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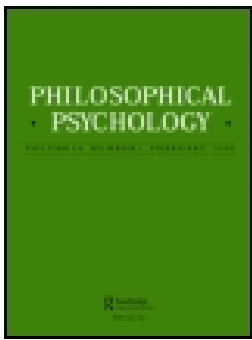
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ARTICLE



Intention and empathy

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ABSTRACT

This essay challenges some assumptions of prevalent theories of empathy. The empathizer, according to these theories, must have an emotion or a representation that matches the recipient's emotion or representation. I argue that these conditions fail to account for important cases, namely surrogate and out-group empathy. In the course of this argument, I isolate some conceptual difficulties in extant models of cognitive empathy. In place of the matching theories, I propose an indexical model that (1) distinguishes virtual from real self-reference and (2) replaces self-other distinctions with an epistemic condition. According to this account, empathy occurs when we index an intention to another person about whom we have the relevant knowledge or understanding.

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1. Introduction

Empathy is an everyday phenomenon but a definitional enigma. We know it when we see it, and we sometimes complain when it is lacking. To say what it is, however, is a more difficult matter. Many philosophers and social scientists define empathy in terms of affective matching or “feeling the way that you think others feel” (Bloom, 2017, p. 3; Deonna, 2007). Others define it representationally as “first-personal knowledge of another's experience” (Paul, 2017, p. 198). This essay challenges some assumptions that underlie these approaches and argues that important cases of empathy do not require either matching states or representational accuracy. These cases demand only that we index our intentional state to other persons while adopting an affect appropriate to their situation.

It is common in the literature on empathy to distinguish among types or species of empathy, and it is often left open what the relations among types are supposed to be.¹ While I do not deny that there are real differences among species of empathy, this essay proceeds instead by evaluating a dozen models of empathy in a scale of increasing nuance and comprehensiveness. I concede that each model succeeds in describing some genuine cases of

empathy, but each also has limitations that I address in the course of formulating my proposal. Theorists of empathy distinguish between affective and cognitive variants (Walter, 2012), lower- and higher-order variants (Goldman, 2006, 2011; Stueber, 2006), and between self-oriented and other-oriented empathy (Batson, 2009; Coplan, 2011; Goldie, 2011). My proposal (Theory 12) leaves room for these distinctions, but at times adjusts them as well. It also relies on a distinction between subject- and object-oriented empathy. In the former we are concerned only with mimicking the emotion or representation of another person (henceforth, the ‘recipient’), whereas in the latter we represent some aspect of the world in the manner that the recipient does or should do.

As far as cases of empathy are concerned, in this essay I consider four paradigms that I describe at the relevant places in my argument:

- (1) Subject-oriented empathy (directed at the recipient and her occurrent state)
- (2) Object-oriented empathy (directed at the object of the recipient’s concern)
- (3) Surrogate empathy (directed at the object when the recipient lacks relevant knowledge or perspective)
- (4) Out-group empathy (directed at the recipient or the object when the recipient has relevant differences from the empathizer)

In the first section, I motivate the intentional approach by distinguishing between subject- and object-oriented cases. In the second and third sections, I consider object-oriented and surrogate cases of empathy, and I argue that the theoretical model for these should not require a resemblance or isomorphism between the empathizer’s state and the recipient’s state. Resemblance theories, which are a dominant trend in philosophy, fail because they cannot take into account the relevant epistemic asymmetries between agents. In the remaining sections, I explain some further benefits of the intentional approach, specifically how distinguishing between real and virtual self-reference addresses conceptual difficulties in more complex cases of empathy. I then treat out-group cases that involve important differences between the empathizer and recipient. The same capacity that enables us to share a friend’s grief enables us to empathize in these cases also: our intentional state may be indexed to the person whose situation we are considering.

2. Empathy as intentional

In this section, I distinguish object-oriented from subject-oriented cases of empathy, and I argue that theoretical models for the former should be

intentional rather than causal. The key element for object-oriented empathy is that the empathizer understands the object of the recipient's purported state. Subject-oriented cases of empathy, on the other hand, involve only the empathizer adopting a certain emotion, such as sadness, as a result of observing someone else in a similar state. A paradigm case is as follows:

Paradigm case 1 (subject-oriented): You enter a room and notice your friend is visibly shaken. You embrace him and adopt a feeling of sadness.

In this instance, the empathizer's awareness of the recipient's feeling of sadness and the empathizer's feeling of sadness seem to be necessary conditions for empathy, and some theorists have taken these to be jointly sufficient. The psychologist Paul Bloom, who believes there to be too much empathy in the world, defines it informally as "feeling the way that you think others feel" (Bloom, 2017). Philosophers have attempted more subtle definitions, but some have preserved the basic formula of awareness plus feeling. Julien Deonna, for example, defines empathy as "feeling the way that you perceive another to feel," and the chief difference between his view and that of Bloom is that, for Deonna, empathy is a success term (Deonna, 2007, p. 100). Later, I will argue that this overshoots the target: one of the more interesting things about empathy is that it so often, and in so many ways, fails. There is even an extent to which epistemic failures in empathy are inevitable. Nevertheless, these theories suffice to describe the simplest cases of empathy, such as our first paradigm case. Our first two models are as follows:

Theory 1 (Bloom, belief plus matching feeling)

E (empathizer) empathizes with R (recipient) in regard to f (feeling or emotion) if and only if:

- (i) E believes that R feels f
- (ii) E feels f because she believes R to feel f

Theory 2 (Deonna, perception plus matching feeling)

