circumstances, hope until the last moment that they might somehow escape death. That is why a person who is going to be killed in such situations will try to do everything, beg for their life, bargain, and more, in the hope that they will be spared. Not so with the person sentenced to death. They know that nothing will save them, that begging is useless, that hope is forever lost. In effect, this, asserts the prince, ‘must be the most dreadful anguish in the world. You may place a soldier before a cannon’s mouth in battle, and fire upon him—and he will still hope. But read to that same soldier his death-sentence, and he will either go mad or burst into tears.’³² Then comes the most pathetic and autobiographical section:

No, no! it is an abuse, a shame, it is unnecessary—why should such a thing exist? Doubtless there may be men who have been sentenced, who have suffered this mental anguish for a while and then have been reprieved; perhaps such men may have been able to relate their feelings afterwards. Our Lord Christ spoke of this anguish and dread. No! no! no! No man should be treated so, no man, no man!³³

Let us now try to analyse these citations. *Prima facie*, if one is ready to accept that there are crimes worthy of death, it seems that the guillotine

³⁰ *Ibidem*. Emphasis in the original.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*.

would be one of the most effective and ‘compassionate’—or, at least, less painful—methods. It would be much quicker and less agonising than hanging, less messy and more efficient than shooting, for example.³⁴ It seems that the guillotine is even a more merciful method than the much later developed electric chair, symbol of the American mode of capital execution, where death is not exactly instantaneous, horribly painful and, as we know as a result of many different cases of executions ‘gone wrong’, not equally efficacious. Nevertheless, what is really problematic with death sentences are not only the techniques used to take the lives of the condemned, but the psychological state of pure desperation in which they plunge those awaiting their fate. The awareness that everything is over, that no one and nothing will save you, that the writing is on the wall, and death will come soon and inevitably, this is the worst suffering of all. In all other situations in which death appears as near and as extremely probable, but not certain, people never lose hope and this is what helps them to keep fighting. This is true for soldiers in war as it is for people attacked by robbers or, we might add, for patients diagnosed with a serious and potentially deadly disease. If there is still even the smallest possibility of survival, a human being will cling to it and not give up. In contrast, the death penalty destroys any hope and a human being is not capable of coping with desperation, simply because desperation, by definition, erases the possibility of coping. This is why Dostoevsky asserts that ‘to execute a man for murder is to punish him immeasurably more dreadfully than is equivalent to his crime’.

Later, to further reinforce his point, Dostoevsky mentions what is, with all probability, the most famous capital execution of the history—at least in the West—namely, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. What the Russian writer wants to say with this example is that the ‘passion’ of Christ, that is his agony, began long before his actual atrocious execution by crucifixion. It had already started the night before it, when he knew he was going to die and what he was going to suffer, and he passed the night in prayer in such a dreadful state of anguish that, so the Bible says, he began to sweat blood.³⁵ I understand Dostoevsky here as highlighting to a prevalently Christian audience the fact that if even the Son of God, in all his majesty,

³⁴ Only to mention the more widespread and common methods used at that time.

³⁵ A rare phenomenon known as ‘hematidrosis’, caused by the rupture of the capillary blood vessels that feed the sweat glands, and which occurs under conditions of extreme physical and/or emotional stress.

his moral perfection, and his courage, experienced such a profound agony, all the more excruciating this experience would be for ‘normal people’. In fact, the prince’s speech finishes with an autobiographical note. There is indeed a man who has been sentenced and, after having suffered the same mental anguish for a period of time, has been pardoned, and this man is Dostoevsky himself. It is as if he wanted to say: ‘if you don’t believe what is written in the Bible about Jesus, believe at least in what I tell you. Believe me when I say that capital punishment is an abuse, a shame, and it is completely unnecessary!’

I consider this line of thought by Dostoevsky to be remarkable and stimulating in itself, but what is even more interesting for our purposes is that everything he says is centred on the role played by empathy at various levels for morality. The entire reasoning, in fact, stems from a very empathic consideration and, what is more, from affective empathy. Consider the following: the prince’s interlocutor makes an observation which, in its obviousness and self-evidence, is very difficult to disagree or even to argue with, namely, that death by guillotine is at any rate painless, or at least almost painless. This assertion, besides confirming the plain factuality of this kind of death, demonstrates that the subject making such statement has not carried out a real process of affective empathy. His understanding of the imagined situation is superficial, it does not reach the very core of the other’s experience, because it does not take the empathiser to *linger* in the other’s perspective, in the other’s inner world. In effect, lingering is exactly what the truly empathic person does and what the morally virtuous person should do. It is also—and this is not surprising—exactly what Myshkin does.³⁶ The prince is not satisfied with the mere scratching of the surface of things, and for this reason, he allows his empathy to dwell in the inner world of the other and to feel (to a given extent, of course) the anguish that the sentenced person might be feeling at that moment. He knows indeed that true objectivity (moral or not) requires us to dive deeper into the experience of the other. Indeed, here we have a conclusive confutation of the criticisms expressed by Bloom, Prinz, and others, for whom empathy is necessarily intrinsically biased and thereby a hindrance to true objectivity. With this example, we see instead that there are cases

³⁶ Keep in mind, in fact, that Myshkin symbolised, for Dostoevsky, the ideal of the ‘positively good and beautiful man’; this description of ‘beautiful’ not referring to his physical appearance, but his ‘inner beauty’, echoing the ancient Greek concept of *kalokagathia*. See also Peace (1971, pp. 59–63).

where empathy is the only means of reaching an objective evaluation of the facts and, consequently, the disclosure of the inherent immorality of certain practices. The guillotine only appears to be painless and ‘merciful’. In truth it is, like any other method of capital punishment, intrinsically disrespectful of the dignity of the condemned, because it deprives the person of everything they need not simply to survive, but to feel themselves to be a person, and not a mere object that can be destroyed on command. The death penalty not only strips the person of their freedom (that would be mere incarceration) and their life, but also of hope. Inevitably, no human being can live without hope. People can live without freedom, without trust, without courage, but they cannot live without any hope of the future, for the very good reason that this is the common horizon of all our actions, and without it, everything is meaningless. This is why capital punishment is more dreadful than the crimes it seeks to punish: because no crime can erase hope the way it is erased by this penalty. Hence, the conclusion cannot be but to judge the death penalty as ‘an abuse, a shame’, as something ‘unnecessary’. Notice that the words used to describe this method are not chosen lightly. It is an abuse because it lets us dispose of another person in a way no one should have the right to do. It is a shame because it strips a person of their dignity as a human being and puts the ‘punisher’ at the same level (if not at a lower one) than the felon that is punished, and it is unnecessary for many different reasons. To cite just a few: because incarceration for life would prevent the offender from committing other crimes, because it does not work as an effective deterrent, and because it does not allow for rehabilitation, that is, for the possibility that the wrongdoer might regret what he or she has done and change his or her behaviour. Notice that the access to all this information is granted only by empathy. It takes empathy to perceive how the death penalty eradicates hope and leads to desperation, thereby becoming worse than the crime it seeks to punish. It takes empathy to see in which sense capital punishment is unnecessary, besides being an abuse and a shame. In fact, in order to be perceived,³⁷ this information requires that we use affective empathy and, in particular, that we take the time to linger in the inner

³⁷ I use the term ‘perceiving’—which has a physical, bodily connotation—because it entails something more than the mere ‘understanding’. Indeed, we are dealing here not with a mere cognitive phenomenon, something that can be carried out by making use solely of cognitive empathy, but with an embodied one. I understand it with my mind and I feel it, as it were, in my bones.

world of the other and let our imagination (and our feelings with it) flow freely. Eliminating empathy from the moral sphere would mean relinquishing all these insights and renouncing the moral motivation resulting from them. Indeed, whoever is capable of gaining these insights by way of emotional empathy will be motivated to fight for more ethical methods of punishment and to regard criminals not as pariahs and the dregs of society, but as actual human beings. Empathy is the key to moral insights which are extremely difficult to ignore.

I use these examples from influential and prominent intellectuals to further accentuate the fundamental nature of the role of empathy within the strong link that exists between moral perception, moral judgement, and, from there, moral motivation and finally moral agency. In fact, such examples also contradict the conclusion supported by Jesse Prinz towards the end of his 2011 article, according to which emotions can be directed towards types of conduct, whereas empathy is focused merely on individuals. In this article we find the following words:

Indignation can be directed towards types of conduct, whereas empathy is focused on individual persons. [...] I suspect that limitations on moral indignation may be most likely to arise *as a result of* empathetic interference. In cases where indignation is effected by proximity, for example, that may result from the fact that we don't empathize with victims; if we focused on the crime rather than the victims, such effects might diminish. The point might be summarized by saying that the limitations of empathy are intrinsic to it: empathy is biased [...]. Therefore empathy is less well suited to serve as the central motivational component of morality.³⁸

In this sense, the analysis we made of the two examples demonstrates exactly the opposite: empathy can direct our emotional reactions (and indignation is one of those) to types of conducts, and not only to the victims. Tolstoy did not empathise merely with Francis Richeux, and Dostoevsky (through the figure of Prince Myshkin) did not empathise with anyone in particular. The process leading to the described moral insights certainly began as empathy for the victim(s), but from there, their attention soon shifted to moral reflections on the institution of capital punishment. What is crucial is that these kinds of reflections would have been impossible without empathy. The dichotomy between empathy as

³⁸ Prinz (2011, p. 227). Emphasis in the original.

