

In Defense of the Moral Significance of Empathy

Aaron Simmons

Ethical Theory and Moral Practice
An International Forum

ISSN 1386-2820

Ethic Theory Moral Prac
DOI 10.1007/s10677-013-9417-4



Your article is protected by copyright and all rights are held exclusively by Springer Science +Business Media Dordrecht. This e-offprint is for personal use only and shall not be self-archived in electronic repositories. If you wish to self-archive your work, please use the accepted author's version for posting to your own website or your institution's repository. You may further deposit the accepted author's version on a funder's repository at a funder's request, provided it is not made publicly available until 12 months after publication.

In Defense of the Moral Significance of Empathy

Aaron Simmons

Accepted: 25 February 2013

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

Abstract It is commonly suggested that empathy is a morally important quality to possess and that a failure to properly empathize with others is a kind of moral failure. This suggestion assumes that empathy involves caring for others' well-being. Skeptics challenge the moral importance of empathy by arguing that empathy is neither necessary nor sufficient to care for others' well-being. This challenge is misguided. Although some forms of empathy may not be morally important, empathy with another's basic well-being concerns is both necessary and sufficient to care for another's well-being, provided that one's empathy is both cognitive and affective. I further defend the idea that empathy of this form is a moral virtue. In doing so, I address three challenges to empathy's status as a virtue: (1) that empathy is unnecessary for being ethical, (2) that it is not useful for promoting ethical behavior, and (3) that an empathetic person can lack other traits central to being virtuous, such as being motivated by the moral good and being disposed to do virtuous things whenever appropriate opportunities arise. I argue that these challenges are mistaken.

Keywords Empathy · Sympathy · Moral virtues

1 In Defense of the Moral Significance of Empathy

What is the moral importance of empathy? Is being empathetic a morally good character trait to possess? It's commonly suggested today that one morally ought to empathize with others and that a failure to properly empathize with others is a kind of moral failure. As a recent example, the Freeh Report on the Jerry Sandusky child abuse scandal at Penn State University criticized university authorities for exhibiting "a striking lack of empathy for Sandusky's victims by failing to inquire as to their safety and well-being" (Freeh 2012). Yet some philosophers have expressed skepticism about the moral significance of empathy, arguing that empathy isn't as morally important as we think it is. The suggestion that

A. Simmons (✉)

Department of Philosophy, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI 49401, USA
e-mail: simmons@gvsu.edu

empathy is of great moral significance tends to assume that empathy involves caring for others' well-being. Skeptics, however, argue that this assumption is mistaken, for empathy is neither necessary nor sufficient to care for others (Stocker 1996; Goldie 2002; Nussbaum 2003).

In this paper, I defend empathy's moral significance from this skeptical argument. I argue, first, that empathy is sufficient to care for others' well-being when (a) one empathizes in particular with others' concerns for their basic well-being and (b) one empathizes in the fullest sense of empathy. Empathy in its fullest form includes both the cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy. I suggest that some of the skeptical arguments against empathy's significance neglect the affective component of empathy. One who fails to feel concern for another's well-being necessarily fails to empathize in an affective sense with the other's concerns for her well-being. Additionally, I argue that 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. This need not mean that we empathize with all of her feelings: we may share in another's feeling of concern while not sharing in her other feelings, including, for example, feelings of worthlessness that a severely depressed person experiences. On the other hand, sometimes we feel concern for others who are lacking certain concerns for their well-being. I suggest that our concerns in these instances may still count as empathy if we accept a broader sense of empathy which involves empathizing with how others ought to feel and not just how they actually feel.

In the final section of my paper, I defend the idea that empathy is a moral virtue. I consider three challenges to this idea: (1) that empathy isn't necessary to be an ethical person, (2) that empathy isn't useful for promoting ethical behavior, and (3) that an empathetic person doesn't necessarily possess other traits essential to being virtuous, such as being motivated by the moral good and being disposed to do virtuous things whenever appropriate opportunities arise. I argue that these challenges are mistaken when applied specifically to empathy with others' concerns for their well-being. Empathy in this form is essential to being an ethical person, it is useful for promoting ethical behavior, and it does possess these other traits essential to being virtuous.

2 The Distinction Between Empathy and Sympathy

Those who speak of empathy's moral importance tend to assume that to empathize with others entails caring or feeling concern for their suffering or well-being. This is apparent in the Freeh quote above which suggests that by failing to empathize with Sandusky's child victims, Penn State authorities failed to properly care for their well-being. To care or feel concern for others is commonly called *sympathy* or *compassion*. It seems generally agreed that feeling concern for others' well-being is a morally good trait to possess. Let us assume, for now, that this assumption is true. Does it follow from this that empathy is also morally significant?

Some authors have challenged the moral significance of empathy by claiming that empathy and sympathy are quite distinct. More specifically, they argue that empathy is neither necessary nor sufficient to feel concern for others (Stocker 1996; Goldie 2002; Nussbaum 2003). That is, one need not empathize with others to feel concern for their well-being and, even if one does empathize with others, one can still fail to feel concern for their well-being. Assuming it's morally good to feel concern for others' well-being, this

challenge casts into doubt the moral importance we often attribute to empathy. But is this challenge correct? To address this issue, we must first become clear on what empathy is.