E empathizes with R in regard to f if and only if:

- (iii) E perceives R to feel f
- (iv) E feels f because she perceives R to feel f

There are a number of further questions that we can ask about the belief or perception condition (i or iii) such as how we become aware of other people's mental states, what are the truth-conditions for attributions of

emotions, and so on. I do not wish to answer these questions except to indicate one possible source of confusion. A number of studies have shown that something along the lines of empathy is required in order to attribute emotions in the first place (Snow, 2000). In other words, in order to justifiably say “my friend is sad,” I must employ some of the neurological mechanisms of feeling sadness. This is perhaps a surprising conclusion, but it is supported by research into paired deficits as well as neurological research (Gallese, 2003; Goldman, 2011; Snow, 2000). It is thus necessary to distinguish neurological simulation or “mirroring,” namely, the physical mechanism employed in arriving at the conclusion that the friend is sad, from the reflectively available belief that she is sad.² The remainder of this essay deals only with the higher-order types of empathy, which are reflectively available, complex cognitive states.

The second requirement (conditions ii and iv) of these theories is that the putative empathizer has a certain feeling or emotion. Bullies who laugh at those in pain are not empathic, but they are aware of the pain. In most cases, they will simulate pain neurologically even while they bully.³ Only certain kinds of reactions qualify a state as empathic, for example, if someone adopts a state of sadness upon seeing that her friend is mourning. There is a further difficulty, to be pursued later, in determining whether the required emotional state should be identical to the target state. Many have claimed that to empathize with a sad person one must feel sadness, whereas others have allowed that empathy requires only a state similar to the target.⁴

The more complete models of empathy, however, insert a third condition. The most common approach is to claim that E’s state is caused by R’s state. Sober & Wilson, 1999, p. 234), for instance, offer a causal theory with matching feelings:

Theory 3 (Sober and Wilson, causality plus matching feeling)

E empathizes with R in regard to *f* if and only if:

- (v) R feels *f*
- (vi) E believes that R feels *f*, and
- (vii) This causes E to feel *f* for R

Nancy Snow, on the other hand, objects to Theory 3, claiming that it seems to make the other person the object of one’s feeling, in this case, sadness (Snow, 2000, Dan Zahavi, 2014). At the very least, the causal theory does not say enough about what the object of one’s feeling is supposed to be. If you tell me that you are sad because your brother has died, for instance, it is not obvious that you should become the object of my sadness. I should rather be

sad that your brother has died, in a manner that relates to you. Snow claims that in these simpler cases, empathy is better described as “feeling with” than “feeling for.” We should allow, however, that the causal model (Theory 3) suffices for the subject-oriented case but not for object-oriented cases. Our second paradigm thus requires a more nuanced approach:

Paradigm case 2 (object-oriented): Your colleague is angry at her manager because of perceived unfair treatment. Listening generously to her story, you adopt a feeling of anger toward the manager.

Snow’s theory adds a shared intentional object:

Theory 4 (Snow, shared intentional object plus matching feeling)

E empathizes with R in regard to her feeling toward a certain person or object (o) (hereafter ‘ $f \rightarrow o$ ’ will denote ‘feeling toward an object’) if and only if:

- (viii) R feels $f \rightarrow o$
- (ix) E feels $f \rightarrow o$ because R feels $f \rightarrow o$, and
- (x) E knows or understands that R feels $f \rightarrow o$ ⁵

Condition ix bears most of the burden of Snow’s argument, and she takes this to be intentional rather than causal.⁶ What does it mean to “feel $f \rightarrow o$ because R feels $f \rightarrow o$ ”? It should not conflate empathy with commiseration. If E, for example, is already feeling a similar pain as a result of likewise having undergone a misfortune, she commiserates but does not empathize. They may take comfort in feeling sad together, but neither empathizes with the other. It is not the lack of a causal relation that makes the difference, however, but, rather, the lack of intentional identity. If you tell me, for instance, that you are sad about your spouse’s recent hospitalization, and I reply that I too am sad, but about my paper being rejected, you would be unlikely to consider my reply empathic. This is so even if your sadness causes mine. The point is that a theory of this sort needs either a causal or an intentional condition, and Snow’s claim of intentional identity better accounts for the object-oriented case.

The wisdom of Snow’s theory becomes clearer if we remove the object altogether and reinsert a causal relation. For example, imagine that someone immediately becomes nervous when walking into a room full of nervous people. This putative empathizer does not know anything about why the people are nervous; she is merely responsive to certain types of emotional behavior. Philosophers have used ‘emotion contagion’ to name, among other things, cases in which the relationship between two states is only causal (Miller, 2009; Coplan, 2011; Matravers, 2017). No doubt, some people call this empathy too, and the point here is not to dictate

terminology. Even the scientific literature investigates emotional responsiveness and calls it empathy.⁷ On some accounts, this characteristic even has a different underlying causal structure than does higher-order empathy.⁸

The characteristic described above, when the agent has the right emotion but not the right belief about the object of the recipient's state, is better described as 'emotional attunement.' This is a quality that we often notice more by its absence than by its presence. There are some people who lead very resilient emotional lives; they enter a room full of sad or angry people, for instance, and remain how they were. Like a lack of empathy, others may perceive this as a vice in certain cases; however, it is not obviously so in the abstract. It reflects, rather, a learned ability that adult humans typically have in some degree. Martin Hoffman suggests that mimicry is self-reinforcing, and it turns out that humans begin life as deeply emotionally attuned to one another (Hoffman, 1984). Infants cry when other people do, and we adult humans have learned, for better or worse, to turn off this mechanism.

Object-oriented cases of empathy, namely, those that require more than simple subject-oriented attunement or contagion, thus require an intentional identity between the empathizer and the recipient. Both parties should be oriented toward the same or similar objects. Empathy is not, however, just two people feeling similarly about a given object, even with a causal relation. There is a further dependence condition that Snow's theory omits, that is, there should be an additional condition that specifies the manner in which the empathizer's state depends on the recipient. Empathy, namely, is not just "feeling with," but, rather, "feeling with in a specific relation of dependence."

Many theories of empathy, however, require only shared feeling rather than a dependence condition. A few simple examples suffice to illustrate the mistake in this. At the funeral of a loved one, for instance, you may commiserate without empathizing with that person. Fans at a football game experience collective emotion but do not thereby empathize. All parties in these examples think of the same object, the passing away of a particular person or the outcome of a particular game, but their respective states lack the dependence condition. As empathizer, namely, I am sad about the object of another person's sadness in a way that gives priority to that person. Since Snow's "feeling with" is not obviously a dependence relation, we replace her condition ix with condition xii:

Theory 5 (intentional identity plus matching feeling plus non-causal dependence relation)

E empathizes with R in regard to $f \rightarrow o$ if and only if:

(xi) R feels $f \rightarrow o$

- (xii) E feels $f \rightarrow o$, and E's $f \rightarrow o$ (hereafter ' $Ef \rightarrow o$ ') is dependent on R
- (xiii) E knows or understands that R feels $f \rightarrow o$

In Sections 4 and 5, I attempt to elaborate condition xii, that is, the sense in which the empathizer depends on the recipient. I will argue that the latter serves only as the referential index for the former. The next section, however, concerns whether, and when, we may dispense with condition xi.

3. Matching and asymmetric states

Many empathy theories, we have seen, require matching, regardless of whether they acknowledge the need for intentional identity. According to these models, a state is empathic only if it matches the recipient's state. Only a few philosophers have dispensed with this condition, though a number of psychologists no longer require it.⁹ Zahavi, for instance, views empathy as a species of perception that does not require isomorphisms of any kind, and Stein's view is arguably similar to his (Dan Zahavi, 2014; Stein et al., 1917; Zahavi & Overgaard, 2012). In this section, I give reasons different from theirs for abandoning matching in favor of an appropriateness model.¹⁰ I argue that affective matching in particular is not a necessary criterion for empathy. The simplest reason is that instances of empathy may be asymmetric; however, later I will raise more conceptual difficulties for the matching approach. Empathy, as I conceive it, is not a relation between two states – for example, my sadness and another's – but rather a single state with at least three characteristics – for example, my sadness about a state of affairs as these relate to another's position to it. Of course, I may be sad about another's relation to a state of affairs without empathizing with her; thus, further requirements arise. These will be considered in the subsequent sections.

Snow's condition ix, like the subject-oriented theories, preserves the matching condition by claiming that both people have the same feeling in regard to a certain object, person, or event ($f \rightarrow o$). This begs the question of what it means for two people to have the same feeling. One thing that it should not mean is that two humans have matching brain states, although there are some who argue along these lines. Some relevant facts were learned from studies of monkeys in the 1990's: a monkey observing another monkey performing an action activates neural cells in the same way as it does when the monkey himself performs the action, or a similar one (Rizzolatti et al., 1996). There are clearly two items in the relation because there are two monkey brains. Thus, it may seem that this type of matching occurs in more complex forms of empathy. Vignemont and Singer conclude, reasonably enough, that neurological isomorphism is a necessary criterion of empathy (De Vignemont & Singer, 2006).

The model of neurological matching does not easily translate, however, into the more complex scenarios of human cognition. Alvin Goldman has argued that the automaticity of these neural mechanisms should exclude them from discussions of empathy (Goldman, 2011). Empathy, he claims, is often something we undertake on purpose or with effort. However, we cannot undertake neural matching with effort or purpose. Neural matching may also be unconscious, and it is not available to introspection. Empathy, however, is both conscious and available to introspection. For Goldman, these arguments concern his distinction between lower- and higher-level simulations. My concern here rests only with the inference from the fact that low-level simulation, for example, babies crying in response to other babies, requires a degree of matching so great that one could conclude that higher-level cognitive states, such as considering what it is like for R to be a victim of racial aggression, will also have matching conditions. There is far too little evidence to warrant this inference.¹¹

Snow takes condition ix – ‘E feels $f \rightarrow o$ because R feels $f \rightarrow o$ ’ – to mean only that the emotions are type-identical as cataloged by natural-language description, and she offers a plausible enough theory of how emotions may match (Snow, 2000, p. 72). This, however, would exclude all the asymmetries present in the most interesting cases of empathy.

Paradigm case 3 (surrogate empathy): A parent is nervous for her child’s first day of school, despite the fact that the child himself is blithely unconcerned with the upcoming events.

