

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EMPATHIST. WHY EMPATHY MATTERS FOR MORALITY.

“Empathy isn’t just listening, it’s asking the questions whose answers need to be listened to. Empathy requires inquiry as much as imagination. Empathy requires knowing you know nothing. Empathy means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see [...] Empathy means realizing no trauma has discrete edges. Trauma bleeds. Out of wounds and across boundaries.”

(Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams*, Graywolf Press, Minneapolis (MN) 2014, p. 24).

The children of Adam are limbs of a whole

Having been created of one essence.

When the calamity of time afflicts one limb

The other limbs cannot remain at rest.

If you have no sympathy for the troubles of others

You are not worthy to be called by the name of "man"

(The quote comes from the story 10, in the first chapter of the book *Gulistan* (1258), written by the Persian poet Saadi from Shiraz. This quote is to be found at the entrance of the Headquarters of the United Nations in New York).

1. Empathy: A Few Preliminary Remarks

The aim of this paper is the analysis of the moral role of empathy. The main questions I wish to find an answer to are the following: is empathy necessary for morality? Is it sufficient for it? In order to answer these questions, it will be of great help if we split the thick concept of ‘morality’ into three different constitutive parts of it and we reformulate our questions in the following way: is empathy necessary for: (1) Moral judgment? (2) Moral development? (3) Moral conduct?

Empathy is a very complex phenomenon and unfortunately there’s no agreement among both scholars and lay public about how a good definition of it should sound. Therefore, if we want to work with this concept and highlight its specificity, we have to offer a clear-cut definition of it. And the fact that this definition will under some aspects be ‘stipulative’ should not be a matter. As the famous psychologist and researcher on empathy Daniel Batson once wrote:

“In spite of frequent claims that one’s own use of these terms is best, I know no clear basis [...] for favoring one labeling scheme over another. In such circumstances, I believe the best one can do is recognize the different phenomena, make clear the labeling scheme one is adopting,

and use it consistently”.

This is in fact the strategy used by all researchers on empathy and I'll make no exception. Empathy, according to my definition, is a psychological mechanism which allows us to understand and feel with a variable degree of approximation the mental states of another subject. These states can include, but are not limited to, thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. Roughly put, when we merely understand what the ‘empathized’ subject is thinking or feeling, then we speak of cognitive empathy;¹ on the contrary, when we also feel what he or she is feeling, then we talk about affective or emotional empathy.² Furthermore, empathy can be the result of a primary, non-reducible, unmediated and other-directed process,³ or it can involve the use of imaginative enactment, targeting the other in his own specific, personal context, and, where possible, taking into account the particular narrative and characterization of the other as well.⁴ It must anyway be remembered that empathy is a mechanism by its very nature prone to errors and inaccuracies. After all, what another person is feeling or thinking in a given moment is never completely transparent to me.⁵ Finally, the empathic process can be successful or unsuccessful, meaning that it can bring us to the correct conclusion about the target's mental states, or not. Usually, the more we know

about a person, the more reliable the outcome of the empathetic mechanism will be.

From what I have asserted so far, another important feature of empathy should become apparent, and it is its moral neutrality. When I try to empathize with somebody I am basically trying to understand and/or feel what they might be thinking or feeling, and this kind of act seems to be devoid of a moral value. Put in another way, we can affirm that empathy is best explained as *feeling with* and not *feeling for*.⁶ When I feel what you feel, this does not imply that I also feel for you. And this leads us to another question: what kind of phenomenon are we experiencing, when we feel for someone? The vast majority of the scholars tends to define it as ‘sympathy’⁷ or ‘compassion’, and, more rarely, ‘pity’.⁸ As a consequence, even if I think that there are some subtle differences between these three concepts, for the sake of brevity and conciseness I will consider them as synonyms and refer to them using the all-encompassing term *compassion*. A good definition of what modern-day psychologists describe as compassion is offered by Keltner and Goetz (2007): «the emotion one experiences when feeling concern for another's suffering and desiring to enhance that individual's welfare».⁹

Thus, compassion can be distinguished from empathy because of the following features:

- (1) It is a specific emotion
- (2) It involves concern specifically for other people's suffering
- (3) It seems to be intrinsically motivating and altruistically oriented

Having briefly sketched the salient characteristics of empathy and compassion it is now time to switch our focus to the role empathy can play in the moral domain.

2. Criticisms to the Necessity of Empathy for Morality.

2.1. Moral Judgment

One way of thinking of empathy as the basis of our moral judgment is by making it the central element of a sentimental kind of ethics, and, more specifically, by considering it the foundation of our moral approbation and disapprobation. The moral theory of Hume is in this sense paradigmatic. Let us read an insightful passage:

“We partake of their uneasiness by sympathy; and as every thing, which gives uneasiness in human actions, upon the general survey, is called Vice, and whatever produces satisfaction, in the same manner, is denominated Virtue [...] sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation, which attends that virtue”.¹⁰