focussed only on the victims and moral emotions as concentrated exclusively on the type of conduct is a false one. Empathy is not fixed, but fluid, dialogical; it starts as an enquiry and then enters into communication with many of our psychological faculties and emotions and forces us to confront what we perceive by means of them, such as the moral insights empathy discloses with our previous moral intuitions. It is like a stone falling in still water. The waves it produces reverberates on anything we thought and felt before, that is, on our personal 'still water'. Empathy is able to make the jump from the particular to the general, from the individual to the masses. If I can feel with another person, then I understand that we are not so different. With this insight in mind, I can use my capacity for analogy and induction to understand that what is condemnable in this case is condemnable in every other similar case. It is surprising to remark how anti-empathists seem to ignore this mechanism. Consider, for instance, the following statement by Prinz: '[...] the basic idea is that we make a concerted effort to focus moral reflection on *what* has happened not on *whom* it has happened to, because the whom question invite bias.'³⁹ Prinz, in other words, considers empathy as referring merely to the individual and not to the situation the individual is facing. Nonetheless, we have seen that empathy does not work that way: there are times in which situations cannot reveal themselves in all their clarity, in all their gravity, in all their meaning (both moral and epistemic) without empathy. To cite once again the example of the death penalty: here empathy for the condemned is what sheds light on the very institution of capital punishment and fuels indignation against it, *pace* Prinz, who thinks that empathy 'lacks motivational strength'.⁴⁰

14.3 EMPATHY AND IMPORT

This power that empathy has and the role it is capable of playing at a time of adoption of certain political policies (a role that Bloom had totally disavowed in his work) is becoming increasingly clear to me, especially in these latter stages. While writing these lines, in fact, numerous countries all over the world are undergoing the effects of extraordinary health measures deployed by different governments in order to minimise the pernicious consequences of the COVID-19 virus. I, myself, am living in an enforced lockdown in the company of one of the most empathic persons

³⁹ Prinz (2011, p. 228).

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

I have ever met: my partner, who, with her short commentaries and observations while watching the news, is unwittingly providing me with more than a few important insights about what empathy is capable of and why we should listen to its voice more often than we usually do. There are two comments in particular that I wish to highlight, since they are paradigmatic of the ethical force empathy can exercise as a character trait to be consciously embraced and developed by political leaders (thus, as political virtue) and as one to be adopted by people in general (namely, as virtue *stricto sensu*). I shall begin with the second of these.

On an evening during the first half of March 2020, my partner and I were watching the news while having dinner, when the anchor-woman on TV reported the number of people dying everyday in Italy because of the Coronavirus pandemic. As journalists on television often do, she was reporting these numbers in a serious, but rather impassive manner. I looked across at my girlfriend and saw her concerned face. After a moment, she said something like the following: ‘Can you imagine that all these numbers were people? Actual people like us? Grandpas and grandmas who had probably survived the war, people who had worked hard, struggled, loved, who made a family... And now they are dead. They are gone, without the opportunity to see their loved ones again, without someone to hold their hand, without even a funeral, so that people could at least mourn them in the proper way. Think of their families, too. How terrible is that?’ During this commentary, her eyes welled up and after a while she could not help but shed tears. This comment and her physical reaction made me think. Anti-empathists used to say that empathy is ineffective when we deal with large masses of people and with raw data, because it is impossible to empathise with so many individuals all at once and because it is hard to experience empathy for people we do not know, who live in foreign lands, for example. However, before my very eyes I had seen exactly the opposite. My partner was perfectly able, as a young Swiss woman, to empathise with the death of thousands of people in Italy that she did not know in the slightest, to imagine what it might have been like for their relatives, to feel, in some way, something similar to what they might have felt. Not only was she able to do this, but she proved to be capable of seeing data, rates, and percentages not as mere numbers, but as equating the life and death of real people. With a few words, she showed the transformative power of empathy, a power which turns unemotional information in emotionally charged material and that makes evident the ethical significance of that information.

The second remark I would like to mention was often to be heard while commenting on the first reactions of leaders who showed an initial, let us say, ‘mild’ attitude towards the potential dangers of the pandemic of Coronavirus, leaders such as Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, or Jair Bolsonaro. In these and other cases, my partner observed that they seemed more concerned about the damages the pandemic could cause to the economy than about the health of people in their countries, and more interested in protecting the economic future of their states than the lives of the people inhabiting them. In particular, I remember, while listening to the words of a famous multimillionaire (whose name I will not reveal) who said, talking about the economic consequences of the general lockdown, that ‘billions were lost for minus a few hundred deaths’, my partner was shocked and uttered the exact following words: ‘this man talks about human beings as if they were potatoes’. This so trenchant a sentence was not intended by my partner as a mere provocation, but as indicative of the fact that some political and economic leaders seemed more concerned about the financial and economic fallout than about the ‘humanitarian’ costs, and that this standpoint was the result of what Strawson would call ‘the objective attitude’ they chose to adopt. Paying attention to the raw data and avoiding empathising with those dying and the families they left behind, it is rather tempting to come to the conclusion that, all things considered, it is better to save the economy at the cost of sacrificing ‘a few thousands’ of lives. This is especially true if one adopts an ultra-utilitarian view and reflects on the fact that the Coronavirus chiefly affects elderly people, who represent a part of the population which is not only, in the main, unproductive, but is even in need of extra assistance (hence, a significant expense to the state). Of course, no one has dared to support such an ultra-Darwinist and *quasi* eugenic position openly, but statements have been made by politicians and top managers over these months of pandemic that seem very much to go in that direction.

My view on the matter is that, whichever strategy one chooses to implement ‘for the good of the country’, empathy should never be absent from the general picture. There are reasons for protecting the economy and reasons for protecting the lives of people, but the point is that some of the reasons in favour of the latter cannot be seen in the correct light if empathy is lacking from the picture. In other words, without empathy one can

easily become unable to attribute the appropriate *import* to the reasons in favour of protecting lives. Strawson said that being human, it is normally impossible to sustain an objective attitude for long (or altogether). Since empathy is one of the ways (possibly the principal way, as we have seen) to exit from this attitude and abandon this perspective,⁴¹ then we can say that being human, we cannot normally (or, at least, we should not) do without empathy for long.

Notice that there is a special sense in which the dimension of the human appeals to the dimension of the moral. When I conclude that the person sentenced to death would feel what I also would feel in such a situation, I gain—through empathy—an access to the human reality of suffering, and this reality is a matter of ‘non-indifference’ to me, because it cannot but signify something for my desires, feelings, or purposes as a human being. Quoting Vetlesen: ‘The perceived human reality addresses me, calls on me, lays a *moral* obligation on me, since I am, and see myself as, a human being. This is the link I established between the human and the moral.’⁴² That said, it is understandable why Vetlesen concludes some lines later that: ‘Missing the human dimension of the situation, I also, and for that very reason, miss its moral dimension.’⁴³ But what does Vetlesen mean when he speaks of *human reality*? Unfortunately, he is not so precise in that matter and does not offer a clear definition, but from his writings it can be argued that, for him, being human means primarily to perceive oneself as being addressed by occurrences impacting the weal and woe of others, and hence to be affected by them. Then, for that very reason, to attribute import to others, to be called upon *qua* moral subject, to adopt, thanks to empathy, what Strawson would call a participatory attitude *contra* the objective one, which, missing the human dimension of a situation, would also miss the moral one. This interpretation seems to fit well with many of the claims he makes:

⁴¹ Empathy is, indeed, exactly the opposite of the Strawsonian objective attitude. If the objective attitude, as he intends it, requires one to remain unaffected by the emotions of others and to not get involved with their own subjectivities, empathy implies precisely that. It is an itinerary to objectivity through the temporary assumption of the subjectivities of others.

⁴² Vetlesen (1992, p. 178). Emphasis in the original.

⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 179.

Thus, following Strawson, when I claim that I cannot—or in any case cannot for long—maintain an objective attitude, I mean that we cannot maintain for long the suspension of the emotional bond between me and my cosubjects. In other words, I cannot go on perceiving and treating cosubjects as if they were none, as if they were instead objects, as if they were not such beings that the situation in which they find themselves could call on and address me qua moral subject. Indeed, if consequently held onto, my all-around adoption of an objective attitude would disavow my very humanity.⁴⁴

These considerations can lead us to another important conclusion, namely, that empathy makes us capable of perceiving the common humanity we share with all people, and since the perception of this common humanity is at the base of moral perception, then we should regard with extreme suspicion, if not with sheer adversity, the processes of dehumanisation. We have seen how anti-empathists caution against empathy, but my claim is that there exists something much more dangerous than a biased empathy and that is the absence of it. In the next chapter I am going to explain what I mean by this.

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Lack of Empathy and Dehumanisation

Ask a person (at least, a person of Western origin, who are the people with whom, as a European, I am most acquainted) to tell you what was the darkest period of human history and they will usually answer either the ‘Middle Ages’ or the period of the great twentieth-century totalitarianisms, especially the time of the Naziregime in Europe and Communism under Stalin in Russia. Alternatively, and more precisely, ask an individual what was the period when humanity really hit bottom and showed its cruelest face, and they will in all probability think of National-Socialism in Germany and the tragedy of the Holocaust. It is, therefore, not surprising that Arne Johan Vetlesen takes this example as emblematic to discuss the processes of dehumanisation, and since this is a theme that has also emerged in this book, it is seemingly appropriate if we take it as the *fil rouge* linking lack of empathy with dehumanisation and amorality.

Recall our discussion about Eichmann: there we said that Eichmann was guilty of dehumanising his victims, whom he did not regard as human beings, but as mere ‘numbers’. However, there is a dehumanising process that Eichmann carried out earlier than that applied to his victims and it is the one he practiced on himself, letting himself be treated as an instrument by his superiors, as means, and not as end in himself. Vetlesen calls this process one of *double dehumanisation*.¹ I will argue in what follows

¹ See Vetlesen (1992): *Hannah Arendt and the Crisis of Judgment*.

that this practice of double dehumanisation can only be realised thanks to the suppression of empathy for others.

