



Empathy, Motivating Reasons, and Morally Worthy Action

Elizabeth Ventham¹

Accepted: 2 November 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

Contemporary literature criticises a necessary link between empathy and actions that demonstrate genuine moral worth. If there is such a necessary link, many argue, it must come in the developmental stages of our moral capacities, rather than being found in the mental states that make up our motivating reasons. This paper goes against that trend, arguing that critics have not considered how wide-ranging the mental states are that make up a person's reasons. In particular, it argues that empathy can play a role in moral motivation when it is to some extent unconscious or it occurs far prior to the moral action itself.

Keywords Empathy · Moral Worth · Moral Psychology · Motivational Reasons

1 Introduction

Fortunately, we live in a world where people will sometimes not only act in a way that's good, but they'll do so with good moral motivation. They'll do the right thing for the right reasons, perhaps, or in a way that manifests the right kind of will. This paper is interested in the connection between this kind of good motivation (which I'll refer to as acting with *moral worth*) and empathy. It is interested in whether an agent needs to empathise in some way with the targets of their moral actions for those actions to manifest genuine moral worth.

Despite the interest, this paper doesn't give an explicit answer to this question. I don't know whether empathy is necessary for morally worthy action, or whether such actions are sometimes possible without the agent empathising at all. Rather, this paper hopes to earn its keep in two different ways. Firstly, it argues that existing work

✉ Elizabeth Ventham
Elizabeth.ventham@plus.ac.at; elizabethventham@gmail.com

¹ Department of Philosophy, University of Salzburg, Franziskanergasse 1, Salzburg 5020, Austria

on the topic fails to consider the best possible candidate for such a necessary relationship. The best possible candidate, I argue, is a ‘motivational relationship’ between the two, where empathy can be found somewhere among the mental states that make up an agent’s motivating reasons for acting well. As I will show, this means looking further and wider for empathy than philosophers currently look. Secondly, in making a case for such a relationship, this paper will also argue that empathy plays a role in our actions far more often than we think it does. As such, this paper should be of interest not only to those who care about empathy’s relationship to moral concern, but to those who care more generally about understanding empathy’s role in our lives and our actions.

I begin by introducing the two main characters (empathy and morally worthy actions) in S1. Then, in S2, I explain why there’s so much scepticism of any *necessary* link between the two in the current literature, especially when it comes to empathy playing a role at any point beyond our initial moral development. But the current literature dismisses a non-developmental link too quickly. In S3 I argue for the importance of what I call a motivational relationship between empathy and morally worthy action. Just as we would, in other cases, explain an agent’s motivations by appealing to her unconscious and prior mental states as well as her conscious and immediate ones when she judges what to do, so too we should look in those prior and unconscious mental states when looking to see whether she empathises with the target of her moral actions, and whether that empathy plays a necessary role.

2 Section 1 The Set-Up

Suppose two people volunteer with a local collective. The collective takes food donations from nearby shops and uses them to cook hot meals for people on the streets. Linnie, the first volunteer, volunteers with good motivations. What exactly these motivations consist of may vary slightly depending on the correct normative ethical theory – for example it might be that she desires to relieve suffering, to do her duty, or to express care and concern for her fellow human beings. It might be that what’s relevant is her belief in the importance of human flourishing, and that her actions reflect the way in which she wants to bring about such flourishing. It’s likely that in cases like Linnie’s a lot of these motivations will overlap – Linnie *does* want all of these things, and she values the reduction of suffering, expressing care, doing her duty, etc. – so she will have good motivations according to any plausible account.

According to some theories of moral worth, it might be that the content of Linnie’s motivation needn’t be so general, and instead her motivating reasons might be specific to the case in question, such as a motivation to help and feed the people she comes across on the streets. Perhaps it doesn’t need to be the case that she directly cares about others’ flourishing, but just that her motivations are in line with that.¹ Whatever the answer, it’s a simple case: Linnie is doing something good, and she has genuinely good motivations that brought her to act in that way.

¹ For more on the specifics of this distinction in discussions of moral concern, see e.g. Carbonell [8].

We can suppose that another volunteer might perform all of the same actions as Linnie, but with different motivations. Herb might put in just as much effort in collecting the donations, chopping the vegetables, and making sure that the hot food gets out to the people who need it. But Herb doesn't do it because he wants to relieve suffering, do his duty, express care, etc. Herb does it because he thinks very little of the people on the streets and sees himself as their reluctant saviour. He doesn't consider the people he feeds as people *deserving* of care and respect, his motivations for bringing them food are mostly about solidifying or expressing his feelings of superiority. And his motivations may be this way without them making a difference to how his actions appear from the outside. 'Moral worth' is the term I'll use to describe the difference between the good cases, like Linnie, and the bad cases like Herb.²

Moral worth is not about whether duties are fulfilled, rights are respected, or whether goodness is brought about, at least not directly. It's not about how many hungry people are fed, or if the relevant people are fulfilling their responsibilities. Instead, the concept aims to pick out whether the agent – given their motivations for their actions – has done something right. Arpaly describes it as “the extent to which the agent deserves moral praise or blame for performing the action, the extent to which the action speaks well of the agent”.³ Linnie is praiseworthy for her actions, and the actions speak well for her. The same cannot be said for Herb – not after we know about *why* he acts in the way that he does. If we praised both of them for their actions and then later found out about Herb's reasoning, it's likely we'd think that *his* praise was undeserved.

For the purposes of this paper, the kinds of moral action I'm interested in aren't just those that are morally worthy, but more specifically they're those which are also directed in some way towards benefitting other people. This is to exclude actions that might have no empathic targets.⁴

'Empathy' is a broad term that can have several different meanings.⁵ The kind I'm interested in for this paper is a kind of 'fellow feeling' that an agent has towards another, that in some way aims to mirror the feeling of that other.⁶ Suppose we think about Linnie empathising with the people she meets and gives out food to while volunteering. On most accounts, empathising with the target will involve something different to feeling sorry for them or caring about them, or even mirroring their feelings through a process of emotional contagion. Instead, empathising will involve match-

² For more on moral worth see, for example, Arpaly, Markovits and Sliwa [2, 15, 22]. I also take this to be roughly the same thing that Denham refers to as 'moral concern' and 'moral motivation' in Denham, [11], and sometimes I'll borrow that language as well.

³ Arpaly, [2] p.224.

⁴ Denham also clarifies this, saying "...countless moral requirements do not directly concern personal welfare at all, and enjoy no direct connection with empathy. Among these empathy-irrelevant norms are various sexual, dietary, and hygiene prohibitions, norms deriving from religious commandments, and norms based on conceptions of social honor and prestige." [11] p.228. I'm sceptical about at least some of these as being particularly moral notions, but nonetheless I'm happy to restrict myself to discussing other-directed morally worthy actions.

⁵ For an example of how broad the term can be, Cuff et al. [10] have a review of the concept that covers 43 discrete definitions.

⁶ The feeling element distinguishes it from 'cognitive' empathy. See, e.g., Maibom, Spaulding [14, 23] for more on the distinction between cognitive and 'affective' empathy.

ing what the target feels *because* they feel it, as if she were feeling it on their behalf, while still understanding the target as being a separate person to herself. Linnie might try to imagine the hunger of a person she meets, in order to better understand their situation. And she might do an even better job if she takes on board more of the complexities of how they feel, whether this involves resilience, anger, pride, distress, etc. In this way, empathising better with the people she meets is an important source for helping her to understand people, their perspectives, and their experiences.⁷

There is some discussion both about the need for more specifics in discussions of empathy⁸ and on what a definition should include.⁹ For the purposes of this paper, I hope to remain neutral on some aspects of the debate. This is because I hope that the arguments here can generalise to a number of different definitions of empathy, or even other mental states that might be contenders in terms of their necessity for moral concern, such as caring. I'll say more about this briefly at the end.