To empathize typically involves perceiving that another being is experiencing some particular emotion (or feeling) and, as a result of this perception, experiencing an emotion similar to what the other being is experiencing. For example, when I empathize with someone feeling sad, I feel some degree of sadness because I perceive that another feels sad. Understood in this way, empathy involves both a cognitive and an affective component. The cognitive component is the conscious recognition that another being is experiencing some emotion. The affective component is our experience of a similar emotion that results from this recognition. This definition of empathy must be distinguished from a purely cognitive definition, according to which empathy is just the cognitive awareness of another's internal states (e.g. thoughts, feelings) (Hoffman 2000).

There is disagreement on how cognitively sophisticated empathy must be (Preston and De Waal 2002). Some authors suggest that empathy is necessarily complex and difficult to achieve. Amy Coplan argues that empathy requires a complex imaginative process of taking another's perspective, according to which "one constructs another's subjective experience by simulating the experience of being in the other's situation" (Coplan 2011). She contrasts empathy with emotional contagion. Like empathy, contagion involves experiencing an emotional state similar to another being, but this transference of emotion occurs through an automatic, involuntary, reflexive process of mimicry: mimicking another's facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, or movements. When one experiences contagion, it occurs without one's realizing it: one is unaware that the other being is the source of one's emotional experience. One experiences the emotion "as her own," not as a vicarious experience of another's emotional state. Contagion does not involve any sort of perspective-taking.

The problem with Coplan's view is that it creates a false dilemma between perspective-taking and emotional contagion. This fails to recognize a middle option between these two extremes: a form of empathy which doesn't require perspective-taking but which is distinct from contagion (or at least as contagion has been defined). Perspective-taking is one means through which empathy can take place, but empathy need not be this complex. One can empathize with others simply from observing affective cues in others' behavior or language. Affective cues in others' behavior include facial, bodily, and vocal expressions which indicate what others are feeling. Often our observations of these cues cause us to experience feelings similar to what others are experiencing.

Consider the following two examples. Sometimes I find myself feeling great joy when I observe others achieving hard-earned goals or triumphing over challenges or difficulties—for example, an Olympic athlete winning the gold medal or an innocent person being freed from Death Row after years spent in prison. Likewise, when I observe animals feeling distressed, such as in factory farms, I feel distress as well. In these cases, I experience emotional states matching those beings that I observe. Is this just contagion? On the one hand, there is a sense in which I do seem to "catch" others' emotional states just by observing them or their situation. However, I don't experience these states simply as the result of mimicking another's expressions. (Indeed, sometimes I can empathize with others in this sense without even observing their behavior, such as by reading a news story about someone suffering.) Moreover, I'm aware that the other's emotional state is the cause of my experience. Therefore, this process is distinct from the more simplistic contagion. At the same time, I didn't need to engage in a complex task of imaginatively constructing another's perspective in order to feel this emotion. Perspective-taking is described as difficult to achieve, but I contend that sharing in others' emotions simply by observing the emotional

cues in their behaviors is a process that can occur rather quickly, easily, commonly, and in a variety of situations.¹

Now that we've defined empathy, we can appreciate the distinction typically drawn between empathy and sympathy. Empathy is to "feel with" another—to share in another's emotion, as if from a first-person perspective. Sympathy is to "feel for" another—to feel concern for another's welfare, which some have said is more from a third-person perspective (Darwall 1998). Those who challenge empathy's status as a virtue claim that "feeling with" another is neither necessary nor sufficient to "feel for" another. Let us consider their arguments.

3 The Arguments Against Empathy

That empathy isn't sufficient for sympathy is evident, according to some, from the fact that empathy with another's suffering is consistent with various non-sympathetic responses, including indifference to or sadistically rejoicing in the other's suffering. As Peter Goldie states, "You can imagine the other's suffering, yet simply disregard it" (Goldie 2002). There could be self-interested reasons for disregarding another's suffering. There could also be professional reasons. Michael Stocker explains, "Think of those, like psychoanalysts and teachers, whose everyday work can depend on having full empathic understanding of another person while, at the same time, maintaining necessary distance. To achieve their important goals, they may need to avoid sympathy—while also maintaining full empathic understanding" (Stocker 1996). Stocker suggests that whether empathy engenders sympathy depends on "why one is interested in the other person."

According to Goldie, empathy with another's suffering is also consistent with the non-sympathetic response of alleviating one's own suffering rather than the other's suffering. He gives the example of someone turning off the television to avoid watching reports of the latest famine. Martin Hoffman raises this as a limitation of empathy as well, describing it as a problem of "empathic over-arousal." If my empathetic experience of another's distress becomes too painful and intolerable, it can transform into "an intense feeling of personal distress" which may move me out of my empathetic mode and drive me to alleviate my own distress rather than the other's distress (Hoffman 2000). Hoffman explains how repeated experience of empathetic over-arousal over a long period of time can lead to "compassion fatigue," in which one's compassion for others is gradually lessened over time. This can happen, for example, with healthcare workers who interact daily with terminally ill patients, people who counsel victims of abuse, or people who clean up after natural and manmade disasters (Hoffman 2000).