What Hume seems to affirm here, is that virtuous actions provoke satisfaction in the people who receive them, that vicious actions produce uneasiness instead, and that thanks to our empathy (what Hume calls ‘sympathy’) for the recipients we can get a feeling of approbation in the first case and of disapprobation in the second one. These two feelings of, respectively, approbation and disapprobation, constitute our judgments that a given action is morally right or wrong. Therefore, empathy seems to be, in Humean ethics, the very precondition for the formation of any of our moral judgments. The question if Hume should be read exactly in this way may still be open to dispute, but in any case, this seems to be a legitimate view on the possible role played by empathy in morality and specifically in grounding our moral judgments. Is it also correct? There are very good clues that it might be not. Think, for example, of the cases in which there is no salient victim to empathize with. One can consider, for instance, bootlegging CDs or DVDs to be morally wrong, even without relying on empathy. Even paying taxes seems to be something we consider morally right. And this is so, also when our empathy or compassion may sometimes bring us to the opposite direction. If, for example, I have some budgetary troubles and a family to maintain, I might think of evading taxes out of em-

pathy for my wife and children but then not doing it out of a sense of justice or some other principle of the sort. There is also a series of transgressions which are commonly judged as immoral without thereby having grounded this judgment on empathy or compassion. Jesse Prinz¹¹ offers the following list: «necrophilia, consensual sibling incest, destruction of (unpopulated) places in the environment, or desecration of a grave of someone who has no surviving relative». It is easy to see that in all these cases empathy cannot be the cause of our moral disapprobation, for we have no one to empathize with.

Perhaps, someone might object that all of these different examples only appear not to rely on empathy, but in fact they indirectly do. One could assert, for instance, that we pay taxes out of the empathy we would feel towards people who (we imagine) would be forced to pay more taxes because of our evasion. Or that we criticize, say, necrophilia, because of the empathy we would feel with the dead person if she was still alive. And so, for all other cases. However, this seems to be a very tortuous way to ground our moral judgments and I think that we in fact rely on a more cognitively economical mechanism.

It is not because of empathy that I approve or disapprove certain actions, rather, very often it is the other way around. It is because I approve or disapprove a given action, that I can empathize or sympathize with the person doing it.

Of course, I do not want to imply that empathy or compassion never anticipate our sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, but in many cases, when empathy is present, it is present as a consequence of these two sentiments, not as a precursor. Therefore, empathy turns out to be contingent upon moral judgment, since we can express moral judgments without having to rely on empathy. However, one might object, empathy is not necessary in these cases, only because they are all cases in which others are not really involved. In other words, if we take empathy to be fundamental only for the regulation of moral behavior between two or more individuals, then we may discover a necessary moral role for it. But even in this context there are some issues. Jesse Prinz has an interesting way of putting it. He imagines the following situation: let's say that I come to eat the last delicious cookie from a packet I've been sharing with a friend of mine. After doing it, I feel a pang of guilt. Is this feeling of guilt coming from empathy for my friend? It does

not seem the case. In order to feel guilty, I just have to construe my action as greedy. Quoting Prinz on this issue:

“Morally significant actions can be recognized without empathy, even if those actions are ones that involve harm. We need not reflect on the harm to see that the action is bad. Perhaps you are delighted that I ate the last cookie. I recognize that, empathetically, and I still feel guilty; I still think that I should have offered the cookie to you.”¹²

Hence, seemingly, morality needs not to be based on judgments stemming from empathy, even when we are considering a sentimentalist kind of morals. However, empathy could still play a fundamental role for moral development. In other words, we may very well suppose that when we have acquired a certain capacity for moral reasoning, relying on empathy would become more and more redundant, but probably this emotional phenomenon might turn out to be the basic psychological mechanism through which we can obtain a moral sense at all. Having rejected its supposed synchronic role in morality, shall we conclude that empathy can have at least a diachronic one?

2.2. Moral Development. The Case of Psychopaths

This view seems *prima facie* very appealing. After all, when we think of what morality essentially involves, we think of the principled regulation of our behavior in relation to others. Therefore, empathy, which seems to many psychologists to imply a certain concern for others' well-being,¹³ might turn out to be central. In order to prove this intuition, more and more researchers have shifted their focus to the study of pathological populations taken to be completely devoid of empathy: psychopaths. These seem in fact to lack both empathy and compassion and if the result were that their well-known amoral or even immoral behavior was due to this deficit, then we would have good reason to conclude that compassion and empathy are diachronically necessary for morality. What is needed are evidences of the fact that empathy can *cause* moral behavior, and not that empathy and moral behavior are merely *correlated*.

Now, what does it mean to be a psychopath? Robert Hare¹⁴ famously takes note of the following characteristics: glibness and/or superficial charm, grandiose sense of self-worth, deceitfulness, manipulateness, lack of remorse or guilt, shallow affect, callousness, irresponsibility, poor behavioral control, lack of realistic, long-term goals, and impulsivity. Cleckley offers another very similar, classical description of the typical psychopath:

“Vexation, spite, quick and labile flashes of quasi-affection, peevish resentment, shallow moods of self-pity, puerile attitudes of vanity, and absurd and showy poses of indignation are all within his emotional scale and freely sounded as the circumstances of life play upon him. But mature, wholehearted anger, true or consistent indignation, honest, solid grief, sustaining pride, deep joy, and genuine despair are reactions not likely to be found within this scale.”¹⁵

Furthermore, psychophysiological studies have revealed that psychopaths generally show a very pronounced lack of responsiveness to the distress of others as well as a lack of fear, shock or sadness in disturbing situations involving physical or psychological harm to other people.¹⁶ Psychopaths also have a difficulty in distinguishing between different types of violations and to correctly evaluate their different seriousness. For instance, they cannot draw a difference between violations of moral and merely conventional rules.¹⁷ All these various features are often explained by a common denominator, that is the lack of what psychologists call ‘Violence Inhibition Mechanism’ or ‘VIM’.¹⁸ The explication sounds roughly like this: normally developing children have an innate proclivity to empathize with observed distress, so if one child causes another child to cry, the child responsible for the harm will catch the observed emotion and feel badly. These negative feelings will serve as

an inhibition signal which will lead the child to terminate the actions causing the distress and even drive him to associate unpleasant feelings with that sort of action in the future.¹⁹ Psychopathic subjects lack this system of inhibition because they lack empathy for others, that is they don’t feel any bad feelings when hurting someone else. This is – for many psychologists including James Blair – the cause of their amorality.

At first glance, this model seems to be very attractive. However, there is a logical fallacy that should not be overlooked. My intention is not to deny that empathy is absent in psychopathic individuals: what I’d like to show is nevertheless that this absence is not the primary cause for psychopathic amorality, but the consequence of another, more primordial, more fundamental lack. If we go back to the already cited description of typical psychopathic individuals, we find some characteristics which can be taken as primordial and which lead psychopaths to other kinds of deficits, including the lack of empathy. These characteristics are poor behavioral control, impulsivity and above all shallow affect. My suggestion is that the constitutive impossibility for psychopaths to experience mature, wholehearted emotions bring them to be callous, irresponsible, unempathetic, and, at the end of the day, amoral.²⁰ After all, empathy as we have defined it is the capacity to experience the emotions of others, and if one is unable to be deeply moved even by his own emotions, he

will remain all the more indifferent to the emotions of others. Put in another way, psychopaths do not feel empathy because they cannot feel any kind of emotion in a wholehearted manner. Being emotionally dead, they are also not concerned about others. Hence, considering the status quo of the research on empathy and psychopathy so far, it seems that we cannot conclude with certainty that empathy is necessary for moral development. It seems consequently safe to affirm that in normally developing children with a normal emotionality, methods of moral education founded in punishments – love withdrawal, positive feedbacks, as well as the offering of positive role models *etcetera* – appear to be both necessary and sufficient for the formation of a mature morality. We will see later if this hypothesis should be sustained against an empathic kind of education.

2.3. Moral Motivation

However, there is a dimension of morality that seems to be really dependent on empathy, and it is that concerning moral motivation. I think that it is undeniable that empathy and compassion do in fact play a role as powerful sentimental motivators for morality. It suffices to take a look at advertising and TV commercials for charities to notice this role.

They don't usually display data or statistics of any sort, instead, they prefer to focalize our feelings towards a particular individual. They tell us the story of a poor African child, escaping from war, they give us her name and age, they show us some heartbreaking pictures of her and tell us that she needs our help and that by donating to this charity we will save her life. This kind of strategy appears to be more effective than simply providing the audience with, say, some information about the aims of the charity and the achieved results.²¹

Nevertheless, it is possible to object that the motivational role of empathy is not necessarily and causally linked with moral behavior per se. On the contrary, empathy just has a contingent connection with helping behavior, which amounts to saying that it is a motivational force among others and that it can encourage, but also fail to encourage helping behavior. More in general, we are used to underestimating the motivational power of our emotional reactions, which are very often not based on empathy. Perhaps, an example might help to shed light on this point.

Imagine this situation: M. is a young student staying in a hostel in a foreign country, in a city he has never seen before and far from his hometown. Tomorrow is a big day for him, as he will have to pass an important exam if he wants to study at that city's university. Unfortunately, M. is unable to catch some sleep, so, he decides to go for a walk.

Once he comes back to his floor and gets out of the elevator, he sees an odd scene. An elderly woman, clearly homeless, is miserably dragging herself barefoot, stumbling down the hall and mumbling incomprehensible words. It is impossible for M. to understand if she is drunk, high on drugs, mentally ill or even injured, but it is certainly not a pleasant spectacle to watch. The thought of simply ignoring her and entering his room crosses M.'s mind, but together with this thought M. also considers the fact that the woman might be needing some help and he tells himself that he can't just leave her in this condition. So, M. decides to approach her, in order to help her in some way. The woman is a few meters ahead of him, but, after the first steps, he has to stop: he is literally paralyzed by the most tremendous stench he has ever smelled. As he comes nearer to the woman, he is able to see details he hadn't noticed before, like the fact that the white piece of cloth that covered her (that once upon a time might very well have deserved the name of 'a dress') is covered in suspicious spots. While he is still frozen and uncertain about what to do, she falls over. Once again, a voice inside M. tells himself to simply head for his room and call reception, but, as he considers this possible course of action, he feels guilty. It is clear that the woman needs help (in her indistinct muttering M. manages to hear the word 'toilet') and he feels some sort of obligation to do something for

her. So, trying to breathe as little as possible and avoiding looking at her dress, he helps her to stand up by taking her arm and eventually supports her to the toilet. After that, he reaches the reception on the ground floor, explains the situation to them and, once they tell him they would call the police and the ambulance, he finally comes back to his room and has a long, warm shower.

