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Empathy Revisited

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In his science fiction novel, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep, Philip Dick's main character, Deckard, has a peculiar job—to find and “retire” androids who have begun to misbehave. However, all recently-created androids look and act exactly like humans, and no IQ test can differentiate between the two. Fortunately, Deckard has at his disposal the Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test, a series of imaginary situations presented to a subject. These imaginary situations evoke automatic measurable empathic reactions in any normal human but not in an android. The android's absence of empathy is readily apparent.

Dick spells out an intriguing vision of what it means to be human. Unlike Descartes who argues that it is not conceivable to have an automaton with the ability to use language, because to him, the crux of what it means to be human is the ability to speak and reason, the 20th century novelist does not have a problem conceiving of such an automaton. However, in Dick's story, automatons cannot empathize with others. Deckard occasionally wonders why “an android bounced helplessly about when confronted by an empathy-measuring test,” and concludes that “empathy, evidently, existed only within human community”.

Dick's novel nicely captures two central debates in the 20th century psychological literature: specifically, what empathy is and how it is developed. For Dick, empathy is an automatic, affective, built-in response evoked by emotional reactions to conspecifics and, as such, is fairly independent of cognitive and linguistic abilities. Dick also provides a tentative developmental account of empathy whereby empathy originated in human evolution and is now a built-in propensity. But in an unexpected plot twist at the end of the novel, Dick opens up the possibility that androids may be able to develop empathy by socializing with humans and each other.

Finally, by choosing empathy as the defining feature of human nature, Dick makes explicit what is often assumed but rarely spelled out: one of our most important capacities is our ability to feel with and for others. As it is interwoven with everything we do and everything we are, empathy is usually unnoticed and taken for granted. We take for granted that some people cry during sentimental movies. We take for granted that when we frown, our friends and family will know how we feel. We take for granted our ability to feel compassion for those who lose their loved ones. We take for granted that the suffering of others does not leave people indifferent.



Sixteen years ago, I wrote my doctoral thesis on empathy. Its opening paragraphs are those you just read. I still consider them a solid introduction to the philosophical enquiry into the nature and development of empathy. But now after all these years, I feel it is time to revisit some of the conclusions I reached then and enrich them with what I have learned about emotions and their history in the meantime.

Empathy as Cognition/ Empathy as Emotion

So what is empathy? In the psychological literature, it is often defined as a capacity to feel with and/or understand others. But this understanding of empathy is not unique to psychology. It appears in debates on *empathie* in aesthetics, debates on the role of pity and compassion in altruism, and in debates on the methodology of the social sciences, including work by thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey and R. G. Collingwood. What makes 20th century psychological approaches to empathy unique is their interest in underlying cognitive and

affective psychological mechanisms responsible for it and their attempt to determine whether we learn to empathize in the course of development or if this ability is innate and hard-wired in our evolutionary past.

Two independent traditions in empathy research can be identified in developmental and social psychology. One conceptualizes empathy as an essentially cognitive phenomenon and a higher form of social understanding that comes in the form of perspective taking and de-centering and does not occur before middle childhood. The other understands empathy as an affective reactivity to others that is, in some primitive form, present at birth, but it takes on a more advanced form in the course of development. Some theories and models of empathy try to bridge the gap between these two traditions by acknowledging that empathy is a complex capacity consisting of cognitive and affective processes, as well as reactions, and that some more basic aspects of it, such as emotional contagion, are evolutionary selected, while more advanced aspects, such as compassion and perspective taking, are practiced and learned (see, e.g., Davis 1994; Eisenberg 1986; Hoffman 1984).

In my thesis, I was mostly concerned with two dichotomies entrenched in all developmental accounts of empathy: the cognitive/affective dichotomy and the nature/nurture one. My impression was that most psychological approaches to empathy offer a far too simplistic and mechanistic view of its development, forgetting that it is not merely a set of empathic capacities (cognitive and/or affective) that develop throughout childhood, but a full blown person. Furthermore, I argued that these theories hold on to the nature/nurture dichotomy because they assume the child is a lone individual of the Cartesian kind: a lonely ego who needs to acquire certain cognitive, emotional, and linguistic capacities to make sense of the outside world. To account for the child's ability to learn about the world and other people so quickly, many psychologists have posited innately given and evolutionary selected constraints (ranging from basic emotions to language acquisition devices and theory of mind).