Questions about surrogate empathy first arose in the 1980’s when psychologists were devising strategies to measure emotions. Hoffman argued that a strict notion of matching would preclude too many instances of empathy. He then adopted an appropriateness criterion: “the observer’s affect must be more like that called for by the model’s circumstances” (Hoffman, 1982, p. 286; see also, 1984). Hoffman’s theory is thus importantly different from Snow’s:

Theory 6 (Hoffman, intentional identity plus appropriateness)

E empathizes with R in regard to $f \rightarrow o$ if and only if:

(xiv) It would be appropriate for R to feel $f \rightarrow o$

(xv) E feels $f \rightarrow o$

(xvi) E feels $f \rightarrow o$ because it would be appropriate for R to do so

Hoffman rejects matching because he seeks to describe empathy as it occurs in therapeutic and other professional relationships, but his point applies to a range of everyday situations, such as our paradigm case. There is an

important difference in the paradigm between paternalistic nervousness, in which the parent is nervous about how the event may reflect on her social status, and surrogate empathy, in which the parent is nervous for the child's own experience or development.¹² The latter type of empathy stems from the fact that another person's immediate experience or occurrent mental state is not the only reference point for one's concern for them. Simply put, people are not identical to their occurrent mental state, so our empathy for them need not target that state. We can empathize, for instance, with reference to a wider temporal scope if we have knowledge of their history or can predict their upcoming experience.¹³

In the case of the protective parent, the young student may not be in a position to become nervous because the child lacks the relevant knowledge of her situation. The parent, on the other hand, knows many things that the student does not, such as how very difficult life can get. In this case, the additional knowledge does not preclude empathy; rather, it is precisely the basis for it. This point is not limited to the parental situation; it occurs, rather, in situations in which the empathizer has important knowledge that the recipient lacks, or in situations in which the recipient is in denial or self-deceived. In general, the recipient's current view of the world may play a very small role or no role at all in the empathizer's consideration. The recipient as a person is the locus of concern for the empathizer.

Defining empathy in terms of its appropriateness to the recipient instead of in terms of matching the recipient's occurrent state allows Hoffman to distinguish cases in which the empathic state does not resemble the direct experience undergone by the recipient (Hoffman, 1982, 1984, p. 115). He concludes that emotional identity is unnecessary as long as the empathizer remains aware that her own "response is vicarious, and if [her] attention remains focused on the other's feelings rather than [her] own."¹⁴ In the following sections, I offer proposals that differ from Hoffman's. I take his examples to suggest that isomorphism or matching feelings is a possible component rather than a necessary condition of empathy. Our emotion sometimes acts as a substitute for the other person's lack of emotion, in which case we have the appropriate response while the recipient does not. In these cases, 'appropriateness' is understood relative to the more stable or fixed characteristics of the recipient.

4. Matching representations

One response to the above argument would be to stipulate that empathy requires a representation (with or without affective matching) of the recipient's occurrent state, and that my examples of asymmetric or surrogate empathy indicate neighboring phenomena. Many people seem to have the intuition that the parent-child scenario is not an instance of empathy

because they take ‘empathy’ to require something like ‘having a matching state’. The presumption is, then, that an intentional state aimed at the recipient’s occurrent state is importantly different from one that allows for epistemic asymmetries or wider temporal scope. In this section, I argue that the distinction is less significant than many have assumed because there are further difficulties for preserving matching for cognitive empathy. We empathize with persons, on my account, rather than with their occurrent feelings or representations.¹⁵

The plausibility of the objection derives from the fact that some conceptions of empathy require us to imagine what it is like to be someone else or to imagine what their experience is like from the inside. This belief is the source of several paradoxes, however, which we will negotiate in this section. Consider, as a starting point, L.A. Paul’s recent claim that empathy “allows you to first personally represent some element of another person’s experience” (Paul, 2017). For Paul, empathy is a manner of embedded representation, though it remains to be seen how she conceives of the relationship between the empathizer’s representation and the recipient’s experience. Paul’s implied definition of empathy is thus as follows:

Theory 7 (Paul, embedded first-person representation)

E empathizes with R in regard to her experience or representation (hereafter ‘ p ’) of an object ‘ o ’ (hereafter ‘ $p \rightarrow o$ ’ denotes ‘representation of a certain object’) if and only if:

(xvii) R is having $p \rightarrow o$ (hereafter ‘ $Rp \rightarrow o$ ’)

(xviii) E has an experience (or entertains a representation) of $Rp \rightarrow o$, or $Ep \rightarrow (Rp \rightarrow o)$

The whole matter rests on how we interpret condition xviii; as it stands, the condition is ambiguous regarding matching and non-matching readings. What does it mean that E represents R’s representation of o ? Since the world includes, for Paul, “irreducibly perspectival facts,” it would seem as if R’s actual representation ($Rp \rightarrow o$) would be private.¹⁶ In this case, E would simply make an imaginative projection of what $Rp \rightarrow o$ is like: $Ep \rightarrow o$ is similar to $Rp \rightarrow o$; E believes that $Ep \rightarrow o$ is similar to $Rp \rightarrow o$; E has the counterfactual thought that her own representation ($Ep \rightarrow o$) is really R’s; or something of this sort. In that case, we should not construe the empathic experience as embedded. Rather, we would write the following:

Theory 8 (Paul, variant without embedding)

E empathizes with R in regard to ($p \rightarrow o$) if and only if:

(xix) R is having $p \rightarrow o$, or $Rp \rightarrow o$

- (xx) E has an experience (or entertains a representation) that she takes to be similar to $Rp \rightarrow o$, which I formalize as: $Ep \rightarrow (o \ \& \ 'Rp \rightarrow o \text{ is similar}')$, or identical to $Rp \rightarrow o$, which I formalize as: $Ep \rightarrow (o \ \& \ 'Rp = Ep')$