The argument above claims that empathy isn't sufficient to care for another's suffering. A further challenge to empathy's moral significance contends that empathy also isn't necessary to care for another's suffering. In defense of this claim, some authors point to examples in which we can feel concern for someone without emotionally sharing in her suffering. For

¹ Similar distinctions between higher and lower cognitive levels of empathy have been made by authors in recent debates over empathy's role in acquiring knowledge of other minds. Karsten Stueber, for example, defends the idea of empathy as a phenomenon of "inner imitation," where our minds mirror others' mental experiences based on observations of their bodily and facial behavior. This "basic empathy" involves direct perception of another's emotions without requiring perspective-taking. Stueber appeals to recent empirical studies on "mirror neurons," suggesting that mirror neurons are mechanisms of basic empathy. He contrasts basic empathy with a higher level of empathy which is required to understand others' behaviors in complex social contexts, in terms of a person's reasons for acting (Stueber 2006).

example, Darwall states that when we feel sympathy for someone suffering from deep depression, we don't emotionally share in her feelings of worthlessness—to the contrary, her welfare seems important to us (Darwall 2002). Similarly, Michael Slote indicates that one could feel sympathy for a humiliated person without feeling humiliated oneself (Slote 2010).

Other authors claim that it's possible to feel sympathy for animals but not empathize with them, further supporting the idea that empathy isn't necessary to care for another's suffering. Goldie states, "You can even sympathize with another's difficulties where it is impossible to empathize or imagine yourself in other's shoes: for example, you can sympathize with the suffering of a dog or a whale" (Goldie 2002).

If empathy is neither necessary nor sufficient to feel concern for others' welfare, then it might seem that empathy isn't as morally significant as we make it out to be.

4 How Empathy is Sufficient for Sympathy

Because empathy can allow one to vicariously experience a variety of different affective states, there are some forms of empathy that wouldn't be morally desirable. For example, it's possible to empathize with a murderer's desire to kill. To vicariously experience this desire wouldn't be morally desirable. However, let us focus more specifically on empathy with another's suffering or with another's concerns about her basic well-being—concerns for basic goods common to most humans as well as many sentient animals. This includes concerns for one's own continued life, one's freedom (e.g. from confinement), and one's bodily security (e.g. to not be physically violated or caused physical injury against one's will or in ways not conducive to one's physical health). Most humans and, arguably, many animals are capable of feeling strong concern for some or all of these basic goods. I contend that empathy with another's concerns for her basic well-being is morally significant insofar as it's both sufficient and necessary (or at least it's often essential) to feel concern for another's well-being.

As we saw, the main challenge to empathy's moral significance consists in the thought that empathy is neither necessary nor sufficient to care for another's well-being. Let us begin with the claim that empathy isn't sufficient to care for another. Skeptics contend that empathy with another's suffering or concerns is consistent with indifference to or even delight in the other's suffering or harm. However, this challenge is unconvincing. Although a failure to care for others' well-being may be compatible with some forms of empathy, it's incompatible with empathy with another's concerns for her basic well-being, when that empathy is in its fullest form. Empathy in its fullest form includes both the cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy.

Those who argue that empathy is insufficient for sympathy seem to presuppose a purely cognitive conception of empathy, neglecting empathy's affective component. As we saw, Goldie suggests that we can "imagine the other's suffering, yet simply disregard it." Stocker appeals to professions like psychology in which it can be necessary to maintain an emotional distance from one's patient while also having a "full empathic understanding" of her. However, to "imagine" another's suffering only captures empathy in a cognitive sense. Of course one can cognitively imagine or understand another's suffering without feeling concern for the other's suffering. But this fails to address whether one can affectively empathize with another's suffering without feeling concern for her—or affectively empathize with another's concerns for her well-being without caring for her well-being.

When I fully empathize with another's concerns or purposes, I not only acknowledge that the other has purposes which are important to her, but I also *experience the other's purposes from her perspective*, seeing and feeling the other's purposes as she sees and feels them. The other experiences her purposes as worthwhile, important, meaningful, and mattering, as worthy of being fulfilled. Thus, when I experience the other's purposes as she experiences them, I experience her purposes as worthwhile and mattering too. This means that I will want, to some degree, to help the other fulfill her purposes, not frustrate them. So, for example, suppose that I empathize with another's suffering. To empathize in a full sense with another's suffering entails not only understanding, in a cognitive sense, what the other is going through, but also sharing in the affective dimensions of the other's suffering. Suffering is associated with the experience of pain or distress (e.g. fear, anxiety). There is an essential affective component to suffering that involves having a strong dislike of one's pain or distress—and a concern or desire to alleviate it. To fully empathize with another's suffering entails experiencing a similar feeling of concern or dislike for the other's pain or distress. This is not consistent with failing to feel any concern for the other's suffering. Likewise, if I empathize with another's basic desire to continue living or be free, I will share in the other's desire to fulfill her goals, whether by providing positive assistance or by not interfering with her goals such as by confining or killing her.

It is in this way that full empathy with another's concerns for her well-being is sufficient to feel concern for another's well-being—and incompatible with cold indifference or sadistic cruelty. If I fail to feel any concern for another's well-being, then I'm not affectively sharing in the other's concerns for her well-being; I'm not experiencing her concerns as she experiences them. It's important to keep in mind here the difference between grasping (or understanding) another's concerns and affectively sharing in those concerns. I can grasp another's concerns without sharing in those concerns, without wanting what the other wants. For example, I might grasp how much a hunter wants to shoot deer but in no way do I share that desire or wish to help the hunter fulfill his desire. In this case, I do not affectively share in the hunter's desire. I have not fully empathized with the hunter. If, however, I affectively share in another's purpose, I experience her purpose as she experiences it, as a purpose which matters and is worthy of being fulfilled. This is just what it means to affectively share in the other's purpose: to feel it as she feels it. I cannot, then, affectively share in another's concerns for her well-being without feeling some degree of concern for her well-being.²