This example shows very clearly how the motivational force of emotions work. Let us try to analyze it step by step. When M. first came back from his walk, he was in a gloomy mood, and he was certainly not in the best condition to help. He was worried about the exam on the next day and frustrated because he was unable to get some sleep. Then he saw the woman. From the way she was dragging herself along the hall he immediately recognized that she might have needed help. In other words, M. construed the situation in his mind in the following way: 'an elderly woman seems to be in trouble, I am the only one in the hall and this condition already makes me to a given extent morally responsible for this woman, hence if I do not do anything for her, I will feel guilty'. M. is not sure from where this sense of responsibility came. Was it the result of moral rules and principles acquired in his education, like: 'help people in need'? Was it the thought that God was watching him? Or maybe the internalization of what Sartre would call *le regarde*

d'autrui? It is hard to see why we act in a given way when the possible motivations can be so different and numerous and when it cannot at all be excluded that it was in fact a combination of various motives which led us to undertaking a certain course of action. What M. knows is that this sense of guilt helped him to overcome his initial doubts and made him approach the woman. But then, a new type of emotion came into play: disgust. Disgust is a negatively valenced emotion which typically leads the person who feels it to refrain from the object that causes it. And that is exactly the effect it had on M.: he wanted to help the old woman, but what he saw and smelled prevented him from doing so. This setback caused him to review his course of action once more and to ask himself if he should really be the one to help her, if it would not be better to simply call reception and let them deal with this poor woman, etcetera. In other words, his brain, pushed by disgust, started to elaborate a possible alternative escape-strategy. But then, once again, the thought that he could not leave her on the ground, that he had to do something, struck him again. Was it a sense of responsibility? A sort of anticipatory guilt? Or maybe even an anticipatory emotion of pride in thinking that by helping her he would be doing 'the right thing', to cite the famous film of Spike Lee? Here, too, M. cannot rule out any of these elements. However, he knows something for sure: he was not

empathizing with her. He never tried to imagine what it must have been like being her and experiencing that situation; he did not feel her suffering. Being completely honest to himself, M. has to admit that he was too much concerned with his own suffering in trying to overcome his emotion of disgust to even think of empathizing with the woman. Thus, whatever force led him to help her stand on her feet and accompany her to the toilet, it certainly wasn't empathy.

Hopefully this example made clear that if it is true that that we often need some kind of emotional trigger in order to act morally, this stimulus does not need, however, to be an empathic one. Other emotions are pretty much apt to play this motivational role. What is more, empathy can sometimes even be deleterious for moral motivation, due to a phenomenon called 'vicarious distress', that is the sharing of negative feelings from others which ultimately leads us to feel distressed and renounce help.

There are several studies which have focused on this potentially very negative feature of empathy.²² Among the most famous are the works of Tania Singer and Olga Klimecki, who attempt to demonstrate the superiority of compassion towards empathy by showing how the former is free from the dangerous inclination to vicarious distress, since compassion does not involve the mirroring of any feeling, but rather, calm

and warm feelings of care and affiliation: «In contrast to empathy», write Klimecki and Singer,²³ «compassion does not mean sharing the suffering of the other: rather, it is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other's well-being.»²⁴

The aim of all these recent pieces of research is to show that empathy should not be seen as the only emotional or sentimental source we can rely on for motivational purposes when dealing with the active practice of morality. Compassion, as opposed to empathy, seems in fact to imply a tighter connection with helping behavior (after all, when I feel for someone, in contrast to feel with someone, I am already thinking of myself as somebody who can actively do something for the others, and not as a mere passive “receptor” of their feelings). And, as we have seen, compassion also appears resistant to the typical shortcomings of empathy.

Therefore, perhaps, in concentrating on empathy and on the importance to inhabit the unpleasant feelings of others and live their pain, as it were, on our own skin, we are probably overlooking how much better off we were if we were to act under the influence of more positively connotated emotions.

3. The Bright Side of Empathy

However, should we really conclude that empathy is always not only useless, but even bad for morality? Should we join that increasingly fashionable circle of critics and objectors of empathy in which we find Paul Bloom and Jesse Prinz, among others, and, in some sense, Tania Singer and Olga Klimecki? I think that we would be mistaken to do so. It is true: given the present state of research, empathy seems not to be necessary for morality: not as its base, nor as trigger for moral behavior, and, apparently, not for its development either. Nevertheless, in what follows I will try to show why empathy should and in fact does play a central role in morality.

First of all, let us come back to what I have said with regards to moral development. To put it briefly, I attempted to demonstrate that moral education can happen through the solicitation of various emotions and I concluded by affirming that these emotions seem to offer enough motivational power when it comes to inculcating morality in children. But does it also mean that empathy does not play a moral role at all? Actually, I think that it does, and that all educators should not forget to make use of it.

If I think of my childhood, I can easily remember many times in which my parents admonished me through the stimulation of my empa-

thy and I believe that this is an experience common to lots of other people. Sentences like: “Don’t act like that with your sister! How would you feel if she did the same to you?” were often to be heard. This is in fact a well-known phenomenon for psychologists and pedagogists. Martin Hoffman names it ‘inductive discipline’ or simply ‘induction’.²⁵ Hoffman conceives this mechanism to be the opposite of the ‘power-asserting’ kind of discipline, by means of which parents attempt to raise a child merely through threats of punishment (which are then carried out if the child does not obey) and by inculcating moral reflection, motivation and behavior through the sheer citing of moral rules and principles. Induction appeals on the contrary to the empathic capacity of the child by letting him imagine how he would feel if he was to undergo the harm he had done to another and thereby making him fully aware of the evil he had committed. If this strategy is applied repeatedly over time, the child will come to associate bad feelings (especially feelings of guilt) in situations in which the harm he can do is not yet done. Hoffman calls these habitual associations ‘guilt scripts’ and asserts that they are essential for moral motivation. In his own words:

