

Articles

Empathy and sympathy: The important difference

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Humans greatly surpass all other species in the capacity to vicariously experience the feelings of others. Two terms have arisen for this phenomenon of “stepping into another’s shoes”: ‘sympathy’ and ‘empathy.’ Because their extensions overlap, the two terms are often taken to be interchangeable. Though convenient, this practice has allowed a certain confusion into our thinking about the ways in which we participate in the feelings of another. In this article, I will argue that blurring the distinction between empathy and sympathy has caused us to miss important complexities in human motivation as well as to overlook and fail to develop the unique capacity to empathize. By strengthening the distinction between empathy and sympathy, I hope to encourage the study and development of what is truly empathy.

‘Empathy’ and ‘sympathy’ in everyday discourse

Though ‘empathy’ and ‘sympathy’ are often used interchangeably, a subtle variation in ordinary usage can be detected which we will seek to artificially sharpen here.¹ To empathize is to respond to another’s perceived emotional state by experiencing feelings of a similar sort. Sympathy, on the other hand, not only includes empathizing, but also entails having a positive regard or a non-fleeting concern for the other person. This would explain why to say, “I sympathize with you” seems to suggest more support and compassion than, “I empathize with you”.² I don’t make my appearance at the funeral home to express my empathy, but to convey my sympathy, and while I may empathize with all the characters of a drama, I am likely in sympathy only with the hero. A “sympathizer” is one who goes along with a party or viewpoint, while an “empathizer” may understand, but not agree with the particular cause.

This may also explain why it seems more natural to speak of “feeling sympathy” for someone than “feeling empathy” for him. The “pro-attitude” which is a component of sympathy is something one distinctly feels towards

someone; it is a positive and supportive response to his situation. Empathy allows one to sense what he is feeling, but does not entail the kind of mutuality and “fellow feeling” involved in sympathizing. Thus it makes sense to say, “give them my sympathy” (cf. “condolences”) or “you have my sympathies” (cf. “support”) but it seems odd to “give empathy” to someone and incomplete to assure someone that “you have my empathy.” The latter invites the query, “and ...?”

Empathy, then, implies sharing something of the other’s feelings without necessarily feeling affection, positive regard or the desire to help. Sympathy, on the other hand, is a special kind of empathy, viz., empathy coupled with a benevolent attitude towards the other person. It is easy to see how these terms could be confused. In order to empathize, one must, in at least some minimal way, care, be concerned about or be interested in the recipient. But empathizing does not entail that the subject have a lasting, as opposed to an occurrent or fleeting concern. The subject is stimulated, disturbed, or even moved by the recipient, but she may not really care about him or agree with him. Below we will argue that empathy often happens unintentionally and sometimes even involuntarily.

Historical background of the two terms

Our analysis suggests that sympathy occurs as a special type of empathy. Yet ‘sympathy’ is the older and more broadly discussed of the two terms.³ It was used by Galens and Hippocrates for an affection or sensitivity of the body, while Aristotle used it to speak of being affected by like feelings. Epicurus spoke of sympathy in terms of a sense of affinity or *Koinonia*, and the Stoics appealed to the “sympathetic vibrations” found in music. The term became especially prominent in the eighteenth century in the writings of the British moralists (especially Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Smith and Hume).

The problem is that the usage of ‘sympathy’ has varied considerably and came to serve a multitude of theoretical purposes. Poseidonius and Epictetus used it most broadly to speak of a kind of “mutual interaction” of the organic and inorganic on a cosmic level. Shaftesbury identified sympathy with our feelings of moral approval and disapproval. Hume drew a somewhat looser connection between morality and sympathy, identifying “humanity and sympathy”, as a source of altruism, with “the benevolent principles of our frame”.⁴ Max Scheler discussed four kinds of *Sympathie*, extending from mere emotional identification to an almost mystical “communion of feeling”.⁵ He argues that “true sympathy” be identified with *Mitgefühl*, “fellow feeling,” as in commiseration with the grief of a friend.

'Sympathy' has been used in a similar way more recently by Nicholas Rescher, who refers to it as an "internalization of another's welfare," and as a form of "pro-social motivation".⁶

On the other hand, we can also turn to Adam Smith and David Hume for what might be called "minimalist" uses of 'sympathy' – instances in which the term is used simply to describe an individual's sensitivity toward or awareness of another's emotional and physical state. Describing our tendency to sympathize, Smith writes:

Persons of delicate fibres and a weak constitution of body complain, that in looking on the sores and ulcers which are exposed by beggars in the streets, they are apt to feel an itching or uneasy sensation in the correspondent part of their own bodies. The horror which they conceive at the misery of those wretches affects that particular part in themselves more than any other; because that horror arises from conceiving what they themselves would suffer, if they were really the wretches they are looking upon, and if that particular part in themselves was actually affected in the same miserable manner.⁷

Hume likewise spoke of sympathy as "a propensity ... to receive by communication [other's] inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own".⁸

It was perhaps the need for a way to refer to this "minimalist" (non-benevolent?) form of sympathy which led Theodor Lipps⁹ to invent the term "empathy" (*Einfühlung*) c. 1907. In aesthetic *Einfühlung*, one imaginatively attributes to an object feelings, attitudes or activities aroused in oneself by the object's depicted position and surroundings. These feelings are elicited through a kind of involuntary neurophysical response – an "aesthetic semblance." Lipps spoke of this as "kinesthetic mimicry"; he believed that certain shapes of objects and the structural configurations in which they stand have the potential to evoke involuntary muscular and nervous system reactions consisting of a kind of imitation of the forces imagined to be operant in or upon the objects. These reactions, reflected in the observer's consciousness as "inner motions," may or may not be identified as one's own feelings, but are projected back onto the object of art. Thus viewing a Doric column holding up a heavy stone arch is said to evoke an imitative kinesthetic response in the observer, inclining her to attribute to the column highly anthropomorphic qualities, such as that of doggedly straining to hold up the heavy weight.