3 Section 2 The Relationship

At first, empathy might seem like a good contender for a common feature in agents who express moral concern through their actions.¹⁰ After all, it's easy enough to imagine some cases in which empathising can make the difference between an action being one that manifests moral concern rather than one that doesn't. Think back to Linnie – she volunteers to cook and distribute food for people who need it, and her actions demonstrate moral worth. We can imagine that part of what makes her motivations good is going to be that she understands the perspectives and experiences of the people who she cooks for. She helps them in part because she appreciates their projects, their lives, and their struggles. In contrast, we can imagine Herb having no such empathy at all – he takes a patronising attitude towards the people he cooks food for and makes no attempt to understand what they are actually going through. So the presence of empathy in the good case and a lack of it in the bad case is one difference between them.

There are some reasons why empathy might even be seen as *necessary* for the good cases. We saw briefly above how the phenomenon of empathy that we're trying to pinpoint is the kind that plays a role in understanding other people. It might be plausible to think that some form of understanding of what a person or their life is like is going to be necessary for knowing how to treat them well. Empathising with

⁷ For more on the role of empathy in understanding people, see Bailey, [4].

⁸ Coplan, [9] is an example of someone who argues for a more precise definition against, e.g., Preston & de Waal [18].

⁹ One contentious aspect, for example, is the extent to which an empathiser must necessarily endorse the positions of the target of their empathy, in order to really be empathising with them.

¹⁰ Bailey, Betzler [4, 6] are examples of people who advocate some connection between empathy and moral action, even if it's not a necessary one.

a person can contribute to knowing about their goals, their fears, their desires, what hurts them or what might help them to flourish.¹¹

Furthermore, affective empathy is more than just a set of beliefs about a person that can inform another's action. Empathy might also play an important role in motivating a person to act. By coming to see a person's situation as they see it there's a normative element to the picture that can motivate us in a way that cold facts alone might not.¹²

To better understand the question of whether there is a *necessary* connection between empathy and moral concern, it will help to be clearer on what forms this connection might take. Denham makes a distinction in 'Empathy and Moral Motivation,' where she distinguishes between what she calls synchronic and diachronic relationships. They are:

- **Synchronic:** a claim about "the motivational contributions of immediate and occurrent empathy to token others-welfare judgments."¹³
- **Diachronic:** a claim that "empathy is necessary for the development of the capacity to be motivated by others-welfare judgments."¹⁴

Let's take the synchronic claim first. If empathy were synchronically necessary for moral concern, then, it would need to play an immediate and occurrent role in the mental state of the agent as they form the judgment of what they should do. On some level, they'd need to be taking on the fellow feelings of the person who their moral judgment is about. If they were making a judgment about whether they should volunteer to feed people, then they'd need to be empathising with the people who they'd likely be feeding. Suppose we think back to Linnie and her volunteer work. We can suppose that Linnie's is an easy case: one where empathy does play a role in the fact that her actions manifest moral worth. For the empathy to play a synchronic role, we'd have to look at the times when she makes the moral judgments (such as 'I should go and help out with the food today'), and find that her empathising with the people she's there to help has played an immediate and occurrent role. Perhaps as she resolved to spend her day helping out she thought about the people she usually finds there, and was moved to help them in part because of the way she understood their perspective and how they are more likely to get a warm meal tonight if she helps out.

If, on the other hand, empathy was diachronically necessary for welfare-judgments, then the empathy wouldn't need to be occurrent or immediate, but rather something that came about much earlier in the development of capacities to make judgements in ways that express genuine moral concern. Perhaps, for example, empathy would've been needed for a role in developing general good will towards

¹¹ For some more details on why it might help, see Mastro [16], who argues for empathy being at least 'sometimes' necessary for moral action. For another example of someone who defends empathy's role, see Simmons [21].

¹² Denham mentions this possible connection in Denham, [11] p.228.

¹³ Denham, [11] p.229.

¹⁴ Ibid. Denham is particularly interested in the role of empathy in development up until late adolescence. (p.236)

fellow creatures. When Linnie was learning that other people have feelings, perhaps some sort of empathic understanding of those feelings was necessary in the development of her moral character.

But it's not clear that there's a *necessary* connection between empathy and moral concern of either type, or even that it is overall more helpful for moral action than unhelpful for it. Indeed, it seems like much of the philosophical tide currently flows in the opposite direction.

The hardest challenge for any account of a necessary relationship will be to dismiss counter examples. After all, if there are any cases at all of people acting with genuine moral worth but not having experienced empathy in the process, then whatever kind of connection it is, it's not a necessary one. An example of such criticism comes from Denham, who defends the diachronic account but takes issue with the synchronic account. She says,

...it stands to be defeated if agents' others-welfare/altruistic judgments are *ever* motivating in the absence of occurrent empathy. [...] An overworked nurse suffering from compassion fatigue and long past empathic attunement can continue to be motivated by her commitment to caring for her patients; a dedicated humanist may serve the homeless, even when he ceases to be animated by empathy for them. In both cases, their (non-empathic) concern may even see them through occasional episodes of irritation or distaste or revulsion. That gives us no reason to deny that their ultimate goal is to relieve the plight of those in need.¹⁵

If there are *any* cases of good moral motivation without empathy playing a role in that motivation, then the relationship is not a necessary one. Let's call this the 'counter-example challenge' to necessary relationships. Along with Denham, I take this to be the strongest problem for such accounts.

The counter-example challenge will be the main topic of this paper, since I think it is the most plausible problem for the relationship between empathy and moral worth. Before discussing my positive proposal, though, I will also briefly discuss two further types of challenge to such accounts. Firstly, there's a 'target-based challenge'. According to these objections, empathy cannot be necessary for morally worthy actions because some morally worthy actions simply do not have an appropriate target for the moral agents to empathise with. Some philosophers have this concern even when we limit ourselves to discussion of other-oriented moral action. Prinz, for example, discusses examples like a victim of a pick-pocket who hasn't realised that her pocket has been picked.¹⁶ It seems like she is an appropriate target for moral action (the pickpocket should return her purse, for example) but empathising with her would not be motivationally or epistemically useful, since she doesn't even know that anything is wrong.

Finally, there are also a wide variety of 'practical challenges'. I use this label to mean anything which, practically speaking, prevents us from applying either the

¹⁵ Denham, [11] p.235.

¹⁶ Prinz, [19] p.218.

knowledge or the motivation that empathy gives us correctly. This includes the fact that empathy is “easily manipulated”,¹⁷ difficult to apply to large problems with large numbers of victims,¹⁸ cognitively quite demanding,¹⁹ and prone to a number of biases.²⁰ In these cases we might be able to empathise, but the empathy might struggle to morally motivate us, or even motivate us in another direction completely.

4 Section 3 The Proposal

I propose that the arguments against a necessary relationship between empathy and morally worthy action haven’t been considering the most plausible version of that relationship. The best version, I will argue, is this:

- **Motivational:** a claim that empathy is necessary (but not sufficient) for the formation of any given instance of morally worthy action, but without needing to be either occurrent or immediate.

If we look at these motivating reasons at the right level of detail – the level of detail that takes into account the full picture of those motivations – it will often be the case that empathy plays a vital but non-occurrent and/or non-immediate role.

But I’ll begin by saying something about the explicit caveat that empathy might be necessary *but not sufficient* for morally worthy actions. This wording is meant as a response to the practical challenges: challenges that showed why some instances of empathy were either morally misleading (due to things such as biases in who we are more likely to empathise with) or were difficult to translate into actual moral motivation, due to things such as the scale of the moral problems. The best case for a necessary relationship, I argue, isn’t that *all* cases of empathy will lead to moral action, nor need it be the case that the amount of empathy felt is proportional in any way to the moral action that results. It might be the case instead that there is a minimum threshold of empathy that is required, and after that is met, empathy’s job is done.²¹

This motivational relationship should be plausible firstly because it reflects our understanding of agents’ actions more broadly. Even when we’re not thinking about morality or empathy, but simply trying to understand an agent’s motivational reasons for acting, we’ll look back further than just the mental states that were occurrent or immediately before they judged that they should act. For the rest of this paper I will argue that we should be looking in the same place for empathy, when we’re assessing whether it played a role in an agent’s acting out of moral concern. I’ll argue both that empathy can be found beyond our most conscious mental states, and that it can play an important role while still being prior to the moral judgment or non-occurrent.

¹⁷ Prinz, [19]

¹⁸ Prinz, [19], Kauppinen, [13]

¹⁹ Kauppinen, [13]

²⁰ Prinz, [19]

²¹ Simmons makes a similar case in favour of empathy against practical objections in Simmons, [21].

Generally, when we want to understand what an agent's motivating reasons for action are, their current mental states will often not give us enough information. Suppose, for example, that someone wants to know why I've taken the left turn as I walk down the road. As it occurred to me that I needed to take the turn, there might have been very little else in my head other than something irrelevant to my turning, like complaints about the weather – particularly if it's extra bright or extra cold, or there's something else distracting me from thinking too much about why I'm going where I'm going. But my reason for turning left is to get to my office. As I judge which road to go down, a full explanation of my motivating reason is going to need to include as far back as the time when I decided to go in and get some work done. It might go even further back than that – and also take into account the reason I'm going into the office (to finish a paper), or the reasons I want to finish a paper (a desire to understand the topic, or the lure of some ice cream that I promised myself as a reward).

In practice, how far back to look will depend on the context, the reason why we're trying to figure out the person's motivations.²² The information that we're trying to find out, and what information we already have, will usually affect what it makes sense to ask about which of a person's mental states contributed to their motivating reasons. But when it comes to understanding what was necessary for a person to have acted with good moral motivation, then we need to have a full picture of what their motivating reasons were. Suppose that one person thinks that actions demonstrate moral worth when they manifest the right sorts of desires in an agent.²³ To satisfy that person, it might be enough to say that Linnie's judgment manifests moral worth because it is a product of her desire to help others. She wanted to provide support, and so she did. But that isn't enough to tell us whether empathy is also necessary for moral concern, because empathy might have been necessary further down the line, either in her coming to have that desire or in her coming to realise that her volunteering was an appropriate way to fulfil that desire.

The same, then, should be the case when we think about where in an agent's mental states to look for signs of empathy. Think about the cases like the nurse with compassion fatigue or the person who wants to feed the homeless because of their dedication to the cause, even though they've ceased to feel empathy for the people they aim to help. It seems very plausible that there are a number of cases just like these where agents aren't empathising with the targets of their morally good actions when they decide to act, but that doesn't mean that empathy didn't necessarily occur earlier in the process that led to their being motivated. Perhaps the volunteer empathised with the homeless when they first considered the plights of people on the streets, and that empathy played a necessary role in their being dedicated to the cause, even if they aren't actively empathising with those people now. And perhaps the fatigued nurse doesn't have the capacity to empathise afresh with their patients every time they do something to help them, but it's an empathy towards such patients which played a necessary role earlier in the process of their reasoning that contributes to each of their good actions as a nurse now.

²² For more on this, see discussion of motivating reasons (and other kinds) in Alvarez, [1] p.183.

²³ Arpaly and Schroeder, for example, argue that moral worth comes from good will, which they take to be an intrinsic desire for the right or the good, correctly conceptualised. [3] p.162).

Remember that not every instance of an action that seems outwardly good will provide a potential counter example if there's no empathy at the centre of it. After all, not every good action is one that manifests good moral worth from the person who acted. A nurse who does good work only because they haven't thought hard enough about a different career choice might not have empathy playing any role in their motivations, but their actions might also not be so morally worthy.