Similar to my argument, John Deigh also argues that one who is indifferent to others' suffering lacks a fuller form of empathy which involves seeing others' purposes as mattering (Deigh 1995). However, Deigh believes this fuller form of empathy consists in viewing others as "whole, autonomous persons" who are architects of their own lives and whose purposes give their lives extension and structure. Deigh's view is problematic for a couple reasons. First, it suggests that we cannot empathize in a full sense with beings that may not be autonomous architects of their own lives, such as animals. But I contend that we can empathize with many animals in a way that entails viewing their purposes or concerns as mattering. This indicates that viewing others as whole, autonomous beings isn't essential to the kind of empathy which entails viewing others' purposes as mattering. Second, it seems possible that one could view another as a whole, autonomous person yet fail to see her

² To be clear, empathy in what I have called the "full" sense just means empathy in both a cognitive and affective sense with another's feeling of concern. It does not require us to empathize with another's entire perspective, e.g. all of her concerns. I can, for example, affectively empathize with a Republican's sadness over his family being killed without necessarily empathizing with his Republican agenda. Additionally, nothing I've said here implies that we should try to empathize with all of a person's concerns.

purposes as mattering. The sadist, for example, could grasp not only that his victim is suffering but also understand (and delight in) how the suffering he is inflicting on his victim negatively impacts his victim's whole life and her various self-chosen purposes.

These points illustrate that what is central to achieving a fuller form of empathy (one which involves seeing another's purposes as mattering) is that one empathizes with another's emotional state in a way that involves not just cognitive understanding but also affective sharing in the other's feeling of concern. One who fails to feel any concern for another's well-being necessarily lacks this component of empathy. Moreover, this explanation makes it possible for us to empathize with animals in a way that involves viewing their concerns as mattering, despite the fact that they may not be autonomous beings. This is possible so long as we can affectively share in an animal's feelings of concern.

Recall that one final challenge to the idea that empathy is sufficient to feel concern for others was the problem of empathetic over-arousal. This challenge is unconvincing as well. Suppose that when empathizing with another's suffering, I become so personally distressed that I cannot bear concerning myself with the other's suffering. What does this show? One thing it does not show is that one can empathize with another's suffering and, at the same time, not feel concern for the other's suffering. In cases of empathetic over-arousal, one ceases to empathize with the other at the same time one ceases to feel concern for the other's suffering. In this sense, it does not show that empathizing with another's suffering is insufficient to care for the other's suffering. Empathetic over-arousal does show that attempts to empathize with others may fail to generate lasting concern for others because one may find that empathizing with others is too personally distressing to do. But this does not prove that one can empathize with another's suffering without feeling concern for her suffering.

5 How Empathy is Necessary for Sympathy

So, the arguments for believing that empathy is insufficient for sympathy are not convincing. Let us next turn to the question of whether empathy is necessary to sympathize with another. As we saw, those who hold that empathy is not necessary for sympathy appeal to the thought that we can sympathize with animals but empathy with animals is impossible. Goldie makes this argument but does not elaborate on why he believes it is impossible to empathize with animals. Most likely, skeptics about empathy with animals are thinking of the fact that animals are unable to tell us through language about their experiences. We are uncertain of what their experiences are like since they can't describe them for us. Additionally, skeptics might appeal to the fact that animals differ from us physiologically, including in the structure of their brains. This too makes it unknown to us what it is like to be a certain animal. What is it like to be a bat or a whale? It is difficult to imagine. Yet, empathy, when understood in terms of perspective-taking, is this process whereby we are supposed to imagine what it is like to be another being. So, on this line of reasoning, we are left to conclude that empathy with animals is impossible since, due to physiological differences and the absence of language, we cannot imagine what it is like to be any animal.

There is some element of truth to this line of reasoning. To a significant degree, I cannot imagine what it is like to be a bat or a whale. I cannot, for instance, know exactly what they are thinking. However, we can know, with a reasonable degree of certainty that they are capable of having certain basic experiences, including feeling pain and suffering, fear and anxiety, and pleasure and enjoyment. Arguably, we can know that many animals experience concern for their physical well-being, among other basic goods. Given that we know that

many animals can have these experiences, I contend that it is neither impossible nor difficult for us to empathize with animals. As I argued earlier, empathy need not involve a complex process of perspective-taking. To empathize with animals, then, we need not be able to imagine what an animal's perspective is like. We can empathize with animals simply by observing them experiencing distress, concern, or enjoyment and, as a result of this observation, experiencing similar affective states. Typically when this happens, we understand that animals are experiencing some affective state and that we are vicariously experiencing their emotions. This supports the judgment that we are empathizing with animals. Even if we focus on empathy as perspective-taking, it's unclear why we should think it's completely impossible to take the perspective of an animal. It may be true that there is much about animals' experiential perspectives that is a mystery to us. Nevertheless, it seems possible to imagine, for example, what it is like for an animal to feel pain. It is likely similar to what it is like for us to feel pain.