The central idea is the following: to commit a genocide of the scale we know the Holocaust to have been, but even to ‘simply’ kill another person, one has to overcome various forces that push in the opposite direction. Some of them are, of course, the result of personal taboos, of our ideas about right and wrong, of the education we have received and the examples we have chosen (more or less voluntarily) to follow. However, a great number of these repulsive ‘forces’ are due to sheer empathy for the other, both in its synchronic version (at the moment, that is, of our considering killing or being about to kill a person) and in its diachronic one, namely, the empathy which was a part of our moral development and education and in the formation of our moral concepts and principles. Therefore, if this empathy becomes suppressed or diminished, the above-mentioned forces pushing us away from the idea of making other suffer will give way.

Consider the typical Nazi concept of the ‘heavy task’. Much of Nazi justification for the atrocities implied in their deviant ideology was grounded in this simple concept, which we know to have been based on a controversial (to say the least) interpretation of the Kantian categorical imperative, as Eichmann’s case, among others, shows. For a task to be heavy means that its fulfilment requires a great personal sacrifice on the part of the subject carrying it out, hence, an ethos centred in this concept cannot but demand that the individual becomes psychologically strong, ‘hard’, and in some way insensitive to suffering. To use a play on words, any limit becomes a limitation, a hindrance to accomplish one’s own duty, hence it must be overcome. Himmler is known to have resorted very often to this concept in his propaganda. When asked how he could bring himself and others to do actions that would shock any normal human being he was able to put operations, like mass killings, in terms of a difficult but necessary form of self-sacrifice, of immolation for the wellness not only of Germany as a country, but of the entire world.² As it is easy to imagine, the only way to cope with this kind of *ethos* was to weaken, to lessen one’s own tendency to feel for and especially to feel with, a process which Lifton names *psychic numbing*. As a result of this process, the numbed individual experienced the Jews and the other prisoners in the concentration camps as beings who could no longer affect them, and this is how the paradox of

² See Lifton (1986, p. 435).

the killing without killing was enabled. When the Nazis proceeded in the effective suppression of the prisoners, the latter were already dead in their hearts.³ Indeed, they were already dead because the moral being of the Nazis was already dead, killed in a heroic (so they thought) act of auto-immolation to the even higher ethics of duty. *Ubi maior, minor cessat*. The process of double dehumanisation is, therefore, nothing but a process of double-killing or, at least, of numbing (oneself) and then killing (the other). Moreover, this process is based on mechanisms aimed at eradicating (partially or totally) empathy.

One of these mechanisms and its tremendous effects has already been discussed in the section on moral judgement. There, we saw that a twisted and perverted ideology could lead to categorising the world, and the subjects living in it, in such a way as to allow for a revolution regarding our more intimate and primordial moral intuitions. Recall, for instance, the powerful and meaningful quote by Primo Levi: ‘people like this deserve their fate, just look how they behave. These are not *Menschen*, human beings, but animals, it’s as clear as day.’ The primary method employed by the Nazi propaganda to suppress empathy and allow for the *Endlösung*, the Final Solution, was to make *Untermenschen* out of Jews: to make them less than human. In this sense, an efficacious manipulation of the semantics (conducted by Goebbels and his team) which described the Jewish race as maggots, as a cancer spreading in the healthy body of the German country proved to be hyper-effective. If Jews were a menace to the German nation and to the world, rooting them out meant saving the world. If Jews

³ I know that the word ‘heart’ may sound, especially in such a context, hackneyed, or even tasteless, but—also for lack of a better term—I believe that it is appropriate. The point here is to highlight the fact that the prisoners of the extermination camps were no longer regarded as human beings, or in other words, they did not have import: what they felt did not matter. In this sense, for the Nazis, they were already dead. Also, notice that, phenomenologically, to be dead for others in this particular way is different from being dead ‘in their minds’, different, that is, from a death experienced only by means of cognitive faculties. This would consist in a form of information that can be accessed by way of reasoning or perception. When I assert that the prisoners were dead ‘in the heart’ of the Nazis I imply a subtle, but crucial phenomenological difference in the way the Nazis felt towards the prisoners: they felt nothing. Once empathy is eradicated, killing becomes easy. As we said in the chapter about Eichmann: in this context it is not the absence of thought (as Arendt mistakenly believed) but the absence of feeling which is problematic. Consider the following quote by Lifton (1986, p. 444): ‘whether a Nazi doctor saw Jews without feeling their presence, or did not see them at all, he no longer experienced them as beings who affected him—that is, as human beings’.

were the sickness, suppression was the cure. It is crucial to understand this perverse mechanism in order to understand the tragic truth behind the Holocaust, namely, that this was intended by the Nazis as a *moral* task. The outcome of this twisted ideology was the foundation of an equally twisted morality for which, as Vetlesen rightly notes: ‘the individual’s theft of a cigarette is wrong, but the murder of millions right’.⁴ Notice that it was morally condemnable to keep something that belonged to a Jew for oneself, not because one ought to have respect or moral obligations towards a Jew, but because one would be in possession of property of the German state, to which Jewish personal possessions rightfully and solely belonged. The reason for that is that Jews were not considered to be moral addressees, nor full-fledged moral subjects: they were devoid of a moral status and, thus, could not be the target of moral obligations of any kind. If we wanted to schematically summarise the mechanism at the base of this method, we could do it by saying that the *dehumanisation* of the Jews led to their exclusion from the field of moral addressees and to a decrease in empathy towards them (to the ‘numbing’ of it).

15.1 THE DISTANCING METHOD

Another method employed to actively suppress (or at least reduce) empathy towards Jews was that of *distancing*. Vetlesen, with all probability influenced by Lifton, speaks of ‘bureaucracy’ in this way. However, I think that the concept of ‘distancing’ permits a richer understanding of this phenomenon and stresses the real objective of Nazi bureaucratisation, as well as of the progressive technologisation of the killing methods employed in the *Lager*, which is indeed distancing (both physically and psychologically) the perpetrators from the victims. The distancing method was employed at every level. At the administrative level, it took on the aspect of bureaucratisation: bureaucrats acted in a type of protective bubble. Their senses were made numb, unable to perceive or witness directly the reality of mass murder because of physical distance and because human beings were presented to them merely as cases, as data, as numbers, as *Sachen* (‘things’). Quoting Vetlesen: ‘The Jew simply never appears; from the very start of the genocidal sequence, the individual Jew is subjected to a derealization making him or her invisible and non-existent long before

⁴Vetlesen (1992, p. 182).

the actual killing itself.⁵ Yet of course, such a method can be very effective with administrators working from their offices, but what about the *Einsatzgruppen*? What about the SS, the Gestapo, and all the military units employed in the actual sweeping and killing of Jews? The task in this case was accomplished through the use of ideology and technology.

The first method, as we have said, made of the Jew something (and not someone) less than human, and for this reason devoid of moral status and human rights. Furthermore, ideology converted the Jew into an idea, a concept. It was the idea of the Jew that had to be eradicated. In the death camps, one never faced the concrete Jew, with a name, an identity, a personal history, but an empty shell with a tattooed number on the forearm. This is what they were: numbers. It is almost impossible to kill a person from whom you can feel fear, the longing for life, with whom you can empathise: but it is a lot easier to kill a concept. This also explains why Nazis could show empathy towards, say, their children, but they were able to inhibit it towards Jews in the camps: Jews simply belonged to another category, to which another status and other rules of conduct corresponded.⁶

Technology, accordingly, helped to implement the method of distancing. We know, for instance, that Himmler himself remained particularly upset after having witnessed an open-air shooting of Jews: in such a situation in fact, the bond pertaining to face-to-face interaction could not be suspended, and hence a certain degree of low-level empathy arising from the mere observation of the faces and the looks of the prisoners, as well as from their cries, could not be taken completely out of the picture. The episode was told by Hilberg in his book *The Destruction of the European Jews* in which this dialogue between Himmler and the *Obergruppenführer* Bach-Zelewski is reported:

BACH-ZELEWSKI: Reichsführer, those were only a hundred.

HIMMLER: What do you mean by that?

BACH-ZELEWSKI: Look at the eyes of the men in this Kommando, how deeply shaken they are! These men are finished (*fertig*) for the rest of their lives. What kind of followers are we training here? Either neurotics or savages!⁷

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 185.

⁶ See also *ivi* (1992, pp. 187–188).

⁷ Hilberg (1985, p. 332).

How serious Bach-Zelewski accusations were can be discerned by his post-traumatic shock: he was hospitalised with acute stomach and intestinal pains and experienced, according to Lifton,⁸ ‘psychic exhaustion’ and ‘hallucinations concerned with the shootings of Jews’. In general, as is also evident from the autobiography of Rudolf Höss, the Auschwitz camp commander, the psychological consequences of such *modi operandi* were devastating: many members of *Einsatzkommandos* committed suicide, others went mad, and almost all of them had to rely on alcohol in order to perform their duty.⁹ Therefore, it soon became clear that more distance between perpetrators and victims had to be devised, and it is in this respect that technology came to their aid, turning death camps into ‘killing factories’, into well-oiled machines. Zyklon-B gas replaced mass-shootings, allowing for a distance never experienced before: the prisoners were collected with the excuse of sending them to take a shower, thereby reducing to a minimum any protest or wailing, they were locked up behind thick walls and then it was only a question of waiting a few minutes for the gas to do its work. With such an execution, the guards were even spared the sight of blood. There was almost no seeing, no hearing, no touching. Never before has an execution occurred in such a detached, distanced context. Hence, numbing was granted, and with it, the emergence of empathy was inhibited. This obviously allowed for more killing, giving rise to a self-reinforcing dialectic: the number one gets, the less empathy one feels, the less empathy one feels, the more one can kill, and the more one kills, the number one gets and the less empathy one feels.