It will also be useful to clarify who the target of empathy needs to be for this account to work. It seems to me like the best accounts of a relationship between empathy and moral worth will include cases in which agents empathise not for current, actual, existing people, but future and potential people as well. This seems to be an accurate representation of how empathy can motivate us. Sometimes I'll be able to treat you well because I can empathise with what you're currently going through, and tell from that what you might need from me. But this doesn't seem to be significantly different from other occasions, when I might need to empathise with how you're going to feel soon. Maybe if I've heard that you're just about to get rejected for a job, or if I suspect that you're about to face a difficult time for other reasons. In these cases I can try to reimagine and share in the affect I suspect that you'll have, in order to know what to do to make you feel better.

Getting clearer on the target of empathy doesn't just add to the case I'm building that there are more motivationally relevant instances of empathy than we might expect. It also answers what I called the 'target-based challenge' to the relationship between empathy and morally worthy action. Think back to the cases of victims who haven't yet been harmed, or don't know that they've come to any harm. It might be the cases that empathy is still necessary for moral actions here, but that the agent should be empathising with potential or future versions of the target.

I will also argue that empathy doesn't need to be an occurrent mental state for it to play a role in moral concern. To begin with, it will be important to note that there's scope for a number of different interpretations in the language here, in understanding what 'occurrent' means.²⁴ An occurrent mental state is often one contrasted with a standing one. For example, I might have a standing desire to paint a colourful painting, but when it plays no role in my psyche it's not one of my occurrent desires. I might also have a standing belief that there are ducklings in the park, even when I'm not thinking about ducklings and the belief is doing nothing to influence my other actions. When I try to think of a list of things I currently believe, for the purposes of writing some of these down as examples in a paper, my belief about ducklings becomes occurrent to me. An occurrent mental state is active, where a standing one is not.

Partly, then, showing that mental states need not be occurrent to be part of a person's motivational reasons will involve repeating the same arguments as I did above. After all, I have just argued that prior mental states can play a necessary role in motivation, and prior mental states are not necessarily active ones anymore. It might be that they were necessary earlier in the process when they actively affected something else about the agent's mental states, but now that they have done so they are active no longer.

²⁴ See Bartlett [5].

But I want to go even further than that in making the case for wide-ranging examples of empathy. Occurrent mental states are sometimes contrasted with unconscious ones.²⁵ Whether or not these are something that the synchronic account aims to exclude, it's still an important place to look for instances of empathy that might contribute to moral motivation – a place we might not otherwise consider to look, and that might stop us worrying about some of the supposed counter examples.

After all, other relevant desires, beliefs, or cases of reasoning might be unconscious to the agent throughout the process, and so not explicit in her thoughts at any time. Think about Bren, who might take a certain route home because she stands a chance of bumping into the girl she's dating in their favourite park, without being conscious at any point that that's what she's doing. This might still play an important part in her motivations, whether or not she'd be able to report on it.²⁶

Consciousness, of course, can also be a broad term, so it might help to be a little more specific. We can think of a number of extents to which our mental states might be available to us. On one end of the scale there are those that are explicitly thought and at the forefront of an agent's mind, that we're attending to and that we could describe if asked. The feeling of tiredness and the desire to go to bed might be at the forefront of my mind, for example, when it's a warm summer afternoon in the office and I've just had my lunch. Sometimes empathy will be at this end of the scale. I might spend some time with a friend because I understand how lonely they've been since their breakup, and the more I can explicitly empathise with their situation, the more this plays a prominent role in the forefront of my mind, the more it might motivate me to do what I can to be there for them.