There is a fairly straightforward reason to think that empathy, at the very least, is *typically* an essential component of sympathy. Typically, when we sympathize with others, we feel concern for some aspect of others' welfare which they too feel concern over. For example, if I sympathize with another who is suffering, I affectively share in the other's feeling of concern for her pain or distress. Likewise, when I sympathize with a friend who has lost her job, I feel concern for what my friend feels concern for: her unemployment. Insofar as sympathy is just feeling concern for others over aspects of their welfare which they too feel concern over, it seems to be nothing more than empathizing with others' feelings of concern—that is, affectively sharing in others' feelings of concern. It makes sense to refer to such sympathy as empathetic concern or caring.

I believe that this point about empathetic concern allows us to understand why Darwall's example of feeling sympathy for a depressed person does not necessarily show that we can feel sympathy for others without empathizing with them. On the one hand, we can feel sympathy for the depressed person without sharing in this person's feelings of worthlessness. However, this only shows that we need not empathize specifically with the person's feelings of worthlessness in order to feel concern for her. It does not rule out the possibility that we empathize with some other affective state of this person. Someone who is feeling depressed or humiliated typically feels some degree of concern for her situation. Insofar as she is suffering, she dislikes her situation and wishes to escape or alleviate it. When we feel concern for the depressed or humiliated person, it is typically the case that we are empathizing with this person's own feelings of concern.

Yet sometimes we feel concern for some aspect of others' welfare which they do not feel concern over. This can happen when others are not aware of what is good for them. For example, we might feel sympathy for a drug addict who does not feel any concern over how her addiction is destroying her health and life. We might also feel concern for children and animals over aspects of their welfare which they are incapable of understanding or caring about. I can feel sympathy for a young child who has just lost his parents in a car accident, despite the fact that the child is too young to understand what has happened and feel concerned about it. Similarly, I can feel concern for the preservation of animals' lives, even if they are incapable of grasping the concept of their own continued lives. If we can feel concern for others over aspects of their welfare for which they lack concern, it might seem that empathy is not always essential to sympathy.

However, this conclusion would be too hasty. There may be reason to think that sympathy in the above situations actually does involve some form of empathy. Martin Hoffman contends that we can empathize with what we *imagine* people to feel, even when it is not what they *actually* feel. Hoffman describes this as empathizing with another's "life

condition.” The life condition of the young child whose parents have just died is a sad one, even if the child doesn’t realize it. This judgment is based on our knowledge (which the child lacks) that growing up without his parents will likely be difficult for the child. When we feel sadness and concern for this child, we are then empathizing with the child’s sad life condition (Hoffman 2000). We might even say that the child would likely feel sad too if he was aware of his life condition as we are. Similarly, it could be argued that when we feel concern for the unconcerned drug addict or for the preservation of the animal’s life, we are empathizing with these individuals’ life conditions. Indeed, it could be argued that we are empathizing with how these individuals would feel or how they ought to feel if they were thinking rationally and were aware of what is truly beneficial for them.

If Hoffman is correct that it is possible to empathize with how we imagine others feeling hypothetically, even when that is not how they actually feel, then it makes the case stronger for thinking that empathy is always an essential component of feeling sympathy for others. On the other hand, if it turns out that empathy must be with another’s actual feelings, not her life condition or how she would or should feel in some hypothetical state of mind, then I think we must concede that empathy is not always a prerequisite for sympathy. Still, even in this scenario, it makes sense to think that empathy is typically essential for sympathy.

6 Is Empathy a Virtue?

I have argued in defense of empathy’s moral significance on the grounds that empathy with others’ concerns for their well-being is necessary and sufficient to feel concern for their well-being. Let us now ask a further question: should we consider empathy to be a moral virtue? Moral virtues are character traits that it is morally good for a person to possess. As I’ve suggested, not all forms of empathy are morally important, so it would be false to say that empathy in general is a moral virtue. However, empathy with others’ concerns for their well-being is necessary and sufficient to feel sympathy for others’ well-being. This form of empathy is what I have called empathetic concern. Does it make sense to think that empathy in the form of empathetic concern is a moral virtue? Below I will consider three challenges to the idea that empathy or empathetic concern is a virtue: (1) that empathy is not necessary to behave ethically, (2) that empathy is not useful for promoting ethical behavior, and (3) that empathy lacks some other features which are essential to moral virtues.

One challenge to the idea that empathetic concern is a virtue lies in the thought that empathy is not necessary for being an ethical person. Nancy Snow suggests that autistic individuals give us reason to doubt whether empathy is necessary to be moral. She explains,

Consider that high-functioning autistics are capable of obeying moral rules, though many lack empathic feeling for others. They are able to comply with traditional moral prohibitions, and even to engage in prosocial helping behavior, though they do so in relatively unempathic ways. This shows that compliance with moral norms need not entail a strong affective component. If so, empathy is not necessary for morality (Snow 2000).

More generally, one could argue that many people (not just autistics) are capable of complying with moral norms (to help and not harm others) without feeling empathetic concern for others. In doing so, they arguably would be living in a way that meets the minimal standard of how one morally ought to live. However, there is a broader sense of being an ethical person (or living an ethical life) that involves not only performing the right

actions but also having the right inner states, including the right affective states. A person lacking empathetic concern for others can live in a way that is minimally morally acceptable, such as by treating others with respect. But there is a degree to which this person is not a fully ethical, flourishing, or good person because she lacks the proper emotional responses. Although she may treat others with respect, she doesn't do so because she empathetically feels concern for their well-being. She ought not only to treat others with respect but also to do so because she feels concern for their well-being. This is similar to Michael Stocker's example of the "friend" who visits you in the hospital not because he actually cares for you but just because he has reasoned that it's his duty to do so. Although the friend does the right thing by visiting you, he lacks the proper feelings of care that a good friend should have (Stocker 1997). Likewise, there is a moral difference between someone who respects or helps others because she feels concern for them and one who feels no concern for others but respects or helps them for some other reason—for example, because it benefits her somehow or because the law requires it of her.³

It might be objected here that if some autistic individuals are incapable of feeling empathetic concern for others, it is unfair and nonsensical to judge them as falling short of an ethical ideal when they fail to feel empathetic concern for others. This objection appeals to the idea that "ought" implies "can": if some individuals are psychologically incapable of feeling empathetic concern for others, then it can't be true that they ought to do so. I am sympathetic to this objection. Perhaps then we ought to say that feeling empathetic concern for others is an essential part of being a fully ethical person for those who are capable of feeling empathetic concern for others, which includes most mature humans.

A second challenge to the idea that empathy is a virtue contends that empathy is not useful for promoting ethical behavior. Jesse Prinz argues that empathy is not useful for promoting ethical behavior, for one, because one can empathize with others yet be unmotivated to help them (Prinz 2011). He suggests, for example, that empathy with others' sadness, misery, or distress may often result in social withdrawal or inaction rather than increased motivation to help others. Additionally, he argues that empathy may work against the goals of morality due to various ways in which empathy can be biased. This includes the fact that we often empathize less with those who are unfamiliar to us and those who are distant from us in space. Hoffman raises the problem of empathetic bias as well (Hoffman 2000). Similarly, C.D. Batson argues that empathy-induced desires to help another person can lead to immoral action by putting the interests of that person above the interests of others in ways that violate principles of fairness and justice (Batson 2011). Batson cites an experiment in which participants who empathized more highly with a terminally ill child were more willing to move her "off a waiting list and into an immediate-treatment group ahead of other children who either had more severe terminal illnesses or had been waiting longer for treatment."

Prinz's claim that there is not a strong link between empathy and being motivated to help others seems to focus on forms of empathy that do not involve feeling concern for others' well-being. If, however, one empathizes specifically with others' concerns for their well-being, then it is difficult to see how one could fail to have at least some motivation to help or

³ This argument may not convince a committed Kantian who believes that morality consists not in acting on feelings of concern but rather doing one's moral duty out of respect for the moral law. Ultimately, further argument is necessary to show more fully why it is ethically important to not only do the right thing but also to feel concern for others. To be clear, I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't respect others because we believe it is our moral duty. I believe that we ought to respect others both because we reason that it is the right thing to do and because we feel concern for them.

not harm them. When one empathizes with another's concerns, one experiences those concerns as the other experiences them: as worthwhile and mattering, such that one will want to help the other satisfy her concerns. Now, this does not guarantee that one will be sufficiently motivated to help others. Whether one is sufficiently motivated depends on how strongly one empathizes with another's concerns and the extent to which one's concern for another conflicts with one's other purposes or concerns. An ethical person must empathize to the right degree with others' concerns, such that she is sufficiently motivated to help or not harm others when appropriate, and she must find the right balance between her various other-focused concerns and self-concerns. It is unclear why this is a reason to doubt the moral importance of empathetic concern. Any other emotion must similarly be moderated according to what is ethically appropriate.

Likewise, the fact that empathy can be biased also is not a reason to doubt empathy's moral significance. Any morally significant emotion can be biased towards those one is familiar with. Empathy is not alone here. There are means of overcoming empathetic bias, ways of encouraging empathy with others that one is biased against. This includes, for example, imagining that strangers are our loved ones and reading stories or seeing images or videos of those who are suffering far away from us. It also includes convincing people through rational argument that they ought to feel more concern for certain others. In short, to hold that empathetic concern is a virtue is to prescribe a moral ideal of how we *ought* to empathize with others' concerns. This ideal could include features such as that we ought to feel equal or significant concern for the basic interests of all people or all sentient beings. It could also specify that our concern for the many should not trump our concern for the few in such a way that we feel compelled to violate the basic interests of the few for the sake of benefiting the many.⁴ When empathy leads one to favor another's interests in a way that violates principles of fairness or justice, it may be the case that one has failed to properly empathize with the needs of those who are being treated unfairly or unjustly. This seems to be the case, for example, in Batson's experiment involving the waiting list for medical treatment.

Despite what I have said so far in defense of empathy as a virtue, it might be objected that there are other essential features of virtues that empathy does not have. In a recent article, Heather Battaly argues that empathy lacks a number of properties essential to virtues (Battaly 2011). Let us consider the main points of her argument and see if they give us reason to doubt that empathetic concern is a virtue.

Battaly first distinguishes between different conceptions of empathy. She reasons that empathy must have some voluntary component if it is to be a virtue, for virtues are traits that we must have some control over. We praise or blame people for their virtuous or vicious behavior; it makes sense to hold people accountable for their actions only if they have some control over them. Assuming this is true, it rules out conceptions of empathy that portray empathy as something automatic and involuntary. Battaly suggests that the one conception of empathy which involves voluntary control is empathy as perspective-taking.

The question then, on Battaly's view, is whether perspective-taking is a virtue or not. She argues that it is not. Her argument primarily appeals to a distinction between virtues and skills. Virtues and skills differ from each other in multiple ways. I will focus here on two differences. First, virtues are dispositions whereas skills are abilities. As dispositions, virtues

⁴ Michael Slote has an interesting discussion of how an empathetic outlook can support a deontological moral theory (Slote 2007). In future work I aim to examine further how a moral ideal of empathy can overcome problems of unfair bias.

indicate what one *would* do under certain circumstances. For instance, one who is courageous is disposed to face up to difficulties and dangers when it is appropriate to do so. (The courageous person will sometimes flee from danger, when it is the right thing to do. Courage, like other virtues, according to Aristotle, exists as a mean between deficiency and excess. One should not be a coward, but one also should not be reckless, having no caution whatsoever.) Skills, on the other hand, are not dispositions but abilities, indicating what one is *able* to do. For instance, having the skill of painting people's portraits indicates that one has the ability to do this. This difference between dispositions and abilities is apparent when we consider *foregone opportunities* to perform a virtue or skill. One can forego opportunities to paint people's portraits but still possess this ability. However, suppose that when faced with appropriate opportunities to confront difficulties, a person chooses not to do so. This person does not possess courage, for a courageous person is disposed to confront difficulty when it is appropriate to do so.

A second difference between virtues and skills concerns the motivation for one's actions. A virtuous person is motivated to perform virtuous actions because those actions are morally good, not for ulterior motives. The virtuous person aims for the moral good. A person who rescues another person only because she wants a money reward is not truly benevolent. The benevolent person helps others in need because it is the morally good thing to do. In contrast to this, skilled people need not be motivated by the moral good—they can perform their skills for ulterior motives (e.g. money) and even for morally bad ends. A skilled sharpshooter could use his shooting skill to murder people. His doing so would not make him any less skilled at sharpshooting.

Is empathy—conceived as perspective-taking—a virtue or skill? According to Battaly, empathy is a skill, not a virtue. First of all, she reasons, empathy is an ability rather than a disposition. She argues, "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" (Battaly 2011). Battaly imagines a seasoned therapist, reliable at perspective-taking, who on one particular day, bored and complacent, foregoes opportunities to engage in perspective-taking with her final client of the day. Battaly argues that, in foregoing these opportunities, the therapist does not forfeit her imaginative ability. Secondly, she reasons, empathy is not a virtue because empathy does not necessarily aim at the moral good: one can be good at perspective-taking but use it for morally bad ends, such as conning others.

Battaly's argument is correct on some points. First, virtues are things that must be under our voluntary control. Second, virtues must be dispositions indicating not just what we are able to do but what we would do in certain circumstances. A virtuous person acts virtuously when it is appropriate to do so. Finally, a virtuous person aims for what is morally good. However, it is incorrect to hold that empathy cannot have these features of virtues, especially if we focus on empathy with others' suffering or well-being concerns. The person who fails to feel concern for others' well-being when there are appropriate opportunities to do so is *not* an empathetic person in the relevant sense. That is, this person is not good at feeling concern for others' well-being when it is appropriate to do so. This would be true, for example, of a murderer who fails to empathetically feel concern for the well-being of his victim. This is one reason, then, to think that empathetic concern is a virtue. Additionally, a person who is empathetic in the sense of feeling concern for others' well-being necessarily aims for the moral good. She is motivated to help others or not cause them harm because she believes it is good in itself—she cares for others' well-being for their own sake. She does not want to help others simply for ulterior motives, such as rewards or reputation.

This is another reason to think that empathy with others' concerns for their well-being is a virtue.⁵

In support of empathy as a virtue, it should be emphasized that empathy need not be some purely automatic, involuntary process. There are a number of tasks that we can voluntarily perform which are conducive to feeling concern for others' well-being. Battaly focuses on empathy in the form of perspective-taking. I've argued that empathy need not involve complex perspective-taking and that more commonly it can occur simply when we observe affective cues in others' behavior. I propose that we also have some control over this common form of empathy. In particular, it is within our control to pay closer attention to the affective cues in others' behavior and language. This applies both to our empathy with other humans and with sentient animals. Some people fail to empathize with animals because they fail to see animals as emotional, feeling beings similar to them. Closer attention to animals' behavior can reveal ways in which they are affectively similar to us. This can open up or enhance one's ability to empathize with animals. Additionally, one can better empathize with others (humans and animals) if one sees others as relevantly similar to oneself—that is, others' suffering and their concerns for their well-being are not significantly different from one's own suffering or concerns. Empathy can and should follow rational arguments as to who we ought to empathize with. This is another way in which we can control our empathy with others: insofar as we are capable of reasoning about how and with whom we ought to empathize.

If empathy is a virtue, does it exist as a mean, similar to other virtues? I don't intend to explore this question in depth here. However, let me propose some ways in which it makes sense to think of the virtue of empathy existing as a mean, between a deficiency of empathy and an excess of empathy. Aristotle says that the virtuous person should always aim for the middle or moderation. I've suggested that it is bad to lack feelings of concern for others' basic well-being. In many cases, a person who has a deficiency of concern for others possesses too rigid of ego boundaries. He sees himself as morally more important than others, failing to some extent to see others as experiential, feeling beings similar to him, with their own meaningful concerns. Empathy seems to require that one's ego boundaries are flexible. One must be willing to see oneself as connected, related, or similar to others, not as entirely separate and different.