Observe that the elimination of empathy also allows for the eradication of guilt. Guilt, in fact, can arise if, and only if, one of the following two conditions are met: (1) we believe we have done something morally blameworthy; (2) we feel we have hurt another person. The typical circumstances of the first kind of guilt do not need any further explication: when you are aware that your conduct has violated some moral principle you believe in (say, you have told a lie) feelings of guilt usually arise, as a result. Situations constituting the second type of guilt can, on the contrary, be somewhat subtler: there are, in fact, times when you do not think you have done anything wrong, but the effect of your action on someone is so hurtful and so contrary to what your intention was, that you may feel guilty as a consequence and discover, in fact, that what you have done was

⁸ Lifton (1986, p. 159).

⁹ See Höss (1963), quoted in Vetlesen (1992, pp. 199–200).

not entirely worthy. An example might be when you tell someone a truth they do not want to hear with the intention of ‘waking them up’, but you end up simply hurting them. Notice that in order to feel a sense of guilt in the first kind of situation, empathy is not necessary, but it is necessary in the second kind. This reflection allows us to understand why numbing and inhibition of empathy were so successful in eradicating any sense of guilt among Nazis. Guilt, in fact, was eliminated thanks to a two-fold method: on the one hand, by the thought that what they were doing was a moral act, a self-immolation for the good of their country and of the whole world, and, on the other hand, by their lack of empathy for the prisoners they tortured and killed. Quoting Vetlesen:

Feelings of guilt, [...] are bound up with being affected, and to be affected by the other, the other must appear to us as a “real experience” that we have. In other words, the other must be perceived as a subject in the full sense of the term, as an autonomous person able to feel pain and to be hurt.¹⁰

As we have seen, my definition of guilt allows also for a wider interpretation, for which guilt must not necessarily be bound with the hurting of another person. However, it is true that guilt has to do with being affected by the other; it implies an opening towards the other, towards whom I am responsible. Now, I disagree with Vetlesen in thinking that guilt is *always* linked with empathy (which, for him, makes visible the suffering I caused in the other, thereby giving rise to guilt), but there are, in fact, emotions which need the contribution of empathy in order to arise. One of the shortcomings of Prinz’s critique on empathy—which, as we have seen, is grounded in the idea that emotions are both necessary and sufficient to ground morality, without the further need for empathy—is indeed overlooking the fact that some emotions which are fundamental for morality cannot occur without empathic mechanisms in place. Consider, for instance, the case of indignation. Indignation is, almost by definition, a form of empathic anger, an anger usually felt by subject A towards subject B, for what B has done to a third subject C. Strawson himself makes a similar description of indignation in his article *Freedom and Resentment*. There, he derives indignation from resentment, the latter being, for him, an angry reaction to injury or indifference. Indignation is nothing but a vicarious version of resentment. However, let us consider it in his own words:

¹⁰Vetlesen (1992, p. 197).

The reactive attitudes I have now to discuss might be described as the sympathetic or vicarious or impersonal or disinterested or generalized analogues of the reactive attitudes I have already discussed. They are reactions to the qualities of others' wills, not towards ourselves, but towards others. Because of this impersonal or vicarious character, we give them different names. Thus one who experiences *the vicarious analogue of resentment* is said to be indignant or disapproving, or morally indignant or disapproving. What we have here is, as it were, resentment on behalf of another, where one's own interest and dignity are not involved; and it is this impersonal or vicarious character of the attitude, added to its others, which entitle it to the qualification 'moral'.¹¹

As you can see, Strawson defines indignation as 'the vicarious analogue of resentment', and it is easy to see why. When I believe that a person has acted unfairly towards me, I will probably feel anger as a result, but when I believe that someone has acted unjustly towards another person, even a person I am not acquainted with, indignation will take the place of 'simple' anger. For instance, indignation can arise from a sexist or racist comment expressed (or from a behaviour enacted) by a salesman towards a person who precedes me in a queue, whereas when I am the target of such a comment (or behaviour) anger is the most plausible emotional reaction. That is not to say that indignation can never arise on one's own account (a possibility which is granted by Strawson, too), but that most of the time indignation is vicarious and that this characteristic is what makes it—so Strawson believes—moral. Unfortunately, the British philosopher does not explain why. Nevertheless, by relying on his other texts, it seems safe to affirm that the vicarious dimension is crucial in order to reach the level of universality typical of morals: a personal reactive feeling is, in fact, unsuitable to be called, *ipso facto*, a moral one, but an emotion that can arise on behalf of others has, *ipso facto*, the potential to be universalised, for the very good reason that it goes beyond one's own egoism and egocentrism and can become, to use Strawson's words, 'impersonal' in character. Put in yet another way, the person who feels indignation feels resentment not for themselves, but on behalf of another, hence, their concern and interest are not about themselves, but about another, thereby revealing a universalistic and intrinsically moral afflatus. For our purposes, Strawson's reflections are especially interesting, since to define indignation as vicarious resentment or vicarious anger is to admit, implicitly, that

¹¹ Strawson (2008, p. 15). Emphasis is mine.

indignation is nothing but *empathic anger*, that is, anger/resentment aroused by my putting oneself in the position of the other. Notice that the other whose position I put myself into may not necessarily be the victim: it can also be the person whose behaviour triggered my indignation. In fact, indignation designates, by its very etymology, what is not *dignus*, which is the Latin word for worthy, deserving, or respectable. Hence, by empathising with the politician instantiating a certain behaviour I may feel disapprobation for it and react with indignation, because such a behaviour is *indignus* (unworthy, dishonourable) for a politician: ‘if I were him, I would feel shame’.

15.2 SHAME AND EMPATHY

This consideration leads us to another issue anti-empathists seem to have disregarded, namely, the fact that empathy appears to be at the base of many social and moral emotions. Take, for instance, the case of shame. Unfortunately, this book is not the place to support my claim with a long study of shame, since this emotion is extremely complex, has a long history, and in recent times has had a massive revival due to an impressive number of publications dedicated to the theme. However, I would like to stress a few concepts.

In their influential book *In Defense of Shame*, Julien Deonna, Raffaele Rodogno, and Fabrice Teroni have ruled out a possible link between empathy and shame by pointing out that empathy and shame are inversely proportional: when shame is elicited, empathy tends to diminish, and *vice versa*. In fact, when you experience a profound sense of shame—so their claim—your ability to empathise with others is severely limited, since you are too embroiled in your own emotion to even try to take another’s perspective.¹² Furthermore, as numerous studies have shown, shame-prone individuals are generally less empathic than other individuals who are inclined to feel different emotions (like guilt) when they do wrong. Proneness to guilt is strongly associated with taking the perspective of others and with having concern for them, whereas shame-proneness is connected with a decreased capacity to empathise and an inclination towards self-oriented distress. This outcome is due to the different focus that the emotions of guilt, on the one hand, and shame, on the other, have. Guilt, in fact, focuses on a ‘bad behaviour’, whereas shame focuses on a ‘bad

¹²See Deonna et al. (2012, pp. 50–51).

self'.¹³ This distinction is of central importance, since, in concentrating on bad behaviour, one focuses on the consequences of that behaviour on other people, enabling and increasing empathy for others. With shame, by contrast, the (distressing) focus of the emotion is on oneself, considered as shameful, as deserving contempt or blame, thereby making an empathic process with others impossible. Empathy is grounded in openness towards others, whereas shame signifies self-closure, in particular, so it is no wonder that the phenomenology of shame seems to go against that of empathy. However, the analysis of Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni on the connections between empathy and shame might be slightly too rushed. Indeed, if it is true that shame, when felt for oneself, is a hindrance to empathy, it is also true that shame can have empathic mechanisms at its base.

If we take a look at the phenomenology of shame, we will soon discover that what is typical of shame is a strong, stressful sensation which leads us to avoid the scrutiny of others: when we are ashamed, we want to hide, disappear from sight. This powerful impulse we feel in shameful situations is also confirmed by the vocabulary and the idiomatic expressions connected with shame. When ashamed, it is usual to say (and to feel the desire) to 'sink through the floor', for example. This is why I agree with Sartre when he affirms in *Being and Nothingness* that although the *I* may very well express judgements on themselves when ashamed and link the shameful episode with an incapacity on their side to exemplify a certain self-relevant value (and Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni are very skilled at evidencing this aspect), the triggering factor remains essentially the presence of the *other*. This involves a presence which is actual or made present in the imagination and which objectifies the subject, that is, the subject feels themselves objectified by the critical look of the other, by their 'accusing finger' and for this reason can objectify themselves in judgement, thereby acknowledging themselves in the same way the others do. The *alter* is therefore essential for shame.¹⁴ My claim is that this *alter*, who is actually present or made aware in the imagination, and who is responsible for the elicitation of shame, can only cause this triggering when the ashamed subject empathises with them. In other words, the judgement of the other (which is expressed in words or behaviour or simply imagined)

¹³ See Deonna et al. (2012, p. 53), as well as Tangney (2007), and for further readings: Tangney (1991, 1995) and Tangney and Dearing (2002, esp. p. 309).

¹⁴ See Sartre (1978, pp. 221 and ff).

can be made transparent by means of empathy. Consider the following sentences by Sartre:

Yet this object which has appeared to the Other [me as seen by the Other, ed.] is not an empty image in the mind of another. Such an image in fact, would be imputable wholly to the Other and so could not “touch” me. I could feel irritation, or anger before it as before a bad portrait of myself which gives to my expression an ugliness or baseness which I do not have, but I could not be touched to the quick. Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me.¹⁵

This quote is very telling. Sartre is adamant that ‘I’ in the mind of the Other am not just an empty image that can be more or less true to what I really am. On the contrary: I am the person the Other sees as they see: ‘I recognize that I am as the Other sees me.’ In order to do that, to see myself as the other sees me and to objectify myself as the Other does, I need to empathise with the Other, namely, I have to take their perspective. Observe that this occurs both when the other is actually present and when I enact imaginatively the perspective of someone watching and judging me: be it God, my father, or a type of Smithian impartial spectator. I feel ashamed because I empathise with the judgement of the Other and feel towards myself what they feel for me, thereby approving of this judgement. Hence, contrary to what Deonna et al. thought, shame would not exist without empathy, without the fundamental access to the inner world of the Other that empathy grants me.

