Anchoring Empathy in Receptivity[1]

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Abstract

In one sense of the term, empathy refers to the act of sharing in another person's experience of and perspective on the world. According to simulation accounts of empathy, we achieve this by replicating the other's mind in our imagination. We explore a form of empathy, empathic perspective-taking, that is not adequately captured by existing simulationist approaches. We begin by pointing out that we often achieve empathy (or share in another's perspective) by listening to the other person. This form of empathy, which we call "empathy through listening", involves four distinctive features: (i) the actual sharing of a perspective; (ii) dynamical unfolding; (iii) collaboration; and (iv) mutual transformation. Next, we consider the individual basis of empathy through listening. We argue that it requires an attitude of "receptivity" and elaborate on this elusive concept in terms of "epistemic respect". Finally, we consider whether this form of empathy can be adequately explained within the simulationist framework. We argue that simulationist approaches must be complemented by a receptivity-based conception of empathy— that is, a conception that envisions empathy not so much as an individual imaginative enterprise, but rather as a collaborative practice of engaging with the other while paying her due epistemic respect.

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[1] Hayakawa and Miyahara contributed equally to this work.

Keywords

Introduction

There are moments in life where we have a desperate need for empathy from others. In such moments, a lack of empathy has a severely negative impact; it can inflict further suffering on people who are already suffering, making them feel abandoned by and isolated from the rest of the human community. Thus, philosopher of illness, Havi Carel, who herself suffers from a rare lung disease writes: "There are many terrible things about illness; the lack of empathy hurts the most" (Carel 2013, p. 45). But this does not happen only in the context of illness. Consider the survivors of a natural disaster, the victims of a crime, refugees, unemployed people, poor families living in an affluent neighbourhood, and others in similar circumstances. They all suffer not only from the direct cause of their predicament but also from a lack of empathy from others.

This suggests that empathy has an important social function: it serves to fulfil other people's need for empathy. In this paper, we explore the nature of empathy by asking how exactly we carry this out. The simulationist account of empathy, which is arguably the standard account in the current literature, holds that empathy consists of mental simulation. We argue, however, that this is not always the case and, in particular, that it does not obtain for some cases of empathy undertaken in response to another's need for empathy.

We begin by outlining the simulationist account and showing that it makes it difficult to understand the possibility of empathizing with those with whom we have little in common. We think that this is morally discouraging because such people are often in desperate need of empathy (§1). Next, we show how this kind of empathy is sometimes carried out by means of attentive listening. We suggest that empathy mediated by listening has four unique features: (i) it involves an actual sharing of a perspective; (ii) it unfolds dynamically over time; (iii) it occurs through a collaborative practice; and (iv) it is a reciprocal process involving self-transformation in both the empathizing and the empathized agents (§2). We then consider what individual qualities form the basis of this form of empathy. We argue that it requires an attitude of *receptivity* and elaborate on this concept in terms of *epistemic respect* (§3). Finally, we consider whether this form of empathy—empathy in response to another's need for empathy, achieved through listening—

challenges simulationism by showing that not all cases of empathy consist of simulation. We address three possible objections to this contention and show that this form of empathy is indeed best explained in non-simulationist terms (§4).

1. Empathy and simulation

1.1   Simulation accounts of empathy

Empathy refers to several different but closely related phenomena described in a range of philosophical and adjacent disciplines, including philosophy of mind, psychology, cognitive neuroscience, ethics, and aesthetics (Coplan & Goldie 2011; Lanzoni 2018; Maibom 2020). Accordingly, let us start by specifying the phenomenon with which we are concerned in this paper. Roughly speaking, we regard empathy as the activity of sharing in other people's experiences of and perspectives on the world. Clarifying exactly what this means will be the central task of the following discussion, but the basic idea can be conveyed by way of the following example:

> *Monica*. Monica is the mother of a 9 month-old infant. She is a paradigmatic extrovert, finding it immensely pleasurable and energizing to be with people. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, she has been confined to her apartment for the last few months. The only adult she has conversed over this period has been her partner Paul, who has also been working from home. However, because Monica is on parental leave and he is not, he has largely ignored his child-care responsibilities, or so it seems to his partner.

This scenario prompts several possible responses. First, you might infer from the above description that Monica is likely to be quite stressed, frustrated with her partner, and perhaps generally depressed. In this case, you approach the situation as a detached bystander and understand her state of mind without being personally involved in it in any significant sense. Many call this form of interpersonal understanding *cognitive empathy*, but this is not what we mean by empathy here. Second, you might feel sorry for Monica because you recognize her frustration, but without attending to its origins. You are emotionally concerned with Monica's state of mind, but pay no heed to how the world looks from her perspective. An emotional concern like this is also sometimes regarded as a type of empathy (Batson 2019; Hoffman 2000); but again, this is not how we use the term in this paper. In a third type of response, you might feel sorry for

Monica by *sharing* in her way of *experiencing the world,* that is, by seeing the situation in question as distressing, frustrating, and depressing. Here, your response is not just a reaction to Monica's frustration, but is mediated by your understanding of what it must be like for her to be in this predicament; you are personally involved in Monica's situation in a stronger sense of the word.

The latter two responses are sometimes distinguished as sympathy and empathy, respectively. According to Lori Gruen, for example, "sympathy for another is felt from the outside, the third-person perspective. I can feel sympathy for another's plight, even pity, but remain rather removed from that plight" (Gruen 2014, p. 44). By contrast, she continues, "the goal [of empathy] is to take in as much about another's situation and perspectives as possible" (p. 45). Similarly, Susan Lanzoni writes, "sympathy is usually defined as a distanced feeling of pity for another, whereas empathy is a deeper-going ability to engage with a variety of feelings and to inhabit, sometimes even bodily, the other's perspective" (Lanzoni 2018, pp. 5–6). In this paper, we understand empathy in terms of this third and final response—which might be more elaborately termed "empathic perspective-taking". It is centrally characterized by the activity of sharing another's experience and perspective in an engaged manner. We will simply refer to this as "empathy" from now on.

It is widely thought that this type of empathy consists in a form of mental simulation, that is, the act of reproducing in the imagination a mental state that resembles another's (e.g., Coplan 2011; Decety and Jackson 2004; Goldman 2011; Ravenscroft 1998; Stueber 2010; Vignemont and Singer 2006). On this simulationist view, we share empathically in another's experience and perspective by imagining what things would be like from their standpoint. According to Amy Coplan, for example:

> Empathy is never fully unmediated since it requires perspective-taking. Roughly, perspective-taking is an imaginative process through which one constructs another person's subjective experience by simulating the experience of being in the other's situation […] [A] person represents the other's situation from the other person's point of view and thus attempts to simulate the target individual's experiences as though she were the target individual. Thus I imagine that I am you in your situation, which is to say I attempt to simulate your experience from your point of view. (Coplan 2011, pp. 9–10)

Alvin Goldman also adopts a simulationist conception of empathy and regards it as

centrally involving "imaginative construction" (Goldman 2011, p. 43).[2]

> When empathizing with another, you often reflect on that person's situation, construct in imagination how things are (were, or will be) playing out for him, and imagine how you would feel if you were in his shoes. This process of perspective taking is the stuff of which most conscious empathizing, at any rate, is made. (Goldman 2011, p. 36)

Like Coplan, Goldman emphasizes that these refined experiences of empathy, which "provide a fine-grained sharing of states" with another person (Goldman 2011, p. 37), require an imaginative activity that reproduces mental states similar to those of the other person.

Similarly, Heidi Maibom distinguishes a type of empathy involving "personal involvement" from other forms of empathy and characterizes it in terms of perspective-taking and simulation.

> The type of understanding […] that does involve a personal element is more often called 'perspective taking' (in psychology) or 'simulation' (in philosophy). Perspective taking, or simulation, describes the action of imagining being in another person's situation. Once placed there, the perspective taker considers what the other person would think, feel, or do, and then, returning to her own perspective, describes these thoughts, feelings, or intentions to her. (Maibom 2020, p. 10)

It is thus standard in the literature to account for the activity of sharing empathically in another's perspective in terms of mental simulation.

1.2 A concern about simulation accounts

However, simulationist accounts of empathy seem to have a limitation, which is not properly acknowledged in the existing literature. Such accounts suggest that empathy is only possible between agents who already have a significant amount in common—or at least, they do not explain how it is possible to empathize with people when there is little common background. Simulationist theories of empathy thus seem unsuited to account for morally significant cases where we empathize with these people in response to their need for empathy.

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[2] Goldman also includes emotional contagion in the category of empathy, but our interest here is in his account of what he calls a more sophisticated form of empathy that involves simulative perspective-taking (Goldman 2011, pp. 33–36).

To see this, let us begin by showing that the simulation view limits the scope of empathy. Minds do not always operate in the same way, and there are individual differences in people's psychology. If this is not explicitly acknowledged in our attempts to empathize with another agent, we are likely to merely imagine what it would be like *for ourselves* to be in the other's situation, which is known as "self-oriented perspective-taking" (Coplan 2011a, p. 9; see also Goldie 2011). To share in another's perspective, however, we need to imagine what it is like *for them* to be in their situation, an activity the same authors call "other-oriented perspective-taking" (Coplan 2011a, p. 13) or "empathic perspective-shifting" (Goldie 2011, p. 304). This requires that mental simulation be informed by background knowledge of the other agent (Coplan 2011a, p. 13). To properly imagine how another sees a situation, we must be somewhat acquainted in advance with that person's knowledge, character, preferences, and experiences, among other things. Suppose you are out for a walk with your child and encounter a large raven in the park. To correctly replicate how the child is experiencing the situation, you need to imagine her state of mind by drawing on your background knowledge about her. Only by knowing that she had a traumatic experience with a raven in the past, for example, would you be able to imaginatively replicate her mental state.

A problem seems to arise, however, when we notice that we are often called to empathize with people who are thrown into a predicament sufficiently severe or unusual as to undermine or detach them from their background familiarity with the "normal" shared world. For example, Matthew Ratcliffe discusses the possibility of empathy with persons suffering from severe depression. These people often describe an overwhelming sense of alienation from the things and people around them, and they even describe partners and friends as remote and inaccessible (Ratcliffe 2017; Styron 1992). As a patient of severe depression, William Styron states that such an experience "is quite *unimaginable* to those who have not suffered it" (1992, p. 33, emphasis added). Healthy people living comfortably in what they consider to be a shared world, he writes, cannot "imagine a form of torment so alien to everyday life" (1992, p. 17). Thus, as Ratcliffe argues, if empathy consists of mental simulation that can be successfully carried out only against the presence of a shared background, then we must say that it is an almost impossible affair for many of us who have never suffered from similar kinds of illnesses to have empathy with these patients. Notice that a sense of isolation from a common (so-called) "normal" world is not limited to those with severe depression or other grave illnesses, but is more or less common to those in severe or unusual predicaments, and thus far removed from the way "normal" people live everyday life.

This seems problematic. It means that the simulation account obscures the possibility of responding to the pressing needs for empathy felt by people who are markedly different from us or who have sufficiently unusual problems. People have a desperate need for empathy especially when they face predicaments that are not readily shared by other people, such as suffering from a rare disease, being a victim of a crime, etc. (Carel 2013). Simulation accounts, however, cannot make sense of how this desperate need for empathy can be met by others precisely insofar as they hold that successful empathy involves accurate mental simulation based on a common background.

One might even say this also has a morally discouraging consequence. In general, it seems morally discouraging to have to leave someone to suffer from having her fundamental needs unfulfilled. Such fundamental needs do not only consist of basic needs for maintaining a biological life (e.g., food and shelter), but also needs pertaining to the possibility of living a socially healthy life, including the need for empathy. A lack of empathy can have a destructive effect on our social well-being. Many empirical studies indicate that when our need for empathy is adequately satisfied, we tend to develop a healthy sense of self-worth and self-respect, which forms a fundamental part of our social existence (Bowlby 1988; Fonagy et al. 2004; Halpern 2001; Howe 2011; Howe 2013). On the contrary, a continued lack of empathy substantially undermines our well-being by causing an entrenched feeling of social rejection (Bowlby 1988, Cassidy and Shaver 2008; Fonagy et al. 2004; Howe 2011). This means that empathy is not only a cognitive tool essential for understanding other minds but that it is also a morally significant form of action. If the simulation account of empathy is true, however, it seems that we are rarely able to respond adequately to other people's need for empathy when it is most desperate because, in such cases, we tend to lack the common background that is necessary for running an accurate simulation.[3]

What are the lessons here? It might be said that this presents a simple, cold truth about how the world operates. We might conclude that, while the world would certainly be a better place if we were able to reduce the suffering caused by a lack of empathy, the nature of empathy itself prevents us from achieving this. However, we can also regard it as an idiosyncratic consequence

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[3] This is not supposed to be a conclusive argument against simulationism. In the rest of the paper, we argue for the possibility of responding to another's need for empathy without drawing on mental simulation. However, this does not in itself exclude the possibility of doing so by means of mental simulation. Yet, since our interest here lies in specifying the non-simulationist approach, we will not examine the possibility and plausibility of developing a simulationist approach to the issue in this paper—except that, in section 4, we will consider and refute the possibility of accommodating our proposal in the simulationist framework.

of existing simulation theories of empathy. In this case, it is only because these theories conceive of perspective-taking in terms of accurate mental simulation that there appears to be little that we can do regarding this lack of empathy. In fact, if we turn to the actual practice of empathic perspective-taking, it seems that the dire need for empathy is at times fulfilled, even in the absence of substantial background familiarity (Carel 2016; Halpern 2001; Ratcliffe 2017).

2. Empathy through listening

Simulation accounts of empathy hold that empathic perspective-taking consists of mental simulation. But do all cases of empathic perspective-taking consist of mental simulation? We think not.[4] In order to show this, we shall now introduce a case of empathy that occurs in response to another's need for empathy, that is, a case of empathy which we described in the last section as constituting a morally significant action in itself. Consider the following vignette:

> *Pat and Nate*. Pat was admitted to the hospital weeks ago due to an unexpected heart attack, but her recent examination has fortunately yielded excellent results. Her assigned nurse Nate tells her that she can begin rehabilitation very soon. Unexpectedly, however, Pat shows no interest or any sign of excitement. Worried by her response, Nate asks her if there is anything wrong or if she wants to share her concerns with him. Touched by his warmth, Pat feels able to talk about her experiences and feelings. She slowly starts to tell him of her fear and anxiety regarding the possibility of having another heart attack. Because of these concerns, the prospect of leaving the hospital soon does not make her feel much better. She is also quietly upset by and angry about the attitude of her doctor, David, who has only provided her with cold medical explanations of her condition, without showing the slightest interest in her personal concerns. Whenever she tries to share her feelings and worries with him, he adopts an annoyed expression and discourages her from discussing them. Although she is on a steady path to recovery, she has not been happy at the hospital. Before hearing this, Nate thought that Pat would be excited to start her rehabilitation. Now he understands

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[4] For a similar view, see Ratcliffe (2017). Ratcliffe says that experiencing the breakdown of simulation is central to understanding the nature of empathy with persons suffering from severe psychiatric illness. In his view, this breakdown makes us realize that the world as they experience it is radically different from the world as we experience it (2017, p. 197). We highlight the role of receptivity to show how we can empathize with another person without mental simulation.

that she sees the situation completely differently and promises her that he will talk to her doctor and do what he can to rectify the situation. However, he also asks her again if she would nevertheless consider joining the rehabilitation program soon. Pat is not entirely satisfied and remains somewhat frustrated and resentful, but she admits that he has a point and agrees to start the program.

This case suggests the possibility of accomplishing the morally significant type of empathy described above—that is, an empathy made in response to another's need for empathy, despite a marked difference in background—by means of attentive listening: Nate becomes able to share Pat's perspective precisely by prompting her to talk about her experiences and listening attentively to her story. In the following, we draw on this case to identify four key features of this form of empathy. For the sake of clarity, each feature is presented in contrast with a typical characteristic of the simulation framework. But an in-depth assessment of whether this presents a genuine challenge to simulationism, showing that not all cases of empathy consist of mental simulation, will be conducted later on (§4).

(i) Empathy as actually sharing a perspective
In the simulationist framework, empathy involves the generation of matching internal states through mental simulation, and successful empathy requires a match between a mental state generated in imagination and the mental state that constitutes the other's perspective. Simulated mental states are products of imagination and so function "'off-line', insofar as they do not, and are not supposed to, lead to overt action" (Feagin 2011, p. 154).[5] However, in the present case, sharing empathically in another's perspective can be a matter of *literally* developing a common understanding of the aspects of the situation that matter the most to Pat. In other words, it goes beyond the *imaginative* construction that takes place within the empathizer's mind: Nate's newly formed view about the situation is a real, rather than a "pretend" one. Nate *actually* comes to see Pat's situation differently by listening to what she has to say about it. Initially, he only saw her as another heart attack patient on a steady path toward recovery, but then, listening to her story, he learns—rather than just imagines—that much more was going on in her life. He genuinely acknowledges that Pat's doctor has been failing to meet her needs for a long time, and that recovery from her heart attack is not her ultimate goal (as it has been for her medical team) because she needs to adapt to a new life after being discharged from hospital. Empathy is here

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[5] However, see Maibom 2007 for a contrary view.

not so much a matter of sharing another's state of mind in *imagination* as of *actually* sharing the other's perspective on the relevant aspects of the situation.

(ii) Empathy as unfolding dynamically over time

The simulationist framework suggests that empathy is a static phenomenon. Proponents of the framework do not explicitly characterize it in this way, but the way they describe the phenomenon strongly indicates that empathy is a time-sliced event or an "episodic achievement" (Ratcliffe 2017, p. 199), which obtains at the moment your internal state matches another's in mental simulation (see e.g., Goldie 2011; Goldman 2011; Guo 2017; Matravers 2017).

The case described, however, shows that, in practice, empathy is a dynamic phenomenon that emerges and evolves over time (Hayakawa 2016; Maibom 2017; Ratcliffe 2017). Nate's empathy with Pat begins to take shape when he asks about her experience and offers to listen to her story. However, we seem only to be able to say this in retrospect, recognizing the extent to which they later attain a shared understanding of the situation through the ensuing exchange. In the beginning, their budding rapport was precarious: if, for example, Nate had to quickly leave the scene for some reason before Pat finished speaking, she would likely not consider him to have expressed empathy for her. Furthermore, even at the end of the vignette, much more remains for Nate to understand about Pat's view of the situation. Insofar as his empathy for Pat is genuine, he will likely *continue* listening to her to get a better sense of her experience. That is, in this case, empathy is not a time-sliced event but a constant work in progress, where there is always more to be shared.

(iii) Empathy as a collaborative practice

The simulationist framework tends to be individualistic and regard perspective taking via mental simulation as an individual enterprise, sustained exclusively by internal psychological processes––that is, as an "achievement by a single individual" (Ratcliffe 2017, p. 199). For example, Coplan holds that the entire process of empathic perspective-taking "must be initiated by the agent and generated from *within*" (2011b, p. 59, emphasis added). In the present case, however, Nate succeeds in sharing Pat's perspective by forming a *collaboration* with Pat, one that is sustained through his readiness to listen. Furthermore, Nate can share in her perspective not only because he first offers to listen to her story but also because Pat responds cooperatively with a sincere attempt to articulate her perspective. That is, the possibility of listening partly depends upon the other's willingness to exercise epistemic agency. The practice of empathy is thus not an individual

enterprise but rather a collaborative one, sustained by a temporally extended engagement between the empathizing and empathized agents. In this light, we see that empathy, as characterized in the simulation framework, is overly self-reliant and can only take us so far in terms of understanding another's perspective.

(iv) Empathy as mutual transformation

The simulation framework typically envisions the empathized other as a "target" whose subjective perspective or mental state functions only as the success condition for the empathizer's attempt to perform empathic perspective-taking (e.g., Coplan 2011a, p. 10; Goldman 2011, pp. 37–8 Matravers 2014, chap. 3; Ravenscroft 1998). This picture, however, does not adequately capture the fact that empathy requires collaboration. Furthermore, in this example, both Nate and Pat adjust how they see the situation through their interaction. Initially, Pat feels an overarching frustration, combined with overwhelming fear and anxiety regarding the uncertainty of her future. However, after sharing her story with Nate, she comes to understand more clearly that her frustration was caused specifically by way the doctor has treated her, and she sees that not everyone in the hospital is equally uninterested. Touched by Nate's warmth, she recognizes him as genuinely respectful and is convinced that she should consider beginning rehabilitation soon. In empathy, the empathized agent does not always passively wait for the empathizing agent to come to share her perspective. Rather, she can also actively transform her understanding of the world, bringing it to meet that of the person attempting to empathize with her. In short, empathy is not always a one-way process where one agent tries to share in another's perspective—there are also *reciprocal* cases that involve a mutual transformation of perspectives.

In summary, the above case indicates that it is possible to respond to another's need for empathy by performing a form of empathy that is mediated by the act of listening and exhibits the following four key features: (i) it involves a genuine, rather than an imagined, sharing of a common perspective between the self and the other; (ii) it develops dynamically over time; (iii) it requires the other's collaboration in the attempt to share a perspective; and (iv) it involves a transformation of perspective on the part of the 'target' of empathy. We contend that this case challenges the simulation framework by showing that not all cases of empathy involve mental simulation.[6] We will consider objections to this contention later in section 4. Before that, in the

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[6] We are not denying that there are cases in which mental simulation and listening combine to achieve this form of empathy. The current case shows, however, that mental simulation is not always necessary to empathize with others through listening.

next section, we elaborate on our alternative proposal, examining the individual basis of empathy, in light of the analysis presented above.

3. Anchoring empathy in receptivity

We have seen that empathy can be a collaborative process, but there are, of course, variations in individual's capacities for empathy. This raises the question of the individual basis of empathy. Specifically, what are the individual qualities that differentiate those who are good at sharing empathically in another's perspective from those who are not? The simulationist framework and our account of empathy have very different implications for this issue. In the former, empathy requires the skilful deployment of mental simulation. The latter, however, indicates that empathy requires a receptivity toward others and their perspectives. This section elucidates what this involves. We begin by specifying the nature of receptivity and then spell out its contribution to empathy.

3.1 Receptivity

We have examined a case of empathy in which the act of listening, rather than mental simulation, seemed to play a key role in establishing a shared perspective between the agents. We saw Nate share in Pat's perspective by listening to what she had to say about her experience and transforming his own perspective accordingly. The individual basis of empathy can thus be explored by investigating what individual qualities are necessary for one person to be able to listen attentively to another and share in her perspective in this way.

Receptivity provides an intuitive answer to this question. The importance of receptivity for empathy was first proposed in the contemporary literature by Nel Noddings. She writes that in empathy: 'I do not project; I *receive the other into myself*, and I see and feel with the other' (Noddings 1984, p. 30).[7] When a baby cries, for example, the parents immediately attend to the baby's perception that something is wrong. They empathically share in the baby's perspective without examining its objective validity, without looking to see whether there really is something

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[7] To avoid the standard association of empathy with the act of simulating another's mental state, Noddings (1984) proposes to call the relevant phenomenon 'feeling with'—although she uses the term "projection" rather than "simulation" in making this point. This clearly refers to the experience of sharing in another's perspective, the phenomenon of our current interest. In fact, she also at times describes it as a form of empathy, such as when she writes that 'the sort of empathy we are discussing […] receives the other' (p. 31).

wrong (p. 31). Intuitively, this kind of receptivity to the other is also fundamental to being an empathic listener. As Michael Slote (2013) emphasizes, it keeps you from being dismissive of the other's view or opinion of her experience simply because it disagrees with your own perspective on the situation.

However, further analysis is necessary if we are to utilize this concept in the current context. It seems quite intuitive to say that empathic listening requires that we forego a "thinking mode" or "analytic-objective mode" (Noddings 1984, p. 34) of consciousness, characterized by "rational objectivity" (p. 33), and instead adopt a receptive mode of engagement with the other. However, these are all negative characterizations, that is, they indicate what a receptive attitude is *not*. What does it mean to be receptive to others, when expressed in positive terms? We pursue this question by examining attitudes toward others that are engaged in and sustain empathic listening.

What kind of attitude is required for empathic listening? To begin with, it is necessary to take the other's views seriously. Unless you take that other as someone worth listening to, you will surely fail to listen to them carefully. This is precisely how the doctor has failed to empathize with Pat in our case. He has dismissed her testimony and other expressions of her experience (such as her facial expressions) because they had no epistemic value to him, because his epistemic interest is confined to the biomedical context of treating her heart attack. In more abstract terms, this means that empathic listening requires the empathizer to pay due *epistemic respect* to the other. The empathizer must treat the other's testimony and expressions as bearing epistemic significance, as opportunities to learn more about the experience and perspective of the other. A brief reflection on empathic listening thus suggests that receptivity centrally involves an attitude of epistemic respect toward the other (Magrì 2019; Slote 2007).[8]

In the earlier case, for example, Nate can listen attentively to Pat only because he assumes her to have important insights about aspects of her situation that are not immediately evident to him. By the same token, he is open to the possibility that his own take on the situation is severely limited or even distorted, unbeknown to him. Noticing that Pat perceives her situation differently than he does, he is thus inclined to explore her alternative perspective and determine its import for him. Without epistemic respect, he might have unreasonably insisted on projecting his own understanding of her situation onto her experience. Instead, he seeks to learn more about

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[8] The connection between empathy and respect was indicated by Slote (2007, p. 58). In his discussion of the receptive dimension of empathy in his later work (2013), the idea of respect recedes into the background. The ways in which epistemic respect makes practices of empathy dynamic and collaborative are not explored by either Slote (2007; 2013) or Magrì (2019).

what has happened in the hospital and its meaning for her, which results in the establishment of a shared perspective.

Receptivity as such, however, does not require taking the other's speech act as a direct expression of truth about the world. This was how Nate treated Pat and her testimony. He listens to her precisely because he sincerely believes that she likely knows something about the situation in the hospital that he has been unaware of. But this presumption is not a necessity. We can epistemically respect and be receptive to another's perspective even while having doubts about her reasonableness and objectivity. For example, we may think that she is *obsessed* with a certain idea or that her opinions are *biased* (Slote 2013).[9] As an illustration of this type of situation, consider the following case, this time taken from a business context.

> *Lisa and Denis.* Lisa is the project manager on a product development team creating a new model of a washing machine. She believes that the team should prioritize product functionality above all, but her colleague Denis insists that they should put more focus on design. In the end, Lisa does not change her original plan, but she carefully avoids imposing her opinion on Denis in a one-sided way. She spends time talking with him so that she can fully understand his point of view. Listening to his story, she realises that Denis is preoccupied with design partly because of a history of miscommunication with function-minded members of the team other than her. Denis himself never frames his point this way, but it dawns on Lisa that he has been so insistent on his position not only because he believes in its intrinsic value but also because the team hardly ever listens to his opinions. Through her engagement with Denis, Lisa learns about a communication problem that has been present in the team all the while. At the same time, after being listened to, Denis becomes aware that he is being taken seriously, which in turn, makes him less defensive and more open to Lisa's and his other colleagues' alternative take on the project.

Here, Lisa remains fully aware that Denis is obsessed with details of the product design and that his opinion is seriously biased in that regard. However, she listens carefully to him and comes to share his opinion about a problematic aspect of the situation, namely, a deep-rooted

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[9] This entails that receptivity is not a question of blind agreement with the other. Our argument here benefits from Slote's (2013) distinction between receptivity and full agreement (p. 42). In our view, however, empathic receptivity must be characterized by epistemic respect not only toward those who disagree with you, but also toward those who, you believe, are deeply biased.

communication problem, which has been affecting his experience and the work of the team generally. This is only possible because Lisa considers Denis to be an intelligible agent despite his apparent unreasonableness. She refrains from rejecting his view as nonsense, assuming instead that it makes sense as an indirect expression of certain unspoken aspects of his experience. Accordingly, instead of dismissing him, she accepts his perspective and gains a new understanding of tacit dimensions of his experience that he had not articulated and may not have himself been aware of. In sum, it is possible to be epistemically respectful of others, not necessarily by assuming that the other's opinion reveals some truth about the situation (as Nate did in the earlier case) but rather by being committed to making sense of it in terms of an unspoken or tacit background and seeing whether there is anything that can be learned from it.

The hallmark of receptivity is thus the epistemological attitude of holding others in due epistemic respect. It is also important here that this involves a *self-referential attitude* of being prepared to transform our own epistemic perspective on the world, which forms the basis of our practical engagement with it, in light of what we might learn. If Lisa listens to Denis's story but refuses to update her own perspective accordingly, we cannot say that she is being epistemically respectful of and receptive to Denis's perspective. The same would apply if Nate recognizes that Pat is feeling mistreated by the hospital but nonetheless takes the status quo for granted, refusing to call his initial understanding into question. Without a self-referential attitude, listening carefully to another's story cannot lead to the establishment of a shared perspective. If receptivity is to anchor empathy, this self-referential attitude is indispensable.

In other words, receptivity involves both an epistemological and an existential attitude to expose yourself to another agent and her perspective on the world. To genuinely respect the other's epistemic significance, you must certainly never dismiss her testimony and non-verbal expressions as empty, but this is far from sufficient. You must also be prepared to confront and transform the epistemic basis of your own actions in response to what you learn from the other. When we respond to another's need for empathy by listening attentively to her, we are engaged in a form of empathy anchored in this ability to interact with the other in this mutually transformative way. This ability is, in turn, grounded in an epistemological-cum-existential attitude characterized by a simultaneous concern with the other and the self.

3.2 How receptivity enables empathy

Receptivity, as we suggest, is an epistemically respectful attitude that concerns the other and the self in complementary ways. We claim that this forms the individual basis of the collaborative

form of empathy mediated by the act of listening. How exactly, then, does receptivity make this form of empathy possible? We can address this question by identifying what happens in becoming receptive to other agents, that is, examining the downstream effects of a receptive attitude on the collaborative process of building an interpersonally shared perspective.

First, a receptive attitude toward another makes us more open to obtaining new insights from that other. This is an almost trivial observation because, as seen above, the ability to acknowledge other people's epistemic significance virtually entails epistemic humility, that is, the ability to acknowledge the limitations of our own view of the situation (Whitcomb et al. 2017). Receptive agents are thus open to updating their own perspectives on the world in light of the other's testimony and other expressions of her view. Concretely, this epistemological attitude can manifest in the form of attentive listening. Epistemic humility makes receptive agents more inclined to advance their understanding of a situation by acknowledging what the other has to say about it, rather than by drawing only on their own cognitive resources. Here, a receptive attitude makes it possible for empathizing agents to transform their perspective so that it aligns better with how the other sees things.