Then, further down the scale, are various states that play less of a prominent or obvious role in our minds. There will be some mental states that are fairly near the front of our minds but that we can't easily put into words. There are others that we would notice but only if given the opportunity to reflect on them. There are more still that are non-luminous, that could influence us without us being able to recognise them even when prompted and given ample time to reflect.²⁷

Could this be the case for some of the more particular definitions of empathy? Particularly when we think about whether it's necessary that an instance of empathy is one where the empathiser believes that their experience is in some way replicating the experience of someone else, rather than something they're experiencing personally. It might be possible that the affect could be unconscious in at least some of those ways. Beliefs and desires can certainly be conscious, as with the case of Bren above. But some philosophers, such as Bramble, argue that even paradigmatic affective states like pleasure or pain can be unknowable to us as we have them.²⁸ We can later

²⁵ Bartlett [5] discusses some examples of this, and argues instead that it's better to understand occurrence in terms of whether the state is currently active and influencing other states, rather than by any type of explanation about what level of consciousness it's on.

²⁶ For more on the role of desires motivating from the 'background' rather than the foreground of our minds, see Pettit and Smith, [17].

²⁷ For more on non-luminous mental states, see Williamson [24].

²⁸ Bramble argues this particularly well in Bramble, [7]. He also credits Haybron, Schwitzgebel [12, 20] for their work on it as well.

tell that we were in these states, he argues, because of things like physical responses (that could be objectively measured) or later inferences.

Suppose we think about the fatigued nurse. They act well towards their patients, going above the call of their job description and treating their patients with kindness and care, helping them however they can. But they're fatigued, they see suffering day in and day out, and they don't think nor want to think about the plight of every person who comes under their care – it's just too much for them. In fact, doing so would actually prevent them from doing their job well rather than helping them to do it. Perhaps the nurse empathises with their patients prior to each interaction, sure. But perhaps some of their empathy is also something that they don't attend to very clearly while they're experiencing it, or don't focus on. Or perhaps the situation is so overwhelming to them that they wouldn't be able to notice, even upon reflection, that they're matching the affect of someone else. After all, it's exactly these sorts of situations when those are the sorts of feelings that are better to push down, to get out of the way, precisely to avoid further compassion fatigue. We can be very bad at being aware of our own feelings.

Of course, there are some difficult aspects of empathy that involves more complex mental states than just the matching of affect. The agent also needs to conceive of that affect in a certain way, and have certain beliefs about those affective states. Even though beliefs themselves can be unconscious, it might be harder to show that the affective states themselves can be unconscious *while* the agent holds beliefs about them. Still, while this might be a more difficult argument to make, I think there's still a case to be made for it that these mental states can still be ones we're not fully conscious of. This is because unconscious states can affect our motivations, they can affect our reasoning, we can have desires about them. We might act in a way that's consistent with having that affect, and we might later infer that we had that affect.

Given the scale of ways in which mental states might be more or less available to us, it might be the case that some people are going to find different places where the story stops being plausible. For some, the idea that we might be empathising with one another without even being able to reflect on that empathy, given the chance, might be too far away from what they think of as real empathy. Others might worry about whether such small tokens of empathy in a large and varied selection of contributing mental states could really be said to play anything like a *necessary* role.

As I said at the start, I don't know whether empathy is required for moral worth. But our minds are complex, and I favour a picture in which a lot is going on in our psychology that we don't necessarily have access to. Furthermore, I think that at least some of these unconscious and prior phenomena are similar enough to conscious and immediate instances of empathy that they're plausible candidates for being the same sort of thing. Together with the fact that empathy can be a useful tool in understanding each other, hopefully I've made a good case for why we should look further and deeper into our motivations when we want to understand morally worthy action.

5 Conclusion

The current literature is sceptical of a necessary connection between empathy and moral concern, particularly when we take that connection to be one that goes beyond a diachronic (developmental) relationship. I have argued here that they are wrong to dismiss the link so quickly, and that existing criticisms (such as that of Denham's counter-example challenge) have failed to appreciate just how wide-ranging the mental states are that can contribute to an agent's motivations. I argued that empathy is likely to play a necessary role in many instances of moral motivation further back in the reasoning process than immediately prior to judgment. Furthermore, I argued that some (if not all) of the components of empathy might be on some level unconscious to the agent as she experiences it, giving us even more reason to doubt counter-examples.