In my thesis, I entertained another possibility and asked what would happen if we started with the assumption that emotions and cognition are constitutive of each other, internally related (not externally and mechanically), and the way we emotionally experience other people in the first year of life determines not only the way we understand other people as adults but also the way we understand ourselves. I also proposed that we start, not with the aforementioned Cartesian inside-out view of development, but with the assumption that the child begins life as a part of a mother-child dyad, with a sense of an independent self emerging only later. In fact, this is something psychoanalysts have been far more aware of (see, e.g., Mahler 1975).

I still find these insights compelling. Of course, not all have stood the test of time. Some criticisms of the empathic models I advanced look weak to me now. But I want to keep these two and enrich them, if I can, with new insights I gained over the years.

The Study of Empathy

The first move to make in understanding empathy further comes from studying anthropology, history, and psychology of emotions especially how these different disciplines understand the origins and nature of emotions. On the one hand, anthropologists and historians (see, e.g., Levy 1975; Rosaldo 1980; for a summary of historical approaches, see,

e.g., Plamper 2015) often work within social constructivism according to which the emotions we feel and the way we express them are shaped by the culture we live in. On the other hand, some psychologists posit a universal nature of at least some basic human emotions (such as happiness, sadness, fear, and anger) that are then understood as evolutionary selected and universal across cultures (see, e.g., Izard 1977; Ekman 1992).

There is no need at this point to enter into a debate between radical social constructivists (who go hand in hand with relativists) and rigid biological universalists (for compromises between the two see, e.g., Reddy, 2001; Toohey, 2011; Barrett 2006). Instead, I want to focus on a less controversial insight that both sides tend to agree upon: our culture shapes the way we express our emotions even in the case of those that are basic and universal. Moreover, the emotional regimes of our society, to use Reddy's term, prescribe what we are supposed to feel, to what extent, and under which circumstances. Indeed, which emotions are appropriate to feel and when they can be felt depend on gender, class, age, and the like. The cultural norms governing our emotional lives change over time and differ between societies. Once-popular emotions can go out of fashion (such as honor, for instance), and emotions that were more or less gender-specific in the past (such as courage or compassion) can be encouraged for everybody. In his entertaining book about boredom, Peter Toohey charts how (un)fashionable boredom was in different cultures of the past, particularly among ancient Greeks and Romans, because Greeks and Romans have been accused by some contemporary social constructivists of never being bored at all!

What does this insight bring to our understanding of empathy? Even if we side with some evolutionary psychologists and accept that empathy has its roots in our evolutionary past, and that some of its aspects have evolved to ensure group survival because they enhance altruistic behaviour and/or are essential for social cognition, we can still ask what kind of cultures and societies have made empathy flourish. Which cultures have made empathy a central value for their members?

Philanthropy and Altruism

One way to answer this question is to go back in time to late Antiquity, starting when Constantine converted to Christianity (312) and allowed Christians to observe their faith without prosecution in the Roman Empire (313). A few centuries later, Justinian (529) outlawed paganism. Over this period, most Byzantine charitable institutions were founded, including hospitals, leprosaria, orphanages, homes for widows, and homes for seniors. The role of the Christian Church in the foundation of these philanthropic institutions cannot be overstated.

Christianization of the Greek city was deliberate and visible in this shift toward open and organized philanthropy. In the third century when the plague hit Alexandria during the reign of Emperor Gallienus (259-268), Christians helped the sick in an organized and systematic way. Bishop Dionysios urged his fellow Christians to remember Christ's command and not abandon the sick but nurse them and bury them properly if they died. Dionysios also condemned the behavior of pagans who left or who expelled their sick relatives. This might have been an exaggeration of the Church historian Eusebius, but the story still tells us that

the Church of Alexandria was already big and rich enough to organize on a mass scale to help those in need (for more information on Christian philanthropic institutions, see Miller 1997, 2003).

Why this move toward philanthropy coincided with the rise of Christianity is not a mystery. After all, the Gospels say: “For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me” (Matthew 25: 35-36). Christianity was the force that made altruistic acts of helping, giving, and sharing essential. Sacrifice for one’s fellow humans became an aspiration in life and the way of salvation. The extent to which lay Christians were concerned with helping the poor can be seen in their letters to two 6th-century hermits of Gaza, John and Barsanuphius. The letters contain questions on how to give and who to help, who has priority, and what the remedy is for being selfish when we do not feel like giving away our property (for more details on the correspondence of John and Barsuniphuius, see Hevelone-Harper 2005).