15.3 TO SEE AND TO BE SEEN

In addition to that, Sartre’s reflections also emphasise the centrality of another element, which empathy makes visible and must be eliminated in order to suppress empathy and favour numbing, namely, the *regard d’autrui*, the look of the Other. We have seen previously how the perpetrator hesitates when they can touch, hear, or see the victim and how this perceivable dimension has to be removed by distance to avoid empathic hesitation. In particular, we have spoken of the empathic potential of face-to-face interactions: it is hard to kill another while watching their face and see the look in their eyes, and this is why executions by means of shooting

¹⁵ Sartre (1978, p. 222).

are done by covering the head of the sentenced person with a sack, or by making them hang their head and look down. Sartre's theory and the analysis we have undertaken of shame offer an interesting explanation for that: a face-to-face interaction not only tends to elicit low-level empathy, but sheds light on a breakthrough experience on the part of the perpetrator, who understands that in seeing the victim, they are also seen by that person, that the victim is at the same time their witness. 'You kill me, but I see you killing me. I am the witness of what you are going to do to me.'

There cannot be any hope of anonymity in a face-to-face interaction: I cannot hide from the Other's look, and I can hardly pretend that the Other is not a human being, that we do not share the same humanity, as the episode between Himmler and Bach-Zelewski also shows. This is why it is not indifference, but relation, to be the basic form of intersubjectivity:

[...] not caring for the other is what is conspicuous, what calls for explanation, what catches our attention—in short, what strikes us as a breakdown to be accounted for. Under conditions of physical proximity, where the full exposure of exchanging looks is allowed for, to matter to one another, to be engaged in the What next? Is the primordial form of relating to each other. [I]t is not well-nigh impossible to adopt an indifferent stance even here. But to [...] do so presupposes an effort, it presupposes the subject's wresting himself or herself away from the condition of being engaged with the other.¹⁶

Once again, we return to Strawson's standpoint: it is possible to adopt an objective attitude, but this must not be considered as the position we usually favour. Being human, we normally live *in medias res*, in a *Mitwelt* of interpersonal relations, of mutual concern, and we cannot (or can only with extreme difficulty) prevent ourselves from feeling certain emotions and having certain thoughts in given situations. The with-world in which we live is a result of the interrelations we have with ourselves and with others, it is the outcome of an understanding we continuously reach, based on the positions, the perspectives we choose (more or less willingly) to adopt. I have already quoted phenomenologists like Scheler, Merleau-Ponty, and even Heidegger on this matter. Here, I wish to use a citation by Husserl to conclusively clarify this issue:

¹⁶Vetlesen (1992, p. 202).

Waking life is always a directedness toward this or that, being directed toward it as means, as relevant or irrelevant, toward the interesting or the indifferent, toward the private or the public, toward what is really required or intrusively new. All this lies within the world-horizon; but special motives are required when one who is gripped in this world-life reorients himself and somehow comes to make the world itself thematic [...].¹⁷

Husserl shows once again how it takes an effort to reorient oneself and one's perspective on the world, how it is difficult to assume an artificial perspective and go against our empathic intuitions which designate the world in which we live and move.¹⁸ However, once we do this, once we choose to destroy and reconstruct our perspective on the world we share with others, we can change not only our interpretation, but even our perception (both moral and not) of it. In other words, what the Nazi soldiers could not change was the fact that they were killing, even exterminating people. This immediately made perpetrators of them and victims of the Jews and the other prisoners. Nevertheless, they could assume a perspective by which they were killing some in order to save many others, for the sake of a greater good. They could numb their senses by means of distancing and ideology and silence their inner, natural empathic reactions.¹⁹ In effect, it was exactly this kind of hard-won, 'objective attitude', this distancing themselves from a *Mitwelt* that one can approach only with the help of empathy, which permitted all those atrocities to be committed.

In this sense, even the doctrine of Levinas can be seen in the positive light it deserves. I am not sure whether Levinas would agree with me on the interpretation I propose for his theory, but I am confident enough that this is the only way I can make some ambiguous aspects of his arguments not only understandable to me, but productive at a moral and ethical level, at least in my opinion. The French philosopher famously remarked that the other comes to me and to my attention as a face, and not merely as a look (as in Sartre's theory). This already constitutes a substantial difference, in fact a *look*, by definition, can only *see*, and this is what the other does for Sartre. I am seen by the other, and in this sense, the other exercises a negative influence exclusively on me: to be exposed to the other's

¹⁷Husserl (1970, p. 281).

¹⁸Remember our discussion in the first part of the book about empathy as being our social and moral compass.

¹⁹As we have seen more than once, empathy is 'a kind of act of perceiving' as Edith Stein wrote at the beginning of her famous book.

direct regard is to be exposed absolutely; this strips me of my freedom and transcends my transcendence. The other is perceived as a looming and threatening presence towards which I can do nothing: the look does not allow for exchange. However, things are different when I am confronted with a *face*. Here, the other affects me in a two-fold sense: as a master commanding me (and this is the junction point with Sartre) and at the same time as a being that is outright nude, defenceless, vulnerable; a being which can also be *seen*, which can be commanded, hurt, and killed. The other does not deprive me of my freedom; on the contrary, their intrinsic and constitutional vulnerability assigns a precise task to my freedom, for which, therefore, I am fully responsible, which is to choose not to kill the other. Indeed, why is that? It is because I perceive the other's frailty, neediness, and utter vulnerability by means of empathy: I feel that the other is vulnerable as I also am, and once I have recognised that, this acknowledgment cannot but call for responsibility on my part. Empathy is what makes the other present to us, namely, what presents the other as a face in the sense of Levinas, that is, as a human being who shares this world with me together with a common sensitivity, and towards whom I am responsible. Recalling the words of Knud Løgstrup:

By our very attitude to one another we help to shape one another's world. By our attitude to the other person we help to determine the scope and hue of his or her world; we make it large or small, bright or drab, rich or dull, threatening or secure. We help to shape his or her world not by theories and views but by our very attitude toward him or her. Here lies the unarticulated and one might say anonymous demand that we take care of the life which trust has placed in our hands.²⁰

This quote is telling. The Danish philosopher wants to express the idea here for which *being with* someone means something more than merely *existing alongside* someone. The attitude we have and the perspective we assume towards the world and towards the other have an impact on the other's attitude and on the other's own perspective about the world. The *Mitwelt* results from the encounter between these different perspectives and attitudes. Since we are the author not only of our world, but, to a large degree, of that of others, too, we cannot escape responsibility for the way in which we shape this *shared world*. In other words, every move we

²⁰ Løgstrup (1997, p. 18).

make has an impact not only on our own life and on our individual world, but on those of others as well. Living in this world, which is intrinsically shared and which is essentially a co-world, requires the faculty to attune to others, to be sensitive towards them, to understand them, and, in this sense, empathy proves to be a fundamental, vital component of social and moral life, a *condicio sine qua non*.

Yet, there is more. It seems to me, in fact, that empathy is the key to a comprehension of the other which is sensitive to their proper ontological status and to the special way in which we *are with* the other. Consider, for example, the words of Heidegger in *Being and Time*, which remain central in the work of many phenomenological philosophers: ‘The kind of being which belongs to the *Dasein* of Others, as we encounter it within the world, differs from readiness-to-hand [of “things” or “equipment”] or presence-at-hand [of “Nature”]. [...] [“Others”] are neither present-at-hand nor ready-to-hand. [...] [T]hey are there too, and there with it [the *Dasein*].’²¹ What Heidegger is doing here is describing the ontological status of human beings: the others are not instruments to be used for our aims or ends (like things or objects, which have a readiness-to-hand), nor are they merely existing alongside us as natural creatures, like plants or animals (presence-at-hand). On the contrary, they are as we are, in the same way, they are *Daseins* who *are with* us, beings ‘among whom one is too’.²² However, although Heidegger was able to shed some light in the ontology proper to the other, he did not show the same ability in highlighting the kinds of relations that we have in mind when we think of ‘being with others’ in the proper sense. Using the words of Martin Buber: ‘[T]his resolution [...] knows nothing of any essential relation with others or any real I-Thou with them which could breach the barriers of the self.’²³

In what follows, I shall argue that the type of relation which Buber had in mind, that I-Thou relation with others that can breach the barriers of the self, can be met only by a mutual relation which involves openness towards the other on both parts and the acknowledging of the Other as in some sense different, but also not too much dissimilar, from Me: a kind of relation which involves, in other words, the essential deployment of empathy.

²¹ Heidegger (1962, p. 154).

²² Ibidem.

²³ Buber (2002, p. 206).