It remains to be seen how Paul will elaborate her notion of embedded representation. The remainder of her argument in (Bloom, 2017) proceeds as if E experiences R's experience directly, which I render as $Ep \rightarrow (Rp \rightarrow o)$. It is as if the mind of the empathizer overlaps with that of the recipient, or R's experience itself is the direct object of E's experience. In the rest of this section, I wish to highlight some of the difficulties of conceiving of empathy in this manner (as in Theory 7), since it captures some common portrayals of empathy. If I ask my friend to view the world from my perspective, this expression seems to depict my mind as a window to the world: if my friend only stood in the right place, he would see it. However, we cannot enter anyone else's mind for a moment – for instance, in the manner once depicted in the film *Being John Malkovich*. Theory 7 seems to depict such a scenario:

Malkovich scenario: various characters crawl into the mind of Malkovich – there is a literal door to this mind, hidden on the 7½th floor of an office building – and view the world through his eyes. Each character is physically in Malkovich's mind, and they use their own eyes to look through his eyes. One mind thus goes inside the other.

The first difficulty with this picture is that it depicts the recipient's mind (that of Malkovich), but not the empathizing minds, according to the optic or spatial metaphor as “a place from which to view.” It works with two different notions of mind, though perhaps this flaw could be corrected with an appropriate theoretical elaboration.

Peter Goldie hints at a second difficulty when he suggests a test for such metaphors: the would-be perspective-shifter should be able to encounter herself during the shift.¹⁷ Individuals are, after all, one of the things in the world which can be seen through the other's eyes. The *Malkovich* scenario fails this test since the characters cannot be simultaneously in Malkovich and encountered by him. Goldie draws an ambitious conclusion from this failure: he thinks that it shows that many claims about empathy involve conceptual impossibilities. In defense of the embedded reading, however, we can correct the metaphor to avoid both initial objections.

Technology scenarios are much more realistic than *Malkovich*, and a few common ones will allow for a more literal interpretation of the expression “seeing ourselves through another's eyes.” Entrepreneurs, no doubt, will one day develop a device that enables us to see the world through someone else's eyes and ears, or at least do so in a manner that is causally dependent on someone else's organs. The series *Black Mirror* has depicted a number of

scenarios like this, and many actual devices have moved in this direction (Series 1, Episode 3, “The Entire History of You”). In an early episode, the characters are able to record their experiences and project them onto screens, rewind and review them, and so on. In this case, the experience is no longer treated as essentially private:

Black Mirror scenario: characters can record and project their experiences onto a screen, in which case they can invite others to watch with them. Watching someone else’s experience in this way is (a component of) cognitive empathy.

The writers of *Black Mirror* are, of course, not beholden to conceptual rigor or scientific plausibility when composing their scripts; the series merely depicts technological scenarios that highlight peculiarities in common conceptions of human experience.¹⁸ We would need to revise the scenario, then, to explain what it means that an experience can be shared like a video:

Revised technology scenario: entrepreneurs create a device that records inputs into your sensory organs. Based on data derived from these organs, the device projects a representation in sharable format. When others view the product, they engage in (a component of) cognitive empathy.

In the remainder of this essay, I attempt to avoid the difficulties that ensue from a picture like the revised technology scenario. The simple idea is that to construe someone’s experience in first person is not to view their actual experience as if it were a sharable video. My proposal exchanges the formula $Ep \rightarrow (Rp \rightarrow o)$ for something more conceptually sound. In the next section, I propose alternatives to theories 7 and 8 by developing the concept of virtual self-reference.

5. A one-state model for empathy

A better way to think about these issues is to abandon the idea that empathy is a relation between two given experiences had by separate persons: we can eliminate not only the embedded aspect of the formula ‘ $Ep \rightarrow (Rp \rightarrow o)$ ’ but also any reference to R’s actual experience of the object. The impetus for this move is the fact that humans are capable of virtual self-reference. Humans are able to use, for instance, the first-person pronoun ‘I’ in a manner that does not refer to the speaker. Actors, gamers, dreamers (see Rosen & Sutton, 2013), role-players, and others frequently employ such uses of the first-person pronoun. In what follows, I refer to such virtual uses of ‘I’ as indexed to someone other than the speaker. I formalize self-referential indices with ‘*’, for instance, when Robert DeNiro thinks of himself as Vito Corleone I write DeNiro*Vito:

Theory 9 (intentional identity with virtual self-reference)

E empathizes with R in regard to $p \rightarrow o$ if and only if:

(xxi) R is having $p \rightarrow o$

(xxii) E is having $p \rightarrow o$, and

(xxiii) E indexes her experience $E p \rightarrow o$ to R, or $E^*R(p \rightarrow o)$

In our cases of surrogate emotion above, we removed the matching condition. The indexical approach accommodates this move more easily, so I insert an appropriateness condition here also:

Theory 10 (appropriateness with virtual self-reference)

E empathizes with R in regard to $p \rightarrow o$ if and only if:

(xiv) it would be appropriate for R to have $p \rightarrow o$

(xxv) E is having $p \rightarrow o$, and

(xxvi) E indexes $p \rightarrow o$ to R, or $E^*R(p \rightarrow o)$

Bernard Williams once claimed something similar when he wrote that in imagining another person's experience, we do not presume an identity between the imaginer and the imagined (Williams, 1973). If I imagine being Napoleon, for instance, what I imagine is rather "the desolation at Austerlitz as viewed by me vaguely aware of my short stature and my cockaded hat, my hand in my tunic" (Williams, 1973, p. 43). There are relevant facts about Napoleon, such as that he was victorious at Austerlitz and he wore a cockaded hat, but what Williams imagines is not Napoleon's actual experience. Here I want to argue that, similarly, it is not a condition of empathy that the empathizer's experience be identical to, or even comparable with, an experience had by the recipient. To make my case, I draw on a few contexts in which notions of virtual self-reference play a similar role.

In a comment on the above passages by Williams, David Velleman argues that the key element in this picture is not the absence of Napoleon in the representation but, rather, the absence of Williams. The phrase 'viewed by me' does not mean, in this instance, viewed by Bernard Williams (David, 1996, p. 47). Velleman offers a helpful analogy: one represents another person's perspective in the same way that the indexical 'YOU ARE HERE' is represented on a map. The expression does not mean that one is on the map; rather, it replaces one's physical orientation with a representation from which one then interprets space. A few simple argumentative steps then lead Velleman to a significant conclusion: the fact that people represent in this way implies that people have first-person experiences that are not indexed to the particular individual that they are. People do this because they are able to separate the indexical expressions from the representations of whatever

content they are considering (the hills in the park, the Napoleonic tunic, etc.). People may think in the first person, whatever that entails, without referring thereby to the particular human that they are. In empathy, people likewise engage in virtual self-reference by indexing their intentional state to another person. Velleman calls the referential index the ‘notional subject’.

Since we are able to form imaginative representations in this way – which I understand to be part of the neurological process Goldman (2006) calls ‘E-imagination’ – our purported first-personal knowledge does not obviously require that the other person experience the scene in the manner that we do. One may represent Austerlitz with reference to a character one identifies as Napoleon and refers to in the first person, just as gamers and dreamers orient themselves in imaginary or virtual spaces. In dream research, for instance, it is commonly observed that the dream’s protagonist (its first-person character) need not be identical to or continuous with the dreamer.¹⁹ In such cases, resemblance is not a concern. Empathy, according to the one-state model (theory 10), is just the name for the ability to map a representation onto someone else.

Theory 10 also allows one to interpret metaphors such as ‘view it with his eyes’ or ‘see it from her perspective’ in a much less literal sense: people view the world occasionally by means of a representation that they index as belonging to someone not identical with themselves, such as Napoleon or, in the paradigm cases, a friend. Of course, empathy cases do not typically deal with people who have been dead for centuries, but with grieving friends or nervous students. Imagine, then, that you empathize with your friend at her son’s funeral. What does this require? The proposal here suggests that to see the funeral ‘from your friend’s point of view’ is not to observe anything in a manner dependent on her sense organs, nor is it to visualize the contents of her experience from the inside. In addition, it is not dependent on her internal monologue, nor on whatever else is supposed to belong to her immediate experience. To see the son’s death and its consequences ‘through her eyes’ is not to see it through her actual eyes.

When I empathize with a friend’s grief, rather, I need only consider the preceding event as a misfortune because I view it in the context of her life and mainly with reference to it. Theories 7 and 8 fail precisely because they take all the metaphors about ‘viewing things from her perspective’ to their conclusion. Empathy is not about repeating or resembling the other person’s experience, but about experiencing certain objects or events in a manner congruent with or appropriate to that person, as one understands or is able to think of the person.

6. Self–other distinctions

There is a common wisdom regarding empathy: it says that many people err in their performances of empathy by covertly focusing on themselves. The above account will seem to have given much license to such errors. Amy Coplan, following a certain tradition in psychology, warns against confusing ‘self-oriented perspective-taking’ with genuine empathy (Coplan, 2011; see also Goldie, 2011). One case that she considers is that of advising someone, using the expression ‘If I were you, I would φ ’. Whatever a person may be like, there are conditions of identity that preclude a person from being another person; thus, the antecedent lacks truth conditions.²⁰ My solution to this has appealed to virtual self-reference as in imaginative fancy, dreaming, and role-playing. I have thereby tried to solve the riddle by replacing the ‘you’ with an imaginary index. My account may seem worse in this regard: in some respects, I have made empathy all about the empathizer. The key distinction in the epistemology of empathy, however, is not between the two persons, but, rather, between standard and virtual self-reference. In the latter case, ‘I’ is indexed to another human in the manner that an actor refers to her character as ‘I’, which we indicate by ‘I*’. The recipient does not thereby lose importance: she is still the *referent* of the empathic act. In this section, I argue that the motivation underlying the self–other distinction is equally satisfied by adding an epistemic condition to our theory.

Coplan, Goldie, and others have worried that mistakes are made in empathizing when the empathizer neglects to remember that it is the experience of the other person that matters. While I remain in agreement with them in regard to this informal characterization, I offer an alternative interpretation of the error they seek to highlight. Coplan insists that the empathizer must explicitly distinguish between ‘self’ and the ‘other’, which makes it harder see how the empathizer (E) can then successfully imagine that she is the other human (R). In any case, it is not clear why E should form of a thought of the sort ‘I am not really R’, although Coplan goes as far as to suggest this:

Theory 11 (Coplan: an explicit self–other distinction)²¹

E empathizes with R in regard to $p \rightarrow o$ if and only if:

(xxvii) it would be appropriate for R to have $p \rightarrow o$

(xxviii) E is having $p \rightarrow o$

(xxix) E knows that $Ep \rightarrow o$ is R’s experience and not E’s, which I formalize as $Ep \rightarrow [o \ \& \ (Ep \rightarrow o = Rp \rightarrow o) \ \& \ \sim(Ep \rightarrow o)]$.