Lipps extended the concept of empathy to interpersonal empathy. An observer may empathically experience the perceived physiological stresses upon another (e.g., a crowd watching a game of football lean forward in their seats and tense up as the running back attempts to fight his way past the

defensive line). In addition, in empathy one may participate in the emotional states of others.

The highest evocation of all arises from the sensuous appearance of the human being. We do not know how or why it happens that a glimpse of a laughing face, or a change in that contour of the face, especially the eyes and mouth, which we associate with the phrase "laughing face" should stimulate the viewer to feel gay and free and happy; and to do this in such a way that an inner attitude is assumed, or there is a surrender to this inner activity or to the action of the whole inner being. But it is a fact.¹⁰

I wish to suggest that the degree of "surrender" to this inner response is a crucial variable, determining whether empathy grows into sympathy, and whether it elicits altruistic responses such as helping behavior.¹¹

Some further differences

The primary value of introducing the separate term "empathy" is that it allows us to name a particular class of vicarious physiological and emotional activations: those which (a) can be experienced unintentionally, and (b) are shared by humans and the higher animal species. There is strong experimental evidence that both animals and humans sometimes, perhaps often empathize unintentionally and even involuntarily. Studies have suggested that rats, guinea pigs, chimpanzees, and also human neonates respond empathically to the perceived sufferings of their peers.¹² Chimpanzees, for example, will sacrifice eating opportunities to rescue other chimps in distress. This occurs even in instances where no kin relationship exists, and in which the "altruist" chimp is hungry. There is little reason to expect that the empathizers in these studies make any effort or intend to empathize. Far from always being sought out, empathy may occur toward those one dislikes or at inconvenient times, sometimes leading to attempts at extinction of the response or avoidance of the other person (rather than seeking to help him).¹³

This is not to deny that we frequently make efforts to empathize (often coupled with efforts to "show empathy"). The point is that empathy sometimes occurs apart from either the intention to empathize or any sort of good will directed towards the empathy recipient.¹⁴ One need not truly care about another person in order to empathize with him; the parameters which determine the likelihood of empathizing differ from those which determine sympathy. In the case of empathy, familiarity with the recipient and his situation is the chief parameter, whereas for sympathy, agreement with the recipient, liking him and what he stands for, the presence of shared ventures etc. appear

to be the important variables. One is more likely to empathize with individuals who have played a functional role in one's upbringing, such as kin group members, than strangers from another land or tribe.¹⁵ In this way, empathy tends to be past-oriented, based upon established patterns of recognition, whereas sympathy is future-oriented, pertaining to shared desires, purposes and goals.

Empathy, sympathy and altruism

To what extent are either empathy or sympathy altruistic? To what extent does either response suggest an altruistic tendency in humans? On the face of it, sympathy appears the more altruistic response because of its pro-social component. If we insist that "altruism" includes a conscious or intentional desire for the other's good, then sympathy is more altruistic than empathy. On the other hand, if the positive regard entailed by sympathy commonly derives from shared ventures, friendships, loyalties, etc., then perhaps it is actually a form of "group egoism," which is less easy to interpret as genuine altruism. Empathy, where experienced unintentionally, may create a motivation to come to aid even where there is no conscious partnership or shared interest. This would make empathy the more purely altruistic, though less praiseworthy response. Whether sympathy or empathy are the more altruistic depends upon which component of altruism one more heavily weights: the conscious desire to help or the absence of egoistic motivation.¹⁶

As to the extent of human altruism, Hume wisely observed that most humans are not ruled by a universal desire for the public good. We are characterized at best by a "limited generosity".¹⁷ Even in a non-individualist society, pro-social motives only go so far. With this in mind, it seems ironic that Hume, associating sympathy with benevolence, sought to appeal to sympathy as an evidence of that generalized concern for society's good alleged to lie behind the institution of morality. We do not quibble with Hume's use of 'sympathy' to speak of human pro-social motives; we argued above that this is its niche in everyday utterance. The problem is that Hume wanted to ground a universal concern for the good of society on sympathy, despite his common sense acknowledgement elsewhere that humans aren't always disposed so kindly.¹⁸

We refer to Hume's discussion only to support a more general point: it is inadequate to appeal to sympathy in support of an altruistic portrayal of humans and their institutions. If sympathy entails having a positive regard or pro-attitude towards another, and if, for various ideological and egoistic reasons, we only inconsistently have such a regard for others, then sympathy can be expected to have only a limited (and highly prejudiced) effect upon

human society. Is it possible that the pervasive non-egoistic response pattern which intrigued Hume is to be found in empathy rather than sympathy?

The tendency to emphasize has indeed been widely noted in all ages and a variety of settings. Murphy (1937), on the basis of a study of a variety of age groups, concluded that "experiