

Empathy

*Philosophical and Psychological
Perspectives*

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Understanding Empathy:

Its Features and Effects

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The concept of empathy has received an enormous amount of attention in the past few decades, appearing in the popular press,¹ political campaigns,² and in the study of a wide range of topics, including autism spectrum disorders,³ psychopathy,⁴ political ideologies,⁵ medical care,⁶ ethics and moral development,⁷ justice and the court,⁸ gender differences,⁹ engagement with art and the media,¹⁰ therapeutic methods in

¹ See, e.g. articles in the *New York Times* (Blakeslee, 2006), *Time* (Nash, 2007), *Scientific American* (Giacomo, Fogassi, and Gallese (2006)), and *Scientific American Mind* (Dobbs (2006)).

² Since he began campaigning for President, Barack Obama has invoked the concept of empathy in dozens of speeches on multiple topics. While speaking to Planned Parenthood on July 17, 2007, he famously remarked that he would use empathy as a criterion for his selection of Supreme Court Justices: 'in the overwhelming number of Supreme Court decisions, that's enough. Good intellect. You read the statute. You look at the case law, and most of the time the law is pretty clear—95% of the time . . . But it's those 5% of the cases that really count. And in those 5% of the cases what you got to look at it is: What is in the justice's heart? What's their broader vision of what America should be? You know, Justice Roberts said he saw himself just as an umpire. But the issues that come before the court are not sport. They're life and death. And we need somebody who's got the heart to recognize—the empathy to recognize what it's like to be a young, teenaged mom; the empathy to understand what it's like to be poor or African-American or gay or disabled or old. And that's the criteria by which I'm going to be selecting my judges' (quotation reported by Livingston and Murray, 2009 on msnbc.com).

³ Baron-Cohen (2003, 2009); Dapretto et al. (2005); Iacoboni & Dapretto (2006); Gallese (2006); Clark, Winkielman, & McIntosh (2008); Blair (2008a).

⁴ Richell, Mitchell, et al. (2003); Blair, Mitchell, & Blair (2005); King, Blair et al. (2006); Decety & Moriguchi (2007); Blair (2006, 2008a); Shirliff et al. (2009).

⁵ Lakoff (2002, 2004); Iacoboni (2008).

⁶ Halpern (2001, 2007, 2009); Stepien & Baernstein (2006); Pedersen (2010).

⁷ Hoffman (2000 and this collection); Eisenberg and Fabes, et al. (1994); Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad (2006); Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade (1987); Batson (1991); Batson, Lishner, et al. (2003); Slotte (2007); Einolf (2008).

⁸ Hoffman (1987, 2000, and this collection).

⁹ Baron-Cohen (2003); Schulte-Rüther et al. (2008); Klein & Hodges (2001); Strauss (2004); Graham & Ickes (1997); Ickes, Gesn, & Graham (2000).

¹⁰ Feagin (1996); Walton (1990, 1997, 1999); Smith (1995); Currie & Ravenscroft (2002); Currie (2004); Coplan (2004, 2006, 2009); Kaplan (2005 and this collection); Carroll (2008 and this collection).

clinical psychology,¹¹ mirror neurons,¹² and theory of mind.¹³ Given its central role in so many discussions and debates, it's safe to conclude that whatever empathy is, it's important.

So what is it? Depending on whom you ask, empathy can be understood as one or more of several loosely related processes or mental states.¹⁴ Some of the most popular include the following:

- (A) Feeling what someone else feels
- (B) Caring about someone else
- (C) Being emotionally affected by someone else's emotions and experiences, though not necessarily experiencing the same emotions
- (D) Imagining oneself in another's situation
- (E) Imagining being another in that other's situation
- (F) Making inferences about another's mental states
- (G) Some combination of the processes described in (A)–(F)

The number of competing conceptualizations circulating the literature has created a serious problem with the study of empathy by making it difficult to keep track of which process or mental state the term is being used to refer to in any given discussion. Keeping track is important because the different conceptualizations refer to distinct psychological processes that vary, sometimes widely, in their function, phenomenology, mechanisms, and effects. Further confusing things is the fact that researchers approach the examination of empathy with differing, often incommensurable approaches, from a priori theorizing to the examination and analysis of patterns of neural activation through functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).

Rather than dismissing the concept of empathy altogether, a number of researchers have responded to the conceptual confusion by beginning their discussions of empathy with an acknowledgment of the varied uses of the term and then stipulating a particular definition for their discussion. This seems like a reasonable temporary solution, particularly for those interested in the role a particular process plays in a given experience or debate rather than in characterizing and analyzing the concept of empathy.

An alternative, rather ecumenical solution has been to include the multitude of diverse processes that get labeled empathy under a single broad disjunctive concept.

¹¹ Kohut (1977, 1984); Rogers (1957, 1961); Kahn & Rachman (2000); Orange (1995); Geist (2009); Clark (2007); Gladstein & Brennan (1987); and Bohart & Greenberg (1997).

¹² Iaconi (2008, 2009a); Keyser (2009); Gallese & Goldman (1998); Goldman (2006a and this collection); essays in Pineda (2009a).

¹³ Goldman (1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 2006a); Goldman & Sripada (2005); Gordon (1986, 1995, 2009); Hurley (2008); Stueber (2006, 2008).