But some theorists have also suggested that one can empathize with others too much. I have already discussed the problem of empathetic over-arousal, whereby my experience of another's distress becomes so intolerable that I check out of empathetic mode in order to alleviate my own distress. Additionally, some authors caution against a loss of self-identity when empathizing—losing oneself in the emotional experiences of the other, believing that the other's experiences are one's own. There are also related feminist concerns over the fact that women, in many cultures, historically have been expected to sacrifice their self-interests for the sake of caring for others. Julinna Oxley suggests that an unchecked empathy can lead to manipulation and servitude, whereby one just does whatever the other wants (Oxley 2011).

A mature and virtuous empathy must aim for the middle. On the one hand, one must be willing to intellectually and emotionally identify, connect, and relate with others. At the

⁵ Again, it might be objected here that an empathetic person does not necessarily aim for the moral good since empathetic concern can lead to unfair or unjust biases towards some individuals (Batson 2011). My reply, which must be developed further in future work, is that we must understand empathetic concern as a moral ideal, guided by moral principles. For instance, one who unfairly favors one person's interests over others' more important interests fails to properly empathize with others' more important interests. This will be true of any character trait which is a moral virtue: it must be guided by certain moral principles.

same time, one must also caution against certain dangers of excessive empathy. One must maintain awareness of oneself as distinct from others. As Hoffman explains, “Empathic distress in mature observers includes a metacognitive awareness of oneself as responding empathically: One not only feels distressed but knows this feeling is a response to something unfortunate happening to someone else” (Hoffman 2000). One must also preserve a sense of her own moral importance, to protect against servitude or over-sacrificing. Finally, one must protect against empathetic over-arousal. Hoffman observes that “being able to regulate one’s own emotions and handle one’s own anxieties constructively can...reduce one’s vulnerability to empathic over-arousal” (Hoffman 2000). He also suggests that one factor contributing to empathetic over-arousal is feeling powerless to help others in need. Perhaps then another way to limit empathetic over-arousal is to mentally focus less on how one is powerless and more on the ways in which one is able to contribute to helping others.

7 Conclusion

In closing, let me summarize the main points of my argument. Skeptics challenge the moral importance of empathy by disputing the assumption that empathy is necessary and sufficient to feel concern for others’ well-being. I argue that this challenge is misguided. Empathy in a full, affective sense with another’s suffering and concerns for her basic well-being is sufficient to feel concern for another’s well-being. Those who fail to feel any concern for others’ well-being fail to empathize in an affective sense with others’ concerns for their well-being. To empathize in an affective sense with others’ concerns for their well-being entails experiencing others’ concerns as they experience them, as worthwhile and mattering. Additionally, empathy is necessary to feel concern for others’ well-being. Typically when we sympathize with another, we feel concern for aspects of another’s welfare which also concern her. This amounts to empathizing with another’s feelings of concern. Sometimes we feel concern for aspects of others’ welfare which they do not feel concern over, such as when others are not aware of what is good for them. However, even then, we empathize with how others would or should feel if they were aware of their interests and thinking rationally. Finally, I’ve defended the idea that empathetic concern is a moral virtue. Feeling empathetic concern for others’ well-being (1) gives one motivation to help others or not harm them, (2) it is essential to being a fully flourishing, ethical person and (3) it possesses essential characteristics of other moral virtues. An empathetic person, in the sense I’ve described, is motivated by the moral good and is disposed to feel concern for others’ basic well-being when appropriate opportunities arise. Empathy also exists as a mean between a deficiency and an excess and there are a number of ways in which we have some voluntary control over our empathetic abilities.

References

- Batson CD (2011) *Altruism in humans*. New York, Oxford
- Battaly H (2011) Is empathy a virtue? In: Coplan A, Goldie P (eds) *Empathy: philosophical and psychological perspectives*. Oxford, New York, pp 277–301
- Coplan A (2011) Understanding empathy. In: Coplan A, Goldie P (eds) *Empathy: philosophical and psychological perspectives*. Oxford, New York, pp 3–18
- Darwall S (1998) Empathy, sympathy, care. *Philos Stud* 89:261–282
- Darwall S (2002) *Welfare and rational care*. Princeton, Princeton
- Deigh J (1995) Empathy and universalizability. *Ethics* 105:743–763

- Freeh L (2012) The Freeh report on the Pennsylvania State University. <http://thefreehreportonpsu.com>. Accessed 24 August 2012.
- Goldie P (2002) *The emotions*. Oxford, New York
- Hoffman M (2000) *Empathy and moral development*. Cambridge, New York
- Nussbaum M (2003) *Upheavals of thought: the intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge, New York
- Oxley J (2011) *The moral dimensions of empathy*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York
- Preston S, De Waal F (2002) Empathy: its ultimate and proximate bases. *Behav Brain Sci* 25:1–72
- Prinz J (2011) Is empathy necessary for morality? In: Goldie P, Coplan A (eds) *Empathy: philosophical and psychological perspectives*. Oxford, New York
- Slote M (2007) *The ethics of care and empathy*. Routledge, New York
- Slote M (2010) *Moral sentimentalism*. Oxford, New York
- Snow N (2000) Empathy. *Am Philos Q* 37:65–78
- Stocker M (1996) *Valuing emotions*. Cambridge, New York
- Stocker M (1997) The schizophrenia of modern ethical theories. In: Crisp R, Slote M (eds) *Virtue ethics*. Oxford, New York
- Stueber K (2006) *Rediscovering empathy: agency, folk psychology, and the human sciences*. MIT, Cambridge