do not mean to imply that condition xxix cannot be made coherent, but there is something *prima facie* objectionable in attributing to the empathizer contradictory thoughts. It is unnecessary, at the very least, to represent E as having the explicit thought that “this experience I am having is not my experience but rather hers.” What E needs to do is rather to consider herself as having different characteristics than she in fact has. It should thus be clear that I am not making the objection that some psychologists have raised against Batson, namely, that in empathy there are two selves that merge.²² It is to say, rather, that the concern here is not with any psychological entity called a self at all but, rather, with the comparatively mundane question of whether one person refers to another as ‘I’ or ‘she’.²³

In Theory 10, I removed the experience of the recipient ($Rp \rightarrow o$) from the picture, and I added R as the referential index of E’s representation. To this I add (condition xxxiii) that E should have a sound understanding of the relevant aspects of R, such as her values, beliefs, priorities, temperament, life history, and so on:

Theory 12 (appropriateness with virtual self-reference and epistemic conditions)

E empathizes with R in regard to $p \rightarrow o$ if and only if:

(xxx) it would be appropriate for R to have $p \rightarrow o$

(xxxi) E is having $p \rightarrow o$

(xxxii) E indexes $p \rightarrow o$ to R, or $E^*R(p \rightarrow o)$, and

(xxxiii) E makes the relevant distinctions between facts about E and facts about R.

In order for my epistemic condition (xxxiii) to take the place of Coplan’s explicit self–other distinction (xxix), we will have to consider a more difficult paradigm case than we did previously. Perhaps the hardest cases for empathy are out-group cases, and these are the ones for which an explicit self–other distinction would be most needed:

Paradigm case #4 (out-group empathy): a student of color recounts for the class her earliest realization that she was racialized. The story involves an episode in which she was disinvited from a party by a classmate whose parents did not approve of having African American people at their house. The instructor is a middle-aged white male who tries to empathize.

It may be that Coplan and Goldie consider the agents to be too different for empathy to occur in this instance, although it would be very unfortunate for us humans if she is right. Theory 11 casts doubt on the possibility that out-group empathy exists, and support for this point lies in the fact that research has documented empathy deficits in cross-racial interactions (Riečanský

et al., 2015). Empathy, however, is a species-wide capacity with deep roots in human cognition. We should not presume, then, that the social causes of out-group prejudices also lead to certain humans being incapable of empathizing with certain other humans.²⁴ The literature has long documented how deliberate out-group perspective-switching reduces prejudice (Blaine & Brenchley, 2017). We should thus define empathy in such a way that explains out-group deficits while also accounting for deliberate correction of prejudice. I take this to be among the virtues of Theory 12.

The important question concerns only what the instructor must do in order to empathize, and for Coplan, the important distinction is between him imagining this situation happening to him and Bob putting himself in the student's shoes. The real problem, I have argued, concerns only what 'himself' and 'him' mean here. In cases of complex empathy, namely, the difference between self and other is not the difference between two actual persons or selves, but simply between uses of referential terms.

In order to engage in perspective-switching, the instructor must imagine being a young African American girl. But he cannot imagine that 'Bob is a young African American girl', where 'Bob' refers to the instructor, namely, a middle-aged white man. He can, however, imagine 'I* am a young African American girl', where 'I' is indexed to another person such as the student in question. Once we accept the notion of virtual self-reference, it becomes less important whether we describe the situation in one way or the other:

Instructor scenario 1a: He imagines being a young African American girl excluded from the party because of phenotypic differences.

Instructor scenario 2a: He imagines that he* is the young African American girl excluded from the party because of phenotypic differences.

All that is required in either scenario is that the instructor quarantine his relevant knowledge about the human that he happens to be (about Bob, that is) and allow his knowledge of R to dictate the details of his representation. He may indeed refer to R as 'I*' or 'myself*' – that is the whole point – so long as he makes the relevant adjustments in the representation:

Instructor scenario 1b: I imagine being her, and she is a young African American girl.

Instructor scenario 2b: I imagine that I* am the young African American girl.

The dangers creep in only if the instructor does not remove the relevant contents from the first-person representation, that is, the descriptions he normally associates with 'I' or the descriptions that anyone else would associate with 'Bob'. He must instead quarantine all the variations of his experience that pertain to being a middle-aged white man. This is admittedly an impossible task, but the difficulties are only epistemic, not logical, conceptual, or neurological. The situation requires, namely, a considerable

study of racism, probably through the reading of many relevant books, listening to many similar stories, and so on. In such a case it is plausible that he successfully conceives of the instance of racial exclusion, and that as if it were his own experience. However, it is not the case, of course, that his experience should match the original experience of R, nor is it the case that he should have the explicit thought in mind that ‘I am not R’.

A second way to express this problem is by asking at what point in counterfactual imaginings we are still imagining ‘ourselves’; we must thereby accept that there is probably not a good answer to such a question. I wish to stay neutral on questions about the metaphysics of the self, though I do insist on that this principle applies: there exist only epistemic limits to how many facts about ourselves we can reasonably change while still employing first-person locutions, engaging in first-person visualizations, and so on.²⁵ All that matters is (1) that the instructor is able to represent the experience of racial exclusion – that is largely a matter of how much knowledge he has accumulated on the topic – and (2) that he is able to represent it in the form $E^*R(p \rightarrow o)$, perhaps by visualizing relevant scenarios in the first-person as if he were R.