Second, the receptive attitude of the empathizing agent contributes to empathy by affecting the empathized agent. Acknowledging another's epistemic significance and showing a genuine interest in listening to her story grants her a safe and secure environment to speak about her experiences (Howe 2013). Once this receptivity is recognized, the other becomes able to explore and express her perspective without the fear of being dismissed or having its significance denied. This increases the chance that she actually expresses her views, especially if she already needed to share them with others and provides the empathizing agent with an opportunity to learn how the other sees the situation and to update his own understanding of it accordingly. What could be a better way to learn about the other's perspective than by having her express it to you directly? The receptive attitude can thus facilitate the path toward the development of an empathically shared perspective by motivating the other to share her story with the empathizing agent.

Third, the receptive attitude of the empathizing agent can induce a similarly receptive attitude on the part of the empathized agent. It might seem that the sole purpose of expressing our perspective to another is to convey relevant information to her. However, one distinctive effect of doing so, which tends to be underappreciated, is that it enables us to objectify and distance ourselves from our own perspective as it is being expressed. In the earlier example, until Pat speaks about her resentment of the doctor, she was entirely dominated by it, such that, even if she knew at some level that there was little point in holding on to it, it was hardly possible for her to

let it go. Once she articulates it for another, it becomes easier for her to treat it as just one perspective on the situation and not one that is indispensable for her. She becomes more open to acknowledging the limitations or one-sidedness of her understanding of the situation and to the prospect of updating her ideas in light of the other's perspective. In other words, in response to the other's receptive engagement with her, she also becomes receptive to the other. This allows both agents to transform their understanding of the situation to align themselves better with each other. Once a mutually receptive relationship of this type emerges, the process of building a shared perspective accelerates. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the case of Lisa and Denis. A receptive attitude can thus ground empathy by inducing a 'chain reaction' of receptivity that propels interpersonal dynamics toward the establishment of a shared perspective.

4. Simulationist objections and replies

We have explored cases of empathy or more specifically empathic perspective-taking mediated by attentive listening and argued that they involve a collaborative process sustained by the empathic agent's attitude of receptivity or epistemic respect. It is worth noting here that we did not need to introduce the concept of mental simulation to explicate these cases of empathy. These cases thus suggest that, *pace* simulationism about empathy, not all cases of empathic perspective-taking consist of mental simulation.

In this section, we examine the plausibility of this claim by considering possible objections that can be raised by defenders of the simulationist framework. The first objection holds that simulation accounts can squarely accommodate the role of listening in empathy (§4.1). The second objection denies that what we describe as "empathy mediated by the act of listening" is properly considered a form of empathy at all (§4.2). The third objection contests the novelty of our proposal, contending that the importance of receptivity in empathy is already anticipated in some simulation accounts, albeit in different terms (§4.3).

4.1 Can simulationism explain the role of listening in empathy?

When presented with cases of empathy mediated by listening, simulationists might account for the role of listening in the following way: listening to the other is certainly useful for empathy, but this is precisely because it helps the listener achieve an "other-oriented perspective-taking" (§1). That is, it enables the empathizer to orient themselves to the differences between them and the other and to adjust their mental simulation accordingly. In other words, it might seem possible for

simulationists to acknowledge the role of listening without giving up their theoretical framework by taking it to be conducive to the accomplishment of mental simulation. On this account, listening as such only plays an auxiliary role: imaginative construction via mental simulation is still central to empathy or the experience of sharing in another's perspective.

This response misunderstands the point of our discussion. Our point is that there is a *transformative* form of empathy, in which sharing another's perspective is not so much a matter of reconstructing the other's state of mind in imagination, but rather of actually transforming yourself to generate a shared situation with her. The act of listening often plays a central role in mediating this form of empathy. By listening to Pat's story, for example, Nate did not just acquire more information about her internal state, which was then used to produce an accurate mental simulation. Rather, he acquired more information about the surrounding situation, which was then used to update or transform his relation to the world, so that it aligned better with Pat's. Simulation accounts can certainly grant some empathic role to listening if they wish. By limiting the role of listening to the facilitation of simulational perspective-taking, however, they fail to account for the transformative form of empathy, in which the act of listening amounts to a transformative experience.

4.2 Should "empathy" be reserved for perspective-taking via mental simulation?

Simulationists might respond that we should reserve the concept of empathy only for what they call empathy, namely, the act of reconstructing another's perspective on the world in imagination. Thus, what we have been describing as empathy would be seen as a different phenomenon entirely and not directly relevant to theories of empathy.

The problem with this rejoinder is that the plausibility of the simulationist definition is far from evident. Consider a modified scenario for Nate and Pat. Suppose Nate imagines how Pat is seeing the situation differently from him by listening carefully to her story but refuses to incorporate any aspect of it into his own perspective. For example, he can quite adequately imagine her frustration with the doctor's dismissive attitude but take this to be a merely subjective feeling. He can re-enact this feeling in his imagination, but he thinks of it as nothing more than a disproportionate response to the situation. The doctor may well not have been as considerate as he could have, but Nate might think that Pat is overreacting; after all, she would do better to focus on the future rather than linger on the past, about which she can do nothing. Irritated by this thought, he might urge her to join the rehabilitation program immediately. In this modified

scenario, Nate quite obviously fails to have empathy and share a perspective on the world with Pat. However, if empathy consisted only in perspective-taking based on mental simulation, Nate would count in this case as having genuine empathy with Pat.