15.4 BEING-WITH OTHERS

We are with others—this, for instance, is the position of Stephen Darwall,²⁴ and I agree with him—when we are in another’s *presence*. The concept of ‘presence’ has more than one similarity with that of the face, but it is more abstract, less embodied, and perhaps, because of that, more easily suitable in describing the kinds of relations shaped by empathy. To be in the presence of someone means essentially ‘to be brought somehow into awareness of and to relate to him as a person’,²⁵ but, even more importantly, it means to relate with the other from a *second-personal standpoint* as described by Darwall in his most famous book:

[S]ince it [the person] can be understood only within a network of concepts that involve the idea of second-personal address: the authority or standing to address claims and demands to others, legitimate claims and demands and the distinctive kind of reasons for acting they create (second-personal reasons), and answerability for complying with valid claims and second-personal reasons.²⁶

This quote has not the usual clarity to which Darwall has accustomed us, however, it is Darwall himself who gives us a good reading key by mentioning Strawson slightly later in the article. What Darwall calls ‘the second-personal standpoint’ and Strawson the ‘interpersonal attitude’, as opposed to the ‘objective’ one, are one and the same thing. Both philosophers point out the need to holding ourselves answerable to each other through, what Strawson calls, the ‘reactive attitudes’, such as the previously mentioned concepts of resentment and indignation. Nonetheless, holding ourselves answerable to another essentially signifies the acknowledgement of the other’s authority over us, to bestow on them the same authority that we also have under the condition of mutuality. This is the reason why Buber criticised Heidegger on this issue: regarding someone as a person is not a third-personal conviction, but a second-personal attitude, meaning, that it is an *attitude towards* that person, and not a *belief about* them. A belief would be a static concept, a mere ontological (or, better, ‘ontic’) acknowledging: the second-personal attitude involved here is instead an active one, which commits the agent(s) to mutual answerability. Interestingly, this concept is not at all arbitrarily stipulated, nor a

²⁴ Darwall (2011, p. 14).

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem.

merely philosophical one. Reflect, for instance, on your saying that you ‘feel a presence’. You would never use this term to describe that you feel an animal is present nearby. With ‘presence’ we indicate beings showing not only an evidence of mentality, but who can refer to us in a way which implies and even presupposes our answerability, beings, that is, who can communicate with us under the idea of mutuality. As a matter of fact, this is the definition Darwall gives of ‘being with one another’:

[T]wo people are with one another when they are mutually aware of their mutual openness to mutual relating. [...] [B]eing present to them, acknowledges their second-personal presence and standing and, thereby, involves implicit respect for them as having this authority.²⁷

Then he adds an interesting example:

That is why it is especially chilling when someone with whom one has had a close personal relation acts as though you are not there when it is common knowledge between you that you are, as though he is not in your presence or as though you are not in his.²⁸

Let us try to reconstruct Darwall’s argument: to be mutually aware of mutual openness to mutual relating is to be in the presence of someone. To be in the presence of someone is to have a second-personal attitude and to assume a second-personal stance in relation to that someone, who, in turn, does the same to me. This ‘modus of being’ entails implicit respect for the other, for the good reason that I implicitly recognise the other as having the authority to treat me second-personally. In other words, the other can expect me to be open towards them, to respond to their questions, requests, orders, implorations, and, in general, to all the second-personal practices involved in this kind of perspective. The implicit ‘shared’ authority and respect inherent in this kind of mechanism is especially transparent in those cases in which this mechanism occurs because of at least one of the two persons involved in the relationship. Thus, for instance, a person who acts as if I am not there refuses to ascribe me the authority and respect a second-personal relationship would require. It is as if they said: ‘I may still be in *your* presence, but you are not in *my* presence anymore. I am not open towards you, nor do I want you to be open towards

²⁷ Darwall (2011, p. 16).

²⁸ Ibidem.

me.’ Suddenly, I am treated from a third-personal stance: as a ‘them’, as someone who can be useful or not, detrimental or not, threatening or not, but I am no longer treated as deserving the same authority or respect. I am not an ‘other’ with whom this person can relate second-personally: I have become ‘The Other’, a complete stranger, a person who cannot participate in a relationship of mutual openness.

Of course, not all the interactions we have are second-personal, nor is a third-personal relation necessarily and intrinsically a negative one. Indeed, there are even second-personal relationships which do not entail the ‘being-in presence of’, as when a robber wielding a knife demands you to give him your wallet. They talk to and threaten you from a second-personal stance, but they are not in your presence in the depicted sense and you certainly do not share a mutual openness with them. However, it is important to highlight that every time where we are in the presence of someone in the described sense (by sharing a mutual openness and accountability), we are so within the framework of a second-personal relationship.

15.5 EMPATHY AND BEING IN THE PRESENCE OF THE OTHER

Nonetheless, what does all of this have to do with empathy? A great deal, actually. Let us return one more time to Strawson. By reading his article *Freedom and Resentment* through the lenses offered by Darwall’s *The Second-Person Standpoint*, we can say that our way of holding people responsible for what they do and think is by means of ‘reactive attitudes’, which are in their essence profoundly second personal: resentment, indignation, guilt, and blame, for example. It is here that empathy comes into play: in fact, to make themselves mutually accountable, people who are present with each other need to be open, receptive, even vulnerable to each other’s reactive attitudes. Furthermore, in order to be affected by the reactive attitudes of others in the entire spectrum of ways mutual accountability requires, empathy is needed. It is needed, because receptivity and vulnerability are involved: empathy is indeed required to be affected by others when their emotions towards us are not transparent enough. However, there is an even more crucial role played by empathy within this context:

[T]he projective empathy implicit in respecting the other takes them into the other’s perspective so that they can see themselves in the resenting way the other sees them. If they can bring this reaction “home” and generate

Smithian “fellow-feeling,” they can then feel the feeling’s propriety in a way that enables them to feel its reciprocal analogue, guilt, or regret for having caused the kind of hurt or harm that warrants apology.²⁹

Thus, empathy turns out to be essential to modulate the Strawsonian reactive attitudes, which means that the second-personal answerability typical of the *being-with*, of *being in the presence of*, relies on empathy. We can respond, anticipate, and react to the reactions of others, when interacting in contexts of mutual accountability, essentially within an empathic framework. This, of course, is assuming that we take into account second-personal relationships which involve being-with. In the case of third-personal relationships, in which others are not with us *stricto sensu*, a Strawsonian objective attitude will result and, with it, empathy will become unnecessary.

I think that this line of thought by Darwall can become particularly enlightening if applied (as he certainly did not do so in his article) in the context of lack of empathy typical of the concentration camps. If, in fact, you take the relationship there was between prisoners and guards in the *lagers* in light of what we have explained so far with regard to Darwall’s theory, it is possible to observe that it was not one in which victims and perpetrators were in each other’s presence, or, which is equivalent, were ‘being with’. On the contrary, the relationship existing between these two groups was a third-personal one for the majority of the time. Jews were not seen as subjects that shared the perpetrators’ authority and towards whom respect was due: in fact, they were so irreducibly alien, so ‘other’ in their ‘otherness’, that it was impossible to interact with them under the condition of a shared mutuality. Only third-personal pronouns were apt to define them: ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘they’. Pronouns that underline even more distinctly the distance there was between the German *Volk* and... *them*. The ‘being with’ the Jews was not only ontologically impossible because of their not being *Menschen*, of their not sharing the same humanness, but even the mere idea of mixing with them, of being in their presence *stricto sensu* needed to be eradicated as a perversion by means of their concrete, physical, and total elimination. In this framework, it is worth noticing that the feelings, emotions, and attitudes elicited by Jews are exquisitely third-personal and exclude them from mutual answerability, rather than call them to it. These feelings and attitudes include, *inter alia*, disgust and contempt. When you feel disgust, in fact, this emotion is addressed to

²⁹ Darwall (2011, p. 17).

someone or something which appears as intolerably hideous, for which distancing is in order, since the mere perception of it becomes extremely unpleasant. In the same way, when you feel contempt, you feel it for someone whom you consider poles apart from you and for whom you cannot feel any respect: 'I am not like him!' Such emotions, although they can sometimes be justified, are on the whole far more deleterious than reactive (second-personal) attitudes, which, even when they are negative, always necessarily involve implicit reciprocal mutual relating often grounded in empathy. To say it in Darwall's words:

By making ourselves personally accountable to those we are with, we put ourselves in their hands, give them a special standing to hold us answerable, and make ourselves vulnerable, through projective empathy, to their feelings and attitudes, not just as the latter's targets, but as feelings we can bring home to ourselves and share. This, according to Buber, "breach[es] the barriers of the self."³⁰

Therefore, empathy breaches the barriers of the self, it makes the self porous, vulnerable, ready to be affected by others, and respond to them, allowing for interplay, for acknowledging the humanity of the other, for seeing the other as at the same time different and equal. Equal, because the other shares my same humanity and deserves the same authority and respect I have *qua* human being; different, because empathy (as opposed to identification or contagion) makes explicit that the other is fundamentally an 'Other'.

However—acknowledging the influence that the philosophy of Levinas had in relation to this point within the theoretical path of this book—it would be wrong to consider the fact that I access the minds of others in a way that is different from that which I use to access my own mind as being an imperfection, a shortcoming, or a deficiency. On the contrary, it is precisely this difference in the two approaches that reveals the other is *de facto* exactly that: an Other. Using the words of Levinas, the absence of the other is nothing else but their presence as 'other'.³¹ This difference is constitutional and it is the reason why we can say that the minds we experience through empathy are actually minds belonging to others. Husserl proves he shares the same line of thought when he writes that if we had the same access to the consciousness of the other as we have to our own, then

³⁰ Darwall (2011, p. 18).