Now, defenders of the strong self–other distinction will likely claim that their view has empirical support. Batson et al. (1997a), namely, took this distinction as the basis for some of their early experiments. They asked one set of participants to “imagine how the [recipient] feels” and another set to “imagine how you would feel,” with the result that there were reliable and consistent differences among the responses. This is not surprising, since in the first case, the subjects were asked about a real event, whereas in the second, they were asked about a hypothetical scenario. In any case, the differences yielded in Batson’s experiments are not the differences described by Coplan, which I codified in Theory 11. The important questions hinge only on how the subjects and the researchers interpret the instructions “imagine how the recipient feels.” Does this involve construing the imagined scenario in first person? Does the empathizer keep the contrasts between herself and the recipient explicit, or does he simply quarantine descriptive self-knowledge such as ‘I am white, male, and so on’? These questions are not addressed by the admittedly very important experiments Batson and his colleagues have conducted.

7. Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to appreciate the insights of many theories of empathy while incorporating them into a more comprehensive and accurate model. The matching conditions are motivated by the simpler cases, and it may be that a good model of subject-oriented empathy requires some

similarity between the empathizer's feeling and the recipient's feeling. An overemphasis on matching, however, precludes surrogate and out-group empathy. There is no need, in many such cases, to consider our feelings or representations as being identical to the recipient's. Empathy, according to Theory 12, is just a complex representational capacity that has four conditions: appropriateness to the recipient, first-person feeling or representation, indexing to the recipient, and interpersonal knowledge or understanding.

The difficulties involved in empathy, according to this model, are epistemic ones, and since we can never know quite enough about our fellow humans, the difficulties are inevitable. By removing the matching condition, I have thus made success in empathy relative to the degree of interpersonal understanding. More work is needed here, but framing the issues in this way has a number of benefits. In the first place, my notion of referential index should connect the research on empathy to other important areas of cognitive research, such as role-playing, pretense, and even vicarious dreaming.²⁶ Secondly, my epistemic condition will allow for a variety of failures that are otherwise more difficult to explain. Relative failures of out-group empathy, for example, will be explained through faulty generalizations or a lack of interpersonal understanding.

Notes

1. Batson (2009) and Coplan (2011) insist on stronger differences than my model requires.
2. Stueber (2006) and Goldman (2006, 2011) distinguish basic or lower-order variants of empathy while focusing their theories on higher-order or reenactive empathy.
3. Fox et al. (2018) distinguish two classes of serial killers, those who understand well the pain of their victims and those who lack a basic capacity to conceptualize pain.
4. Miller (2009), Stein et al. (1917), and Goldman (2006) are among those who argue only for similarity.
5. This reading of Snow (2000) follows Christian Miller (2011), which was likewise intended for comparison with Sober and Wilson (1999). Miller did not, however, add the object condition to *f*.
6. Snow argues that the causal condition is vulnerable to Gettier-style objections, and that it excludes cases involving direct perception.
7. Schinert-Reichl (1993), for instance, uses the term for "a person's emotional responsiveness to the emotional experiences of another."
8. Coplan (2011, pp. 45–46) documents the case for this.
9. See especially Hoffman (2001), whose arguments against matching I consider below, and Batson et al. (2005).
10. Hoffman (1984) offers the approach closest to mine in this respect.
11. A referee has pointed out that my argument here is consistent with the possibility that the lower-level process is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for the higher-order process. In that case there would be problems of over-intellectualization in cases in which the lower-level process is lacking.

12. On a generous interpretation, this is what Sober and Wilson were trying to capture with their claim that E feels *f* for R.
13. Hoffman (2001) incorporates considerations of temporal scope.
14. Hoffman (1982) and Hoffman (2001) conform to the definition given in Hoffman (1984).
15. Perhaps some readers will persist in the belief that my examples of surrogate empathy are not examples of empathy proper. Be that as it may, it remains necessary to inquire about the extent to which standard cases of object-oriented empathy require a different cognitive structure than do cases of surrogate empathy. My argument in this section is designed to show that cognitive empathy does not require a matching representation; thus, the distinction between the standard and surrogate cases breaks down at the cognitive level.
16. See Bloom (2017, p. 197) and, for contrast, Matravers (2017, p. 79ff), where he considers a number of related theories that unfortunately presume a matching condition.
17. Goldie (2011); Meyers (2014, Chapter 2) likewise criticizes metaphors of this type.
18. A referee points out that an interesting element in the *Black Mirror* scenario is that it allows for a kind of vicarious experience that is non-cognitive, like an after-image of someone else's experience.
19. Rosen and Sutton (2013) summarize the empirical research on this point.
20. On a classical account, this expression is a "counterpossible"; hence, it is trivially true, since the antecedent is always false. For an attempt to remove the triviality, see Bjerring (2013).
21. I do not know where Coplan would stand on the issue of matching. Thus, I mean only to attribute to her condition xxix rather than the whole of Theory 11.
22. Cialdini et al. (1997); see also the reply by Batson et al. (1997b).
23. Among philosophers who have written on empathy, Robert Gordon seems to have been most aware of this point.
24. See Cikara et al. (2011), Cikara & Van Bavel (2014)). The simple fact for which we account here, however, is that out-group empathy does indeed take place.
25. Nagel's (1974) famous argument, of course, is that I cannot imagine being a bat by making only descriptive modifications. While I do not find his metaphysical conclusions obligatory, I will accept the epistemic point in this argument: a bat is probably too far for the human imagination.
26. In some traditions of empathy research, such as the phenomenological school of Max Scheler, the relationship between empathy and some types of vicarious experience was also explored. See Agosta (2014).

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