

Empathy in Business Ethics Education Redux

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A RESPONSE TO David Ohreen (2013), “The Limits of Empathy in Business Ethics Education,” *Bus Ethics J Rev* 1(18): 113–119, <http://doi.org/10.12747/bejr.2013.01.18>

ABSTRACT

My original paper (Cohen 2012) argued that business ethics education should focus on cultivating empathetic concern. This response clarifies terminology used in that paper and responds to criticisms presented by David Ohreen (2013).

DAVID OHREEN OFFERS a thoughtful reading of my paper (Cohen 2012), which addressed the role of empathy in business ethics education. The present paper very briefly summarizes that original paper, clarifies the terminology involved, and restates the argument accordingly—in order to respond to three criticisms presented by Ohreen.

My original paper began with an assumption: the goal of business ethics education is to change behavior, and in particular our goal is to foster cooperative, mutually beneficial outcomes. Given this starting point, business ethics education ought to focus on cultivating empathetic responses, or at least include material intended to do so, as a tactic—in support of those outcomes. The problem we need to address

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in business ethics is not that our students (and that we ourselves) sometimes reason poorly, or that moral decision-making is subject to characteristic kinds of errors. The problem is that our students (and we ourselves as instructors) don't always care enough, and as a result we don't modify our behavior consistently enough.

In contrast, business ethics education – and philosophers more generally – very much focus on ethical theory and moral reasoning, we locate the problem in the space of practical reason, and we think of the unethical person as acting irrationally. But the empirical literature shows that ethics education has very limited effect on moral reasoning, and there is no documented effect on behavior (see the citations in the original paper, Cohen 2012: 361–364). Moreover, it is unclear that unethical behavior is irrational; for example, free-riding can be perfectly rational if one is concerned with individual, short-term gains and not cooperative outcomes (see Foot 1972: 310). And even if unethical behavior is irrational, the person committed to unethical activity won't be convinced by a philosopher's accusation of irrationality. Why then does business ethics education focus on moral decision-making? Perhaps because this focus *seems* to give us some control over the situation, perhaps because – with Philippa Foot (1972: 310) – “We are apt to panic at the thought that we ourselves, or other people, might stop caring about the things we do care about.” I take Foot's comment – “caring about the things we care about” – to suggest another direction, in particular to push us to focus on empathy in the classroom.

Ohreen (2013) presents three criticisms (on my reading of his paper), and the remainder of this paper addresses each in turn.

1

Ohreen (2013: 116) takes me to claim that empathy-as-perspective-taking is an essential dimension of moral/cooperative behavior, and he argues that perspective-taking can be inaccurate:

if Cohen is right about empathetic experiences being tainted by biases, then there is no guarantee when one steps into the shoes of another they will accurately reflect the situation or the underlying mental states of the subject.

But my point was very different. My original paper should have been clearer about terminology, and I appreciate the opportunity to respond here and to clarify my position.

Across the literature the term ‘empathy’ is used in a number of ways. Batson distinguishes between eight uses of the term, and I lack space to say something systematic, but references to empathy in my original paper were intended as references to what Batson (2011: 11) calls empathetic concern—defined as “an other-oriented emotion elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need.” Empathetic concern so-conceived is “other-oriented in the sense that it involves feeling *for* the other—feeling sympathy for, compassion for, sorry for, distressed for, concerned for, and so on” (2011: 11, see the further points/refinements at 11–12). So my claim is that business ethics education ought to focus on cultivating empathetic concern. And for the remainder of this paper I will use that term and also the term ‘empathetic response’, which should be understood accordingly as responding-with-empathetic-concern.

Here we need to be careful about the relationship between empathetic concern and empathy-as-perspective-taking. The most widely used instrument for measuring empathy is Davis’s (1980) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). The instrument has 28 questions that measure empathy along four distinct dimensions (with four sub-scales), including the two dimensions that are relevant here—empathetic concern and perspective taking. Davis (1980: 6) defines empathetic concern as “the tendency . . . to experience feelings of warmth, compassion and concern for others undergoing negative experiences,” and that sub-scale includes items such as these: “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me,” and “When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective toward them” (Davis 1980: 11). This is consistent with Batson’s use of that term. Davis (1980: 6) defines perspective taking as, “the tendency or ability of the respondent to adopt the perspective, or point of view, of other people.” It “reflects an ability or proclivity to shift perspectives” (Davis 1980: 11). That sub-scale includes questions such as this: “I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective” (Davis 1980: 11) and it combines several of Batson’s other forms of empathy.

According to Davis (1980: 16), empathetic concern and perspective taking are “relatively independent”; this claim is made on the basis of empirical measures, and applies across all four dimensions of empathy measured by IRI. In particular, (i) empathetic concern does not depend on perspective taking. For example, conceptually, a friend might lose her job, and I might feel empathetic concern for her even if she is not distressed—that is, without taking on her perspective (Batson makes this point at 2011: 13, see also 58; note that perspective taking could generate empathetic concern, the claim is only that perspective taking isn’t necessary). And further, (ii) empathetic concern does not require vicarious experience of another’s emotion, coming to feel as another person feels, matching the target persons emotion; for example, a colleague might tell me that she was upset about something, and as a result I feel empathetic concern *for* her, without feeling her emotion.

So, Ohreen takes me to be making a claim about empathy-as-perspective-taking in moral/cooperative behavior, and he seems to think that perspective taking requires vicarious experience of the other’s emotion. But my claim is about empathetic concern, *which does not depend on empathy-as-perspective-taking*. Biases and limitations in empathy-as-perspective-taking – and in particular, worries about accuracy in perspective taking – are therefore irrelevant, they have no bearing on my position.

2

Ohreen’s more general worry about biases and limitations nevertheless applies: empathetic concern is subject to recognized limitations and biases, there are no guarantees that these limitations and biases can be overcome, and so no guarantee that cultivating empathetic concern will be effective. This is the second criticism I take from Ohreen (even though it doesn’t appear in his paper in exactly this form).

There is strong evidence that empathetic concern is, to borrow Konrath’s phrase, something like a muscle, it can be strengthened and/or weakened (Anderson and Konrath 2011)—so working with empathy is a plausible tactic in the business ethics classroom. My original paper suggested that service learning programs offer promise in fostering empathetic responses. There is further evidence that empathetic responses can be cultivated (see references in Konrath et al 2011). And there is research showing that induced empathy can increase

cooperation and reduce conflict (see references in Batson 2011: 168–176). To be sure, as Konrath et al (2011: 191) note, we don't have a systematic meta-analysis in this space, no systematic understanding of how to best cultivate empathy in different contexts, but the evidence clearly suggests that empathy can be cultivated.

This said, my claim is not that business ethics education should focus exclusively on emotional processes; empathetic responses will depend on a number of cognitive factors (my original paper was clear about this, see 2012: 368–370). And my original paper acknowledged limits on empathetic concern, allowing that “empathy [empathetic concern] is often partial, biased, and unreliable, and cognitive processes – analytical reasoning – can help makes us aware of the beliefs at work underneath these limitations” (2012: 368). So in response to this second criticism: cultivating empathetic concern requires, in part, addressing these limitations and biases—in order to change behavior, in order to improve outcomes. In particular, this requires encouraging identification with others to support empathetic responses/concern (see Lanzetta and Englis 1989) and challenging the rationalizations that close off empathetic responses (preventing what Batson calls “psychological escape,” 2011: chapter three). This sort of cognitive/rational work is different from more traditional focus on moral reasoning. Contra Ohreen (2013: 113–114), I most certainly realize that this will not be easy. Konrath et al (2011) documented a substantial decline in empathetic concern among college students between 1979 and 2009. And the challenges in the economic domain are themselves substantial. For example, Vohs et al (2006) showed that the mere thought of money – not actual money, only reminders – limited cooperative behavior. But addressing these challenges is precisely our problem, precisely our task in the classroom, even if there are no guarantees.²

² So, when Ohreen (2013: 116) claims, “Cohen gives no guidance regarding how moral reasoning will take up the empathetic slack,” the material in the original paper and in the main text here does provide some guidance. At certain points, Ohreen seems (to me) to suggest that cultivating empathetic concern is not important because there are limitations and biases (e.g., in his Abstract). Perhaps he means that cultivating empathetic concern will not be successful because of limitations and biases. But note that we might say the same things about reasoning itself, which is subject to characteristic errors (here think of Daniel Kahnemann's work), therefore cultivating reasoning is unimportant. Or, moral reasoning is subject to certain kinds of limitations and biases, therefore we ought not work on improving moral reasoning. But those inferences are obviously unwarranted, and the same is true of this suggestion on Ohreen's part.

3

Ohreen also argues the following: empathetic concern is not necessary for moral action, therefore cultivating empathetic concern is “not necessary for ethics education” (2013: 114). This third criticism is separate from the previous worries about factors that limit/bias empathetic concern.

My own view is that empathetic concern is necessary for moral action and cooperative activity. The original paper outlined the case for this claim, which is fundamentally Humean. From Hume (1998 [1772]: 121, my emphasis):

Let us suppose a person originally framed so as to have no manner of *concern* for his fellow-creatures, but to regard the happiness and misery of all sensible beings with greater indifference than even two contiguous shades of the same colour. Let us suppose, if the prosperity of nations were laid on the one hand, and their ruin on the other, and he were desired to choose; that he would stand like the schoolman's ass, irresolute and undetermined, between equal *motives*; or rather, like the same ass between two pieces of wood or marble, without any inclination or propensity to either side. The consequence, I believe, must be allowed just, that such a person, being absolutely *unconcerned*, either for the public good of a community or the private utility of others, would look on every quality, however pernicious, or however beneficial, to society, or to its possessor, with the same indifference as on the most common and uninteresting object.

The references to concern and to motivation justify reading this passage in terms of empathetic concern (Batson is especially clear that empathetic concern is a form of motivation), so this passage does not concern empathy-as-perspective-taking or empathy-as-vicarious-felt-emotion. This claim is consistent with some empirical research on the role of affective processes in motivating human action (e.g., Damasio 1994).

But we should be open to evidence with regard to this point, it could be that empathetic concern is not necessary for moral action and cooperative behavior. If so, empathetic concern is nevertheless *one* antecedent of moral action/cooperative behavior, so a focus on cultivating empathetic concern in the classroom is certainly not mistaken or misguided.

And we should be open to evidence more generally: My original paper was intended to open up space to ask questions – about how to cultivate empathy, and about whether this is effective with respect to behavioral outcomes – questions that have not been part of the discussion in business ethics education (see Cohen 2012: 36n3 for one proposal about how this might proceed). The original paper was programmatic in this sense, and I still hope others will join me in that task.

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