By contrast, in our conception, empathy is based on receptivity and requires that we treat the other's expressions and testimony as epistemically significant, as something that must be taken seriously as we form our own perspective. This is precisely what is lacking in Nate's actions in the modified scenario above: he succeeds in generating a mental simulation of Pat's perspective, but he does not acknowledge its epistemic significance. By regarding her descriptions of her experience as nothing more than expressions of subjective feelings, he fails to take her frustration seriously as revealing some truth about the situation. On our account, therefore, in this modified scenario Nate is unreceptive to (or epistemically disrespectful of) Pat and fails to respond adequately to her need for empathy precisely for this reason.

This doesn't mean that empathy never involves mental simulation. It only shows that not all cases of the former involve the latter. However, this moderate point suffices to challenge the plausibility of defining empathy in terms of mental simulation.

4.3 Does simulationism already imply an account of receptivity?

Simulationists might also challenge the novelty of our proposal. Our discussion suggests that simulationist accounts overlook the importance of receptivity in empathy. Nevertheless, it might be objected that simulationists have already taken account of what we call receptivity in their own terms. For example, Coplan (2011a, b) contends that empathy "requires (i) mental flexibility and (ii) relies on regulatory mechanisms to modulate our level of affective arousal and suppress our own perspectives" (Coplan 2011b, p. 58, numbers added). The role of mental flexibility here is to put aside or 'quarantine' your own desires, beliefs, commitments, and values to avoid imposing them on others (see also Goldman 2011; Matravers 2017; Stueber 2006). Modulating your affective or emotional arousal is necessary because emotional overarousal, caused, for example, by another's overwhelming fear, can force you to focus exclusively on your own experience and so keep you from empathically sharing in the other's feelings and thoughts.

It might seem that these concepts (i.e., mental flexibility and emotional regulation) already imply what we have been elaborating in terms of receptivity. We characterized receptivity as an attitude of acknowledging the epistemic significance of the other's perspective on the world (§3.1). This allows us, for example, to listen attentively to another's description of her experience without imposing our own thoughts and commitments on her. As we just saw, however, Coplan's

simulationist account holds that mental flexibility and emotional regulation are crucial for empathy precisely because they prevent us from being insensitive to the other's perspective in this way. Accordingly, you might argue that what we called receptivity only plays the role that mental flexibility and emotional regulation are posited to play in the simulationist framework. In that case, our claim that there is a form of empathy that requires receptivity reduces to the claim that there is a form of empathy that requires mental flexibility and emotional regulation. It then seems to follow, contrary to our contention, that the simulationist framework is well-equipped to account for the form of empathy made possible by receptivity.

However, this objection underappreciates the role of receptivity in empathy in its most significant respects. On our account, receptivity makes a triple contribution to empathy: (i) it enables us to transform our perspective on the world to align it better with that of the other; (ii) it provides the other with a safe and secure environment to share her experience with us; and (iii) it further enables this other to also transform her perspective so as to make it even more easily shared with us (§3.2). In short, there are cases in which receptivity contributes to empathy by facilitating a mutual transformation of initially discrete perspectives. Receptivity thus sustains a collaborative form of empathy in which the other is no longer treated as a passive target who simply awaits the arrival of empathy as its pure recipient. Rather, the other is involved in the process as an active participant and both parties participate in a joint effort to build a shared perspective on the world. By contrast, in the simulation framework, mental flexibility and emotional regulation serve empathy by enabling us to form an accurate mental simulation of the other's mind, where the other is precisely dealt with as a passive "target" in the sense described above. Accordingly, the role attributed to receptivity in our account goes far beyond that attributed to mental flexibility and emotional regulation in simulationism. This shows that what we have explicated in terms of receptivity is by no means already implied in simulation accounts that draw on mental flexibility and emotional regulation.

5. Conclusion

Simulationists hold that empathy consists of mental simulation. This account seems unsuited to explain the possibility of what we identify as a morally significant class of empathy: namely, the activity of empathizing with someone suffering from a desperate need for empathy due to being in an unusual predicament that is not readily shared by other members of the community (§1). You might insist that this shows the limit of empathy. But we argued against this diagnosis by

showing that not all cases of empathy consist of mental simulation. Furthermore, we argued that we can fulfil another's need for empathy by engaging with the other in a collaborative process mediated by the act of attentive listening (§2). Moreover, we claimed that this collaborative form of empathy is not grounded in a skilful employment of imagination, but that it is anchored in the attitude of receptivity, that is, of having due epistemic respect for other people. In such cases, empathizers must be prepared to learn from and with the other and revise their understanding of the world in light of the other's words and expressions. This receptive attitude provides the other the safety and security needed to freely explore his or her own experiences and situation in a previously impossible way, which further facilitates the development of a shared perspective (§3). We then concluded by considering objections to our claim that this form of empathy shows that not all cases of empathy are adequately encompassed by simulationism (§4).

We do not claim that the concept of mental simulation has no role to play in theories of empathy. We have only indicated a limit to the simulationist approach, demonstrating a form of empathy, namely, empathy through listening, that is not adequately accounted for in simulationist terms. Thus, the arguments presented here are not intended as knock-down objections to simulationism about empathy. Our goal, rather, has been to offer a new approach to empathy that regards receptivity and epistemic respect as its key foundations and as necessary additions to future theories of empathy.

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