“[...] peer pressure compels children to realize that others have claims; cognition enables them to understand others’ perspectives; empathic

distress and guilt motivate them to take others’ claims and perspectives into account”.²⁶

And here is where I believe that ‘anti-empathists’ like Jesse Prinz go awry. They are right when they say that at the present state of the research it is impossible to conclude with absolute certainty that empathy is necessary for moral development and, therefore, that it is also diachronically necessary for the formation of moral judgments, but we have very good clues that it might be very important. Are we sure that a child would really be able to understand what is wrong with a given action without observing and reflecting on its outcomes also at an emotional level? Let’s take again into account the ‘taking the last cookie’ example. Prinz claims that it is sufficient to construct the action as greedy to feel a pang of guilt and therefore be motivated to act morally. But the very word ‘greedy’ is, at a large extent, based on empathy. If we look at the definition of ‘greedy’ provided by the Oxford Dictionary (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/greedy>), we find: “Having an excessive desire or appetite for food” or: “Having or showing an intense and selfish desire for wealth or power.” Now, the term ‘selfish’ is quite telling. To be selfish implies a closure with regards to others, a lack of openness and receptivity to others’ sentiments, desires, needs

and expectations. The selfish person is the unempathetic person par excellence. If I feel greedy, and therefore also guilty, because I have eaten the last cookie, this is not because I think I have been greedy in the sense of gluttonous or overindulgent (I may have eaten only a few cookies), but in the sense of having been disrespectful towards you and towards the desires you might have had in relation to the cookies. And, in order to entertain this line of thought, I need empathy. In fact, suppose that in my childhood I used to eat the last cookie all the time, when sharing them with friends, and suppose that all that my parents did in reaction, was to tell me that what I did was wrong, because it was greedy, but without using the ‘inductive discipline’ method I explained earlier. That is, they did not lead me to empathize with my peers, telling me to imagine what I would feel if my friends were to always eat the last cookie. In this case, I do not think that I would have been able to develop a real sense of guilt for what I had done. I am not persuaded, in other words, that I would have been able to internalize this moral rule: it would have been only a kind of convention for me, like an external imposition. Moreover, even though I know that a critic of empathy may very well reject this view by claiming that we do not have enough evidence to conclude that other methods like punishment, love-withdrawal and so on might have worked as well, I have difficulties in thinking that

the development of a refined moral sense can really happen without empathy.

However, there is another important part of morality that we have previously analyzed, in which empathy can make its voice be heard, and it is the field of moral motivation. Does the role played by compassion and other emotions make empathy useless in this context? Furthermore, must empathic distress necessarily lead to the adoption of a selfish, rather than altruistic behavior? I think that both questions should be answered negatively.

First of all, although I agree with Singer and Klimecki (see *supra*) when they show that compassion and empathy are two distinct mechanisms which rely on two different neuronal patterns in our brain, this does not mean *ipso facto* that compassion cannot sometimes originate from empathy: as a matter of fact, this occurs very often. Take as example the videos showed by animalist or vegan associations. Here, the aim is certainly the elicitation of a strong, altruistic, and compassionate behavior towards animals, but the means employed to reach this outcome are clearly empathic. In other words, empathy is instrumentally elicited, in order to elicit compassion, as a consequence. Consider the sentences that are commonly used in these videos: “Imagine being a chicken. The first day of your life on earth you are castrated and then forced to live

your entire existence in a small place overcrowded by other chickens like you, while literally dragging yourself over your own excrement, waiting to be slaughtered”; or “Imagine being a pig and seeing the butcher stunning your mate and then killing them in front of your eyes, knowing that you would be next”, *etcetera*. It is crystal clear that this methodology is employed in order precisely to elicit empathic distress in us, in the hope that this distress will lead the spectator of the film or the reader of the article, to not only feel with animals, but to feel for them, and, eventually, do something for them. And this actually works, as, when asked, most people who became vegan answer that they did it out of respect or love for animals.²⁷ Hence, not only can empathy bring compassion, but even when it leads to an experience of empathic distress, this distress can often be preliminary to altruistic behavior.

4. *The Special Role of Empathy*

After all this, how should we considerate empathy? What role should it have for morality? Well, I wish to argue that if we take morality to regulate the actions and intentions of individuals with bodies and sensitive appetites, who live an emotional life and do not always follow the dictates of pure reason and logic, but who also value care, attachment and the resulting vulnerability they get from them, then empathy ought to be and in fact is a constitutive part of moral behavior.

Perhaps, we might be able to develop morality, as well as to act and to judge morally without empathy and use instead deontological or utilitarian principles together with what Paul Bloom calls ‘rational compassion’²⁸ (a sort of active concern for other people stemming from the rational evaluation of their needy conditions). But would it be better that way? Would that be an advantage or a disadvantage for morality? I’m inclined to think that setting aside empathy from the moral sphere should be considered a great loss. Without empathy we might reach morally significant results, but – and this is the final claim of this paper – we would not act perfectly and completely morally. This concept may sound odd to many, so, in what follows, I will try to sketch a brief, but hopefully clear explanation of what I mean by this.

Suppose that a couple, Samuel and Alice, are talking. Alice seems quite upset, so, Samuel, who loves her very much and always tries to take care of her, asks her with a concerned face what is wrong. Alice initially denies that something is wrong and attempts to change the subject, but Samuel persists. After a couple of minutes, Alice starts to open up and tells Samuel her problem. Samuel listens to her problem very carefully, without interrupting her. After Alice has finished her story, Samuel takes a couple of minutes to meditate on the matter and then exclaims: “Maybe you could...” and offers Alice what he believes is the

best solution to her problem. However, surprisingly enough for Samuel, Alice reacts with irritation: “Oh, why do you never listen to me?” Samuel is puzzled:

“What... Why do you say I never listen to you? I listened to your story for ten minutes without saying a word!”

“Oh, poor you!” replies Alice with more than a hint of sarcasm.

“No, I mean... I really care about you. I was just trying to figure out a possible solution for your problem. I wanted to help you!”

“Yeah, I see how you try to help me! You’re always the same! Too focused on yourself to really understand what the other needs. Forget about it. It’s my fault! I knew I hadn’t talked to you about it.” replies a disappointed Alice.

Samuel, astonished and hurt, is speechless.

This and other situations of the kind are with all probability common to lots of people. Let us try to analyze what went wrong in the communication between Samuel and Alice. So, Samuel cares for Alice and the moment he hears that she has a problem, he immediately prepares himself to help her. Therefore, after having listened to Alice’s story very carefully, he reflects upon the possible solution and eventually offers it to Alice. The schema is quite simple and can be resumed as follows: ‘I realize that you have a problem. From what I think I’ve understood,

your problem is “x”. And I’m convinced that the best solution for “x” is “y”. So, why don’t you try to do “y”?’ Taken per se, there is nothing wrong with this line of thought: everything seems rational and logical, and yet, Alice is convinced that Samuel has not understood her. There seems to be nothing offensive in this reasoning, and nonetheless, Alice feels offended and thinks Samuel is selfish. However, all this makes sense when we become aware of the fact that actually something is missing from this line of thought, and it is empathy. Samuel takes the problem, analyzes it, and gives the solution. Even if he said that he cares for Alice (and he really does) he does not take Alice completely into account: his focus is on the problem. And this fact is of exceptional importance for our claim, because, put in another way, we might very well affirm that Samuel in this precise case has a kind of rational compassion, but not empathy for Alice. He cares for her, he feels bad for her and feels the desire of helping her, and he accomplishes this desire by helping her out in what he thinks is the best way to do it. But he does not empathize with her, and this lack of empathy is perceived by Alice, who, as a consequence, feels hurt and reacts quite acidly. Samuel does not show empathy because he treats Alice’s problem as a mechanic would treat a breakdown in a car, or as a surgeon would treat a cancer at the stomach, that is by focusing on the problem, ultimately for the sake

of the other, of course, but without thereby feeling with the other. Perhaps, if Samuel had really tried to empathize with Alice, he would have realized that what she really needed was not a ready-made solution, but simply some moral support. Perhaps she just wanted to be listened to and then hear soothing words of concern. She wanted to feel herself cared about and not just to see the effects of care. And this kind of aid can be offered only by empathy. That is why I argue that the *feeling with* alone can already possess moral value. Moreover, frequently when we are troubled it is not the *feeling for* that we seek (which, after all, can often be overly paternalistic and make the object of compassion feel pitied), but the feeling with. We want people to be tuned into us. We like it when we are on the same wavelength with our partner or our friends, but also with our doctor, with our politicians, even with strangers. In fact, we spend our whole lives looking for people who are tuned into us.

My claim is that to help others with compassion, but not with empathy, can sometimes work perfectly fine, but in the long run it can lead to several problems: it can create a distance between the person who feels a rational kind of compassion, and the target of their compassion. Since on the one side there is an individual with warm feelings of concern and who is very much inclined to help, but who does not feel, in the slight-

est, the same feelings as the suffering person, and on the other side this latter subject, who does not feel the helping person is tuned into their feelings ends up just feeling pitied. Kant famously remarked in the Critique of Pure Reason that thoughts without intuitions are empty and that intuitions without concepts are blind. Well, I think that we can find the same connection between empathy and compassion: empathy without compassion is sometimes empty (because it does not always necessarily lead to helping behavior) and compassion without empathy is blind (because we cannot really act morally towards another person without first being in tune with them). Furthermore, it seems that the role empathy can play in morals was noticed even by the staunchest defender of the law of duty, Kant, who refers to it with the name ‘sympathy’ or ‘sympathetic feeling’, or in German: *Teilnehmende Empfindung*, and writes about it:

“Sympathetic joy and sadness (*sympathia moralis*) are sensible feelings of pleasure or pain [...] at another’s state of joy or sorrow (shared feeling, sympathetic feeling). Nature has already implanted in man susceptibility to these feelings. But to use this as a means to promoting active and rational benevolence is still a particular, though only a conditional, duty. It is called the duty of humanity (*humanitas*) because man is regard-

ed here not merely as a rational being but also as an animal endowed with reason”.²⁹ [Emphasis in original].

From this quote it can be noticed that for Kant empathy is a natural sentiment and that we can use it instrumentally in order to achieve what duty alone (i.e. the categorical imperative) would not be able to achieve. It seems fair to affirm that Kant sees empathy as a sort of emotional ‘crutch’ or ‘prosthesis’ for the moral man, and I share this view. But I also think that by developing this view of Kant we can reach two other important conclusions about the moral dimension of empathy that we can summarize in two slogans: (A) empathy is a fundamental part of our humanity (what Kant calls ‘humanitas’), and (B) empathy is what is in some cases required to not only act morally but to act in a morally, so to say, ‘more perfect’ way.

Let us consider again the example of Samuel and Alice. This example illustrates the intrinsic value of empathy compared to compassion. Empathy has a special and unique importance on its own, regardless of whether it can lead to compassion, or not. When we are in need, we do not want someone helping us with the gloating and detached smile of a bodhisattva, we want a certain sharing, a commonality of feelings, we want – in a sense – to be ‘welcomed’ in the hearts of others. We want

them to be open and receptive, even vulnerable towards us. And to those of whom would argue that sometimes we want friends to be happy when we are sad, so that we can try to forget our pain by sharing their happiness, it should be answered not only that this is in fact another case of empathy (we basically empathize with our friends’ joyful state), but also that who holds such a claim has with all probability never experienced the warm and sweet sensation one gets when, in communicating to a friend one’s own sorrow, one sees the other shedding a tear in response.

My claim is that even if it makes no sense to affirm that a person has not acted morally when they had good intentions and when they chose a morally apt means of realizing those intentions, if they have failed to empathize with the other when it was needed, then their action cannot be considered morally perfect, because it was not perfectly appropriate for the situation. In some cases (as we have seen with Samuel and Alice’s example), empathy is even what is required to really be of some help and reach one’s own moral aims.

Furthermore, empathy can even play an epistemological role which is sometimes essential. As a matter of fact, what a good moral agent should do in order to perform a moral action requires often to engage in a deliberative process. Of course, there can be circumstances in

which the action to be performed by the moral agent is so self-evident that the recourse to empathy becomes useless, as in the well-known Singerian example of the child drowning in shallow waters. In such cases it indeed makes no sense to empathize with the person in trouble before acting. However, there are other more complex cases for which empathy is a fundamental guide in the process of deliberation. For example, when we want to help a colleague. In this case, empathizing with her and trying to see things from her perspective can be essential to understand what possible course of action should be undertaken. Through empathy for our colleague we might for instance discover that the plan we had regarding how to help her was wrong, for example because at that precise moment the best support we can offer is to give her some time to clear her head, or the like. Of course, empathy is not the only way to get this kind of information about our colleague: we may discover the same information by simply discussing it with her, for instance. Even then, however, empathy would be an important source of information-gathering among others.

5. Conclusion

After all these considerations, it is now time to draw our conclusions. The claims which I have attempted to defend in this paper are the following:

- (1) Although, taking into consideration the present state of the research, empathy cannot be said with certainty to be necessary for morality, there is evidence that link it – as we have seen – to compassion and helping behavior, which in turn are commonly considered to be integral parts of morality. Empathy seems also to be able to complement a morality based on a set of rational principles and can be instrumentally used as a motivational ‘crutch’.
- (2) Empathy seems, in some cases, to be even sufficient for moral behavior, as in the cases in which ‘feeling with’, instead of ‘feeling for’ is required. In other words, empathizing is sometimes the moral thing to do.
- (3) Empathy can play an important role even at an epistemological level. Through empathy we can in fact get access to the thoughts and feelings of another human being, and thanks to it we can engage in a course of action with much more information at hand regarding what we should do in order to effectively help. After all, if one really wants

to help others, he should try to see things from their perspective, and not from his own.

In conclusion I want to argue that if we chose to get rid of empathy in the sphere of morals, we would not only lose, to use once again Kant's words: «a great moral adornment»³⁰ but our very humanity would be mutilated. To feel with others, to take their perspectives, to experience their joy and their pain, to be, in one word, receptive towards other human beings is a fundamental part of what it means to be human. And it is certainly not a coincidence that the adjective 'humane' in English is used as a synonym of 'compassionate', 'sympathetic', or 'empathic'. In fact, how would a person who always acts morally, but who never experiences empathy for other creatures, look like? I claim that their acts would be only formally moral, but they would unveil an imperfect moral content. It is a cold kind of care that care which is performed without empathy for the other. It is a cold kind of love that love which is felt without empathy. And if we all agree on the special places occupied by love and care not only in our relationships with other humans and animals, but also in our moral behavior, then we should never forego empathy.

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⁵ See S. Gallagher, *The Practice of Mind. Theory, Simulation or Primary Interaction?*, in *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8, 2001, pp. 83–108; S. Gallagher, *Simulation Trouble*, in *Social Neuroscience* 2, 2007, pp. 353–365; P. Goldie, *Ant-Empathy*, in A. Coplan and P. Goldie

(eds.) *Empathy. Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, 2011, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 302–317.

⁶ See e.g. M. Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. 30.

⁷ See A. Bain, *Emotions and the Will*, Longmans, Green, London 1899; L. A. Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1980; S. Darwall, *Empathy, sympathy, care*, in *Philosophical Studies* 89, 261–282; C. Darwin, *The descent of man and selection in relation to sex*, Appleton, New York 1871; F. B. M. de Waal, *Good Natured: The origins of right and wrong in humans and other animals*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1996; N. Eisenberg & J. Strayer (eds.), *Empathy and its Development*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1987; R. J. Gruen & G. Mendelsohn, *Emotional responses to affective displays in others: The distinction between empathy and sympathy*, in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51, 1986, pp. 609–614; S. D. Preston & F. B. M. de Waal, *Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases*, in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 25, 2002, pp. 1–72; L. Wispé, *The distinction between sympathy and empathy: To call forth a concept a word is needed*, in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50, 1986, pp. 314–321; L. Wispé, *The Psychology of Sympathy*, Plenum, New York 1991.

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¹⁰ D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Floating Word Press, Portland (OR) 2009, p. 762.

¹¹ J. Prinz, *Is Empathy Necessary for Morality?*, in A. Coplan and P. Goldie (eds.) *Empathy. Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. 214.

¹² J. Prinz, *idem*, p. 215.

¹³ Probably the most famous and well-documented works are those of M. L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, and the life-long work of Batson and his colleagues, good summarized in C. D. Batson & L. L. Shaw *Evidence for Altruism: Toward a Pluralism of Prosocial Motives*, in *Psychological Inquiry* 2(2), 1991, pp. 107–122 and C. D. Batson *Altruism in Humans*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

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¹⁸ See R. J. R. Blair, *idem* and R. J. R. Blair, L. Jones, F. Clark, M. Smith, *Is the Psychopath “Morally Insane”?* in *Personality and Individual Differences* 19, 1995, pp. 741–752.

¹⁹ See also M. L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000.

²⁰ For a similar view, see the already cited work of Prinz (2011).

²¹ For studies confirming the important role of empathy for donations to charities see e.g. G. A. Verhaert, D. Van den Poel, *Empathy as added value in predicting donation behavior*, in *Journal of Business Research* 64, pp. 1288–1295; see also S. Lee, K. P. Winterich and W. T. Ross *I’m Moral, But I Won’t Help You: The Distinct Roles of Empathy and Justice in Donations*, in *Journal of Consumer Research* 41, pp. 678–696 for an interesting study comparing the effects of empathy and perceived moral responsibility when donating to a charity and D. A. Small & N. M. Verrochi, *The Face of Need: Facial Emotion Expression on Charity Advertisements*, in *Journal of Marketing Research* 46, pp. 777–787 for the consequences of showing certain facial emotion expressions in a charity’s advertising on our choice to financially support it.

²² See i.a. C. D. Batson, S. Early, & G. Salvarani, *Perspective taking: Imagining how another feels versus imagining how you would feel*, in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23, 1997, pp. 751–758; C. D. Batson, D. A. Lishner, A. Carpenter, L. Dulin, S. Harjusola-Webb, E. R. Stocks, S. Gale, O. Hassan, & B. Sampat, “... As you would have them do unto you”: *Does imagining yourself in the other’s place stimulate moral action?*, in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 29, 2003, pp. 1190–1201; P. L. Jackson, E. Brunet, A. N. Meltzoff, & J. Decety, *Empathy examined through the neural mechanisms involved in imagining how I feel versus how you feel pain*, in *Neuropsychologia* 44, 2006, pp. 752–761; C. Lamm, C. D. Batson, & J. Decety, *The neural substrate of human empathy: Effects of perspective-taking and cognitive appraisal*, in *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 19, 2007, pp. 1–17.

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²⁴ For further analysis see O. M. Klimecki & T. Singer, *Empathy from the Perspective of Social Neuroscience*, in J. Armony & Vuilleumier (eds.) *The Cambridge handbook of affective neuroscience*, 2013, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp. 533–55; O. M. Klimecki & T. Singer, *Compassion*, in: A. W. Toga, (ed.) *Brain Mapping: An Encyclopedic Reference*, vol. 3, 2015, Academic Press: Elsevier, pp. 195–199; O. M. Klimecki, M. Ricard, T. Singer, *Empathy Versus Compassion: Lessons from 1st and 3rd Person Methods*, in: T. Singer and M. Bolz (eds.) *Compassion: Bridging Practice and Science*, 2013, Max Planck Society. E-book: <http://www.compassion-training.org/?page=download&lang=en>; O. M. Klimecki, S. Leiberg, M. Ricard, T. Singer, *Differential Pattern of Functional Brain Plasticity after Compassion and Empathy Training*, in *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 9, 2014, pp. 873–879.

²⁵ M. L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, Chapters 5 and 6.

²⁶ M. L. Hoffman, *idem*, pp. 10–11.

²⁷ See, e.g., a survey conducted with 726 vegans in Australia, where it is displayed that the main reason for people going vegan is ethics for animals: <https://vomadlife.com/blogs/news/why-most-people-go-vegan-2016-survey-results-reveal-all>

For studies highlighting the fundamental role of empathy in animal ethics see especially E. Aaltola, *Animal suffering: Philosophy and culture*, Palgrave, New York 2012; F. Ascione, (ed.) *The international handbook of animal abuse and cruelty: Theory, research, and application*. West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2008; J. Berenguer, *The effect of empathy in proenvironmental attitudes and behaviors*, in *Environment and Behavior* 3, 2007, pp. 269–283; L. Gruen, *Empathy and vegetarian commitments*, in Sapontzi SS (ed.) *Food for thought: The debate over eating meat*, 2004, Prometheus, New York, pp. 284–293; L. Gruen, *Attending to nature: empathetic engagement with the more than human world*, in *Ethics and the Environment* 14, 2009, pp. 23–38; T. Signal, N. Taylor, *Attitude to animals and empathy: comparing animal protection and general community samples*, in *Anthrozoös* 20, 2007, pp. 125–130; R. C. Solomon, *Peter Singer's Expanding Circle: Compassion and the liberation of ethics*, in D. Jamieson (ed.) *Singer and his critics*, 1999, Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 64–84..

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²⁹ I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Intr., Trans., and Notes by M. Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, p. 250.

³⁰ I. Kant, *idem*, p. 251.