Of course, some people might be persuaded for other reasons that empathy isn't necessary for morally worthy action. For those people, I hope that this paper has still given them something to think about when it comes to just how often empathy can be important for moral motivation. It might also be the case that the lessons of this paper (to pay attention to prior and unconscious mental states) are the key for understanding the importance of other relevant mental states to moral worth. It's important to look in the same places when determining the role of caring for others, for example.

Acknowledgements I wrote this paper when I was working as a Postdoctoral Research Associate on the project 'How Does It Feel? Interpersonal Understanding and Affective Empathy' at The University of Liverpool. Additionally and in particular, for their help and comments, I would like to thank Sophie Keeling, Katharina Sodoma, Christiana Werner, Thomas Schramme, and audiences at The Joint Sessions in 2022 in St Andrew's and at EPSSE (European Philosophical Society for the Study of Emotions) in Graz, 2022.

Funding Open access funding provided by Paris Lodron University of Salzburg.

Declarations The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- 1 Alvarez, M. 2009. How many kinds of reasons? *Philosophical Explorations* 12(2): 181–193.
- 2 Arpaly, Nomy. 2002. Moral Worth. *Journal of Philosophy* 99: 223–245.
- 3 Arpaly, N., and T. Schroeder. 2013. *In praise of Desire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 4 Bailey, O. 2022. Empathy and the value of Humane understanding. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 104(1): 50–65.

- 5 Bartlett, G. 2018. Occurrent States. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 48(1): 1–17.
- 6 Betzler, M. 2019. The Relational Value of Empathy. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 27(2): 136–161.
- 7 Bramble, B. 2020. Unknown pleasures. *Philosophical Studies* 177(5): 1333–1344.
- 8 Carbonell, V. 2013. De Dicto desires and morality as Fetish. In *Philosophical Studies* 163(2): 459–477.
- 9 Coplan, A. 2011. Understanding Empathy: its features and effects. In *Empathy: philosophical and psychological perspectives*, eds. A. Coplan, and P. Goldie. New York: OUP.
- 10 Cuff, B., S. Brown, L. Taylor, and D. Howat. 2016. Empathy: a review of the Concept. *Emotion Review* 8(2): 144–153.
- 11 Denham, A. 2017. Empathy and Moral Motivation. In *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, ed. H. Maibom. New York: Routledge.
- 12 Haybron, D. 2008. *The pursuit of unhappiness*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 13 Kauppinen, A. 2017. ‘Empathy and Moral Judgment’ in Maibom, H. (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, pp.215–226.
- 14 Maibom, H. 2017. ‘Affective Empathy’ in Maibom, H. (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, pp.22–32.
- 15 Markovits, J. 2010. Acting for the right reasons. *Philosophical Review* 119(2): 201–242.
- 16 Masto, M. 2015. Empathy and its role in morality. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 53: 74–96.
- 17 Pettit, P., and M. Smith. 1990. ‘Backgrounding Desire’ in *Philosophical Review*, vol.99 no.4 pp.565–592.
- 18 Preston, S., and F. de Waal. 2002. Empathy: its Ultimate and Proximate bases. *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 25: 1–72.
- 19 Prinz, J. 2011. Against Empathy’ in. *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49(1): 214–233.
- 20 Schwitzgebel, E. 2008. The unreliability of Naïve Introspection. *Philosophical Review* 117: 245–273.
- 21 Simmons, A. 2014. ‘In Defence of the Moral Significance of Empathy’ in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 17 pp.97–111.
- 22 Sliwa, P. 2016. Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge’ in. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 93(2): 393–418.
- 23 Spaulding, S. 2017. ‘Cognitive Empathy’ in Maibom, H. (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, pp.13–21.
- 24 Williamson, T. 2000. *Knowledge and its limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.