³¹ See Levinas (1979, p. 89).

the other would stop being an ‘other’ and would instead become a part of us, of our *persona*.³²

Now, having highlighted this crucial point, we can arrive at a likewise critical conclusion: the cruelty of Nazis relied on the fact that ideology, distancing, and all the methods we discussed earlier took the soldiers and the guards in the concentration camps to assume third-personal attitudes and emotions towards the prisoners. To use again the case in point of disgust and contempt, Jews were viewed with contempt for being weak, inferior, and unworthy as a race, and they were regarded with disgust for their being *Untermenschen*, less than humans, as well as for the ‘infection’ they could spread by contaminating German, Arian blood. Of course, there were times in which Nazis addressed prisoners second-personally, for instance, when they gave them orders. However, they were never with them *stricto sensu*, they were not in each other’s presence, because empathy was precluded from arising. Empathy would have been able to break the spell and make the Nazis capable of seeing the Jews as humans, as beings who could, for example, suffer or love as they also did, who shared one and the same humanity. However, everything was scrutinised so as to impede a rising of empathy. An important testimony comes indeed from the autobiographical book by Rudolf Höss, *Kommandant in Auschwitz*, who writes:

Time and again I was asked how I, how my men, over and over again, could cope with witnessing *this* process, how we could endure it. I always replied that all human inclinations and feelings had to keep silent in the face of the ice-cold consequence with which we had to carry out the order of the Führer. Thus, I had to appear cold and heartless in front of proceedings that would cause the heart of any still humanly feeling person to turn around in his body.³³

This quote is extremely revealing, since it confirms everything we have argued for until now. Höss does not talk, in fact, about *moral* inclinations and feelings, but says instead that ‘all *human* inclinations and feelings had to keep silent’ and speaks of ‘ice-cold consequence’. Further, he says that the proceedings carried out in the *Lagers* would have caused ‘the heart of any still *humanly* feeling person to turn around in his body’. These admissions are very significant, as they show that it was, in fact, the all too human capacity of ‘feeling with’ that was blocked in those contexts, of

³² Husserl (1950/1999, p. 159).

³³ Höss (1963), quoted in Vetlesen (1992, pp. 210–211). Emphasis in the original.

being entirely human. The fact that Höss admits that any human person (any ‘humanly feeling person’ to be precise) would have felt their heart tear apart in dealing with such practices is more than a hint towards the actuality that it was empathy to be fundamentally lacking in this context. Before compassion (and contrary to what Nussbaum thought), before sympathy, the great absent was empathy, human empathy. Recall the process of double-killing of which we spoke earlier: Nazis had to kill the humanity in themselves before killing other humans. They had to show the same coldness of heart (sometimes the same sadism) we have seen being the chief characteristic of psychopaths. It is therefore no coincidence that many of them were, in fact, sociopaths.

15.6 LACK OF EMPATHY AND THE CASE OF CRUELTY AND BRUTALITY

If we wanted to use the valuable terms of Max Scheler, we could say that the suppression of empathy did not make all Nazis *cruel* (as we tend to think). Cruel was the Nazi ideology, and cruel were the Nazis who took pleasure in torturing and exterminating the prisoners of the camps. However, for the most part, Nazis were indeed *brutal*, rather than cruel.³⁴ Scheler introduces this difference at the beginning of his book *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, when talking about similar but distinct phenomena in the sphere of sympathy. The cruel person is, for Scheler, not simply that person who is insensitive to other people’s suffering, but rather that kind of individual whose primary pleasure and enjoyment lies in torturing and in the agony of his or her victim. In this sense, their chief defect is not a lack of empathy, or of fellow-feeling, but involves something different. Scheler explains it by introducing a crucial distinction between what he calls *Mitfühlen* and *Nachfühlen*, listed in the English translation as ‘fellow-feeling’ and ‘vicarious feeling’. In short, the German philosopher argues that whereas ‘vicarious feeling’ involves the mere visualising of the feelings of the other, ‘fellow-feeling’ entails the (re)active participation in the state and value of the other’s feelings (as these are visualised in vicarious feeling). The phenomenon of cruelty cannot therefore be conceived as a lack of vicarious feeling; on the contrary, cruelty exists exactly because we have vicarious feeling for another person who is suffering, but no

³⁴ ‘Cruelty’ and ‘brutality’ are the nouns chosen to translate Scheler’s original terms ‘*Grausamkeit*’ and ‘*Roheit*’, respectively.

‘fellow-feeling’ as a result. In other words, cruelty is what occurs when we enjoy the suffering of the other which is presented (or made present) to us through vicarious feeling.

As we already know, there are some authors, such as Darwall or Breithaupt, who see this occurrence as demonstration that empathy (at least in its cognitive declination) can be at the base of cruelty and sadism. We have already confuted this view, but I would like to add something more here. Cruelty, in my opinion, does not arise from affective empathy as described in this book. In fact, although I do not think that empathy necessarily involves isomorphism, it is undeniable that if the term ‘empathy’ is to have any sense at all, it should be attributed to feelings which are more congruent with those of the other and which share at least their same valence. Thus, plainly, just as we would not be ready to say that Julia empathises with Jane when Jane is crying her heart out and Julia is laughing as a response, I find it absurd to think empathy would be occurring when a person is in agony and another one takes pleasure at the sight of this person’s pain. It would be more reasonable to think that cruelty results from a profoundly perverted sensitivity, for which the suffering of another (human) being is never really empathised with, never thought of as meaningful. Further, the other, in such a framework, is never considered as sharing the same status as the cruel person (thus, they are never *with the other* in the proper sense), but as being a mere instrument to his or her own personal satisfaction. This means that the flaw inherent in cruelty already occurs at the level of (moral) perception. It is as if the cruel person cannot see things in the same way they appear to any ‘normal’ person, as if they were not merely ‘blind’ to certain values (in the sense of being incapable of seeing them), but—to continue the analogy of sight—as if they have a strange case of daltonism, in which values (instead of colours) are misattributed. Therefore, for instance, the suffering of the other is not a matter of concern, but a reason for joy and pleasure.

The matter of brutality is entirely another issue. As Scheler states: ‘In contrast to cruelty, “*brutality*” is merely a disregard of other peoples’ experience, despite the apprehension of it in feeling.’³⁵ Hence, whereas the cruel person feels pleasure in making another individual suffer and intentionally pursues this end, the brutal person is simply not touched by this suffering. *Nota bene*: brutality is not reducible to *insensitivity*. The latter, according to Scheler, is mainly found in pathological cases (e.g.

³⁵ Scheler (2008, p. 14).

consider depression as a case of chronic insensitivity and vicarious distress as a temporary one) where the individual is so absorbed in their own (negative) feelings so as to be undermined with respect to being moved by others and/or feeling any kind of fellow-feeling for them. Under these circumstances, the brutal and the insensitive person are both ‘not touched’ by others and disinterested in their weal and woe. However, brutality differentiates itself from insensitivity by virtue of its *conscious* disregard of other peoples’ feelings. The insensitive person does not choose to be insensitive and is often unaware of their own insensitivity. The insensitive person might have the desire to feel with others, to empathise with them and even to sympathise with them, but they struggle to do so as it involves an enormous effort. Instead, the brutal person has the capacity to empathise with the victims of their brutality, but chooses not to employ this. They do not feel pleasure, nor displeasure in instantiating their brutality with violence, killing, and so on, they simply decide not to care, and to this absence of care is inherent an absence of a clear-cut feeling in relation to what is perpetrated.

This reconstruction fits perfectly with our previous reflections. We have said, in fact, that Nazi ideology required people (especially those soldiers employed in the enactment of the Final Solution) to renounce what was more characteristically human in them. In this sense, it is only logical that the trait characteristic of Nazi soldiers was not so much cruelty, but rather brutality. The cruel person, in fact, cannot be said to lack humanity *stricto sensu*. Their capacity to think and feel is still there, but it is perverted in ways that can sometimes be irreversible. Put in another way, the cruel person can be *inhuman* in their evil desire to always think of better ways to make other people suffer and in their feeling pleasure in the pain of others. On the contrary, the brutal person consciously chooses to inhibit their capacity to think and feel as a normal human being, and in their doing violence without feeling anything in particular, in their blind obedience to orders, and in their renunciation of empathy (but also compassion) for others, they prove to be not inhuman, but *subhuman*.

If I am right in this argument so far, I think that the conclusions that can be drawn are even more striking and can be used in response to many of the criticisms which are often proffered against empathy. I have already discussed the fact that the biases which are taken by anti-empathists to be essentially inherent in empathy are actually flaws of reason and that the extent of our empathy usually reflects the extent of our open-mindedness. I have also tackled the view that the sadistic torturer is empathic. Now it

can be shown that even if one were not ready to accept my arguments about these issues, one could hardly reject the conclusion that the absence of empathy in the moral domain is in fact much more deleterious than its supposedly biased nature.

Consider our 'latest discoveries'. We have seen that Nazi soldiers had to be 'cold blooded' in order to comply with their orders. This 'cold-bloodedness' was achieved thanks to a process of numbing based on ideology, distancing, and other methods. This numbing, aimed at the elimination of empathy for the victims, inevitably led to a condition which we may call, based on Schelerian terminology, 'brutality' on the part of the perpetrators. However, although powerful, this numbing was not all-encompassing; instead, it was highly selective. Nazi soldiers were able to inhibit their empathy in the concentration camps, but a part of them was still capable of feeling empathy in other contexts. Nonetheless, what if this deactivation of empathy were generalised and became all-encompassing? After all, we know from Vetlesen, Lifton, and from the analysis we conducted on the phenomenon of the Holocaust that the number the individual becomes, the more they kill, and the more they kill, the number they become.³⁶ It is therefore a process that, even though selective, can easily spread and infect the mentality as well as both the conscious and unconscious behaviour of the individual. Furthermore, anti-empathists insist that we should abstain from using empathy within the moral sphere, 'turning it off' as some kind of switch, thereby also upholding a full-fledged intentional numbing of empathy. However, I am convinced that such a position would be detrimental to morality. To 'hush up' our empathy would mean to relinquish being affected by the condition of others, to renounce taking active human interest in their 'weal and woe', to surrender to indifference. Indeed, I can almost hear anti-empathists objecting that empathy is not the only means by which we can take an interest in others and in their circumstances, and that these methods are preferable to empathy. Nevertheless, as we have seen in the course of this book and with numerous examples, there are many cases in which empathy is the main access to moral perception, moral motivation, and moral conduct (let alone moral education and development), and to renounce empathy in these contexts would be to renounce seeing and doing what is moral.