¹⁴ For an overview of the history of the concept, see the introduction to this collection; Stueber (2006, 2008); Gladstein (1984); Gladstein & Brennan (1987); Wispé (1986, 1987, 1991); and Eisenberg & Strayer (1987). Useful surveys of research on empathy within particular disciplines and sub-disciplines can be found in Clark (2007), Verducci (2005), Sawicki (1997), Basch (1983), Bohart & Greenberg (1997), Throop (2008), Eisenberg (2000), and Coplan (2009).

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Stephanie Preston and Frans de Waal claim that the empirical data on the various processes is consistent across studies on a variety of species and propose a 'unified story' across disciplines, situations, and species.¹⁵ Though they acknowledge differences among some of the processes, they claim that the distinctions have been 'overemphasized to the point of distraction'¹⁶ and insist that the different views of empathy can be cohered into a unified whole if a broad view of the Perception-Action Model is taken.¹⁷ They therefore define empathy very broadly as 'any process where the attended perception of the object generates a state in the subject that is more applicable to the object's state or situation than to the subject's own prior state or situation.'¹⁸

Preston and de Waal's account and others like it take us in the wrong direction. Far from being 'emphasized to the point of distraction,' the differences among processes (A)-(E) enumerated above haven't been emphasized enough, particularly those that exist between some of the higher-level processes. We need more specificity, not more generality. New developments in cognitive neuroscience and philosophy of mind on mirror neurons, mirror systems, shared representations, simulation, and emotion are revealing more about the differences among the processes labeled empathy and why they are significant. We should strive to be as precise as possible.

With this in mind, my goal in this paper is to propose a narrow conceptualization of empathy informed by recent psychological and neuroscientific research. Although I am in favor of restricting the use of the term empathy to the high-level process I'll describe, my concern is less with terminology than with clarifying the essential features of the process. In other words, it is less important that we call this process empathy than that we stop conflating it with several related processes for it is the conflation that has led to so much ambiguity and confusion, making it difficult to analyze and evaluate empathy researchers' work and threatening to hamper both philosophical and empirical efforts to study the significance of all of these processes. Under my proposed conceptualization, empathy is a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation.^X To say that empathy is 'complex' is to say that it is simultaneously a cognitive and affective process. To say that empathy is 'imaginative' is to say that it involves the

¹⁵ Preston & de Waal (2002).

¹⁶ Ibid. 2.

¹⁷ Ibid. 4-5.

¹⁸ Ibid. 4. Preston and de Waal's definition is based on Martin Hoffman's (2000). In his 2009 book *The Age of Empathy*, which is briefly discussed in the introduction to this collection, de Waal elaborates on the work he did with Preston and continues to argue for a broad conceptualization of empathy. He proposes what he calls the 'Russian Doll Model' of empathy, according to which empathy comes in many different varieties, some primitive and others highly sophisticated. De Waal objects to restricting the term empathy to high-level processes because, in his view, doing so denies how much empathy is a part of who we are. I disagree. We can be more precise in our conceptualizations without dismissing or devaluing low-level mirroring processes or ignoring the critical role they play in our lives. Preston and de Waal are right to emphasize their importance. However, they have their own unique characteristics and effects on our lives. As I will go on to argue, including them under the rubric of empathy does not elevate them; it simply confuses things.

representation of a target's states that are activated by, but not directly accessible through, the observer's perception.¹⁹ And to say that empathy is a 'simulation' is to say that the observer replicates or reconstructs the target's experiences, while maintaining a clear sense of self-other differentiation.

Although my proposed conceptualization departs in some important respects from other recent conceptualizations offered by philosophers and social scientists, I hope to show that, in spite of this, it is conceptually cleaner, captures several of the key intuitive characteristics of the ordinary use of the term and, most importantly, that it dovetails with recent psychological and neuroscientific research. I take the view that philosophical theories should be constrained by empirical research whenever possible, and that while we as philosophers should never accept the conclusions of empirical scientists uncritically, to ignore them is to render our work less relevant, less credible, and, ultimately, less meaningful.

In the sections below, I describe what I take to be the three essential features of empathy: affective matching, other-oriented perspective-taking, and self-other differentiation. All of these features are necessary for empathy, but none is sufficient on its own. An observer affectively matches a target only if the observer's affective states are the same in kind as the target's, though they may vary in degree. In other-oriented perspective-taking, an observer imagines a target's situation, experiences, and characteristics as though he were the target. And an observer maintains self-other differentiation only if he continuously represents himself as distinct from the target, thereby avoiding confusion about their respective situations, experiences, and characteristics. Together these features make up empathy, a unique kind of understanding through which we can experience what it is like to be another person.

1.1 Affective Matching

Affect is a broad category encompassing multiple mental states, all typically thought to involve feelings and some degree of physiological arousal. Emotion and mood are paradigm cases of affect. Affective states are not necessarily directed at specific objects nor do they necessarily involve cognitive evaluations or appraisals. Although most researchers agree that empathy has an affective component, just how to characterize that component is a matter of some controversy. Under my proposal, affective matching occurs only if an observer's affective states are qualitatively identical to a target's, though they may vary in degree. The observer must therefore experience the same type of emotion (or affect) as the target. This is a stricter condition than²⁰

¹⁹ I am using imagination here to refer to a process through which one recreates or enacts some mental state. Some philosophers refer to this as recreative imagination. Alvin Goldman uses the term 'enactment' imagination, which he distinguishes from what he calls 'suppositional' imagination (2006a). As Goldman explains, when one imagines feeling X, it is not enough for one to *suppose* that one feels X; one must try to enact the feeling of X (2006a: 47–9). In other words, one must do more than entertain the idea or possibility of feeling X. One must recreate an experience of X.

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