Altruistic behaviour was clearly encouraged. But what about the inner feeling of empathy (feeling with and for the other)? What did early Christians think about the feeling of compassion, not just compassionate acts? Writings of Gregory the Great (c540-604) can help us here, as he was very interested in the psychological aspects of suffering with a fellow human. For Gregory, co-suffering refined the human soul and made an individual more inclined to help. So, he insisted that the feeling of compassion for and suffering with the other benefits not only the one who is in pain but also the one who commiserates. Gregory was one of the first to describe the psychological process of soothing the other person:

For the order in consolation is, that when we want to soothe someone who is afflicted with grief we first try to join with his sorrow by grieving. For the person who does not join with the pain cannot console the person suffering, since the greater the discrepancy between his own [feelings] and the distress of the sufferer, the less he is accepted by him [the sufferer], from whom he is separated by his mental state. But the mind must first be softened, that it may correspond with [that of] the distressed, and by corresponding connect, and by connecting draw him in (Gregory the Great, *Moralia on Job*, 1.3.20).

As Susan Wessel (2016) nicely captures when commenting on this passage, for Gregory, compassion should be more than just a natural or accidental way humans react to the suffering of others. Compassion should be taught, trained, and valued and should be on equal grounds with other Christian virtues, such as self-control and discipline.

What does this co-suffering look like according to Gregory? When we reach for the other to alleviate their pain, in the compassionate act, we are meeting them in their feelings. We should let ourselves feel their suffering, let them see we are in tune with them and are reaching out for them. When our feelings are in tune with the other, this on its own eases their pain and alleviates their sorrow. In this act, the one who sets out to help must “lower” themselves to the level of the other person—but only so that they can lift them up. As Gregory puts it, “Thus we neither lift up the fallen, if we do not bend from the straightness of our standing posture” (*Moralia on Job*, 1.3.20).

The role model we are to follow in our compassion for the other is Christ who emptied himself of divine nature (*kenosis*) in order to save ours:

Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Philippians 2: 6-8).

By letting ourselves merge with the suffering of the other, we are healing the other just like Christ healed us.

It is important to note that for Gregory, suffering with the other does not serve the external purpose of establishing societal bonds and maintaining group cohesion, as many philosophers and contemporary psychologists would argue. Rather, it is the way of spiritual transformation. He might have agreed that co-suffering helps in those matters too, but for Gregory, the most important aspect of grieving and co-grieving is that it helps us humble ourselves and, in this way, improve ourselves. So even if we are fortunate and have never experienced poverty, war, or famine, empathizing with others who have experienced these privations could transform us spiritually.

When we go back to the period of early Christianity, we find Christians nourishing empathy in all its forms: both its altruistic acts and its emotional aspects. Church fathers taught their fellow Christians how to feel with their brothers and sisters and how to help them. They explained how fellow Christians are to discern the need and suffering of others. But like Gregory the Great, they also taught empathy as a way to transcend ourselves and become better people. What is remarkable about the early Christian culture is that it not only valued the outward acts of altruism and almsgiving materialized in the first philanthropic institutions; it also encouraged Christians to see, recognize, and acknowledge the suffering of others, to weep with those who wept in order to lift them up.

Toward a Fuller Picture of Empathy

The Christian understanding of compassion and empathy that I have briefly outlined here was shaped by a profoundly different understanding of the individual than we find in today's developmental literature on empathy. There is none of the cognitive/affective dichotomy so prevalent today. The focus was not (and indeed could not be) on human psychological capacities but on the human soul. However, this did not stop Gregory the Great from describing the psychological process of empathizing in a precise and illuminating way.

Furthermore, for Gregory, we are not isolated Cartesian selves. We do not need empathy to make sense of what other people feel and think, nor are we members of social groups who need empathy to make the group functional. Instead, empathy needs to be cherished, encouraged, taught and valued as one of the key Christian virtues, because it is the way to save our soul. By letting ourselves be vulnerable the way Christ did when he emptied himself

for us, we become better people; we go through a spiritual transformation that gets us closer to God. The immersion with the other and their suffering saves us both.

This brings me to my final point. In addition to overcoming the cognitive/affective and nature/nurture dichotomies in our study of empathy (as I argued many years ago), it now seems to me that we need to go beyond psychology of empathy to get a fuller picture of what empathy is. We need to venture into its history, but we also need to examine its theology. Without this type of examination, the psychological study of empathy risks being incomplete and misguided.

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