³⁶ See, for example, Vetlesen (1992, p. 212).

15.7 THE DANGERS OF (MORAL) INDIFFERENCE

From a moral perspective, the indifference, and in some cases, the brutality stemming from the absence of empathy are even more dangerous than cruelty. In fact, whereas some people can do cruel things from time to time, not so many individuals are capable of being consistently and continuously cruel. The latter are usually pathological individuals. Nevertheless, people can much more easily succumb to indifference and become—sometimes unconsciously—‘brutal’ in the way previously described. However, there is more to take into consideration. Even if we grant, as Bloom does, that empathy can sometimes fuel hatred,³⁷ my claim is that the potential dangers that this could create would be minor (and thereby preferable) to those that indifference caused by lack of empathy could provoke. In fact, as Scheler rightly observed in the second part of his book *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, both love and hate, although of course in opposite ways, stem from and clearly show a deep-rooted emotional engagement. To love is, for Scheler, to take an active, positive, ‘feeling’ interest (in the sense of a deep-felt emotional interest) in some particular person and to seek the enhancement of the qualities and the values perceived in the other, so that one is happy for the good that occurs to them. On the other hand, to hate means to feel an active, negative interest in another individual and to be happy about the misery and suffering of the other and bitter at their joy. Notably, the hating person will typically seek the divestment of the perceived qualities and values of the hated one.

From a moral standpoint, one can love the wrong person and for the wrong reasons, and one can hate a person who does not deserve it, perhaps for fabricated or simply wrong reasons. Both possibilities are morally criticisable. However, the fact that someone can show a deep-seated emotional engagement, that they can feel and pursue an interest, should be seen as positive at this point, because it would mean that their emotional capacities, among which we find empathy, and which are constitutive of a considerable number of more complex processes, such as information gathering and moral perception, are still there. Now imagine a person completely devoid of empathy. This person, understandably, would be totally unaffected by others. They would take no active interest (negative or positive) in the ‘weal and woe’ of another and show no emotional engagement, nothing but coldness and insensitivity. This condition is far

³⁷ See Bloom (2016, chapter 1).

more dangerous than that of a person whose emotionality was ‘wrongly’ elicited, in fact, it is hard to return to a state of emotion and interest when everything seems ‘grey’ and leaves you untouched. Why care for others if at the end of the day it’s all the same and nothing matters? To this view, a few objections might be raised: to begin with, anti-empathists do not want to say that empathy is necessarily detrimental, but that it is detrimental within the moral sphere. Hence, a person should not renounce empathy *tout court*, but only empathy applied in the moral field. Furthermore, they may maintain that a person lacking empathy might still feel emotional affection based, for instance, on token behaviours, without further need to empathise with the individual instantiating that behaviour. Nonetheless, these objections miss the point. *In primis*, we have already noticed more than once that renouncing empathy in relation to morality is a great loss in many different aspects. Moreover, it is hard to completely abstain from empathy: it seems more reasonable to let empathy flow and then act on the base of what reason recommends, *together* with the suggestions stemming from empathy. The alternative would be to suppress empathy, thereby losing a significant part of our emotional sensitivity. To use the illuminating words of Vetlesen on this point:

[T]o undermine the access to the weal and woe of the other through empathy is to undermine an indispensable presupposition for the exercise of moral judgment, so that—to invoke the example of Nazi Germany—having barred the emergence of empathy through processes of dehumanization, there was no risk that the “brake” represented by judgment would come to interfere with the increasingly technologized killing. This suggests that the further one moves away from the love-hate end of the continuum and approaches the logic of indifference, the greater the danger that the subject will contribute to immoral acts, because the less likely it is that he or she will be able to “see” and subsequently pass judgment on moral phenomena.³⁸

Vetlesen defines empathy at various times in his book as the ‘basic emotional faculty of humanity’ and I agree with that. Empathy, in fact, constitutes the ability to relate to others through emotion, it is our interpersonal compass, the key to being attuned to others. This is why I am against moral theories which tend to favour one particular feeling over empathy, as it happens with Bloom and his idea of (rational) compassion and, to a lesser extent, with Prinz (who, in his [2011a](#) article, speaks in favour of anger, and

³⁸ Vetlesen (1992, p. 213).

in the 2011b, of concern as in many aspects superior to empathy). Consider, for instance, the case of compassion. It is easy to notice that compassion is too narrow to serve as a motivational basis for our moral acts and, likewise, too narrow to be the explanation of moral conduct in general. It would, in fact, be absurd to believe that someone necessarily has to suffer (which is compassion's eliciting condition) in order to feel a moral obligation to help them as an addressee of moral action. Morality cannot but transcend any particular feeling, emotion, or sentiment we may develop towards others. Nevertheless, morality cannot be prescindend from empathy in the way we have defined it, nor can fellow-feelings, such as compassion, sympathy, or pity, which all stem from empathy.³⁹ In order to act morally, we have to 'get things straight', to understand a situation as well as the thoughts and feelings of those implied in it. All of these elements are given and revealed to us through acts of physical and emotional perception. This level precedes that of judgement as well as that of action and it is the stage in which emotions play their part. The emotions we feel pin us down to the particular moral circumstance we have in front of us, to that singularity, to the *hic et nunc* that cannot but address us directly and immediately. The situation and the subjects present in it 'talk to us', granted that we are receptive, empathic enough to hear their voices.

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³⁹How can a person, for example, feel sorry for another without any kind of attunement to this other individual, without any kind of grasp (even the slightest) of their suffering, of what they are thinking and/or feeling?

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Conclusion

I wrote this book with the intention of making it understandable and interesting both for laypeople and for researchers from other disciplines, in the belief that the questions raised and the answers given might have significance for a larger audience than solely a philosophical one. After all, an illustration of the nature of empathy, its phenomenology and functioning, as well as its role within the ethical sphere should be an endeavour welcomed by a variety of individuals and constitute a knowledge which can be useful and fruitful in many different domains, such as the social, the psychological, but also the political and the economic. In fact, the choice of whether to encourage and develop, or, conversely, to disincentivise a culture of empathy, are questions that concern first and foremost our political and economic representatives.

In this respect, I think that this work of mine has the merit to renounce the partisan and senseless polemic between a priori supporters and critics of empathy and constitutes an attempt to offer an alternative and, as much as possible, an impartial theory that I hope will be a small step in the right direction; the same position which, in my modest opinion, international research on empathy should adopt in the years to come.

The claims defended in this book are many. We started with an epistemological analysis of the empathic phenomenon and marked its limits from other similar phenomena, such as sympathy or compassion. We also discussed several approaches to empathy and ways in which we can empathise with others, concluding that it was sensible to divide empathy

into a more basic and conceptually poor form (low-level empathy) and a more complex and mentalistic one (high-level empathy).

After that, we shifted to the central theme of this thesis: the study of the possible moral roles empathy can play. We conducted an exhaustive reconstruction of the main criticisms made by anti-empathists against empathy and confuted the majority with various arguments. However, ours was not a mere defence, aimed at the confutation of anti-empathic positions: in fact, we attempted to show how empathy can be useful and often even necessary for the principal dimensions of morality, namely, moral perception and judgement, moral education and development, and moral motivation and conduct. In particular, we highlighted that empathy can enrich and refine moral judgement by means of its function as information-gatherer and, what is more, that it plays an essential role in moral perception (which, in turn, is central in moral judgement).

Furthermore, we saw that, at the present state of research, it is rational to conclude that empathy is necessary for moral education as well and that its benefits for moral development appear to be beyond all doubt. Specifically, we asserted that empathy should become a habit, a kind of 'second nature', and we showed both at the theoretical and at the practical level what benefits this approach brings. We then observed how empathy differs from sympathy in that it does not require approval of what the other thinks or feels, but only openness and receptivity. Sympathy implies a positive assent towards the other, but not empathy.

We then spoke of empathy as a powerful motivator and defended the view in which empathy can be considered a virtue, and, in this guise, as an essential character trait of the virtuous person and fundamental for their (typical) moral agency or conduct. Finally, in the last chapter, we examined contexts in which empathy is either suppressed or heavily limited and concluded that even granted the few biases that can affect this phenomenon, building an ethics without empathy would be a mistake not less unforgivable and imprudent than, as the expression goes, 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'.

Empathy is not always and necessarily right. It does not always and necessarily bring out the best in us; it is not always and necessarily a guarantee for the instantiation of moral behaviour. On the other hand, nothing does. Empathy is fallible, as all our capacities are; it is manipulable and prone to biases, but so is reason, too. However, given its potential for morality, the solution to this matter can hardly be the eradication of empathy from the moral sphere. The claim that this work of mine supports

is that we simply need to learn not only to think straight, but to ‘empathise straight’. We have to educate our faculty of empathy so that it can become increasingly more reliable within the ethical field.

Of course, all of the above would not make any sense if we were not be able to introduce, perhaps even to encourage, a form of mentality that is not yet deeply rooted in mankind: a mentality that would surely need time to grow, to develop, to spread, but that is already there, albeit latently; a concept that we are all connected, all linked to varying degrees. We said earlier that morality should govern our mutual relations. Now empathy, by making these interrelations visible, and, especially, possible in a full-fledged form,¹ by making us assume the perspective of others, becomes essential for ethics, which, *inter alia*, aims at governing these interrelations under the idea of the Good and the Right. Empathy is the means by which to flesh out this still often unexpressed potentiality of mankind. This is certainly no easy task but the fact that the path is hard to travel does not mean that it should be discarded. Also, the fact that the objective can even seem at times as beyond our reach does not mean that we should abandon the fight. Because if we lose our capacity to fight for what is good, then we lose, more than any other capacity we have available to us, what makes us truly moral.

¹Relationships among individuals without empathy would indeed be cumbersome, shallow, and superficial, since the access to the others’ inner world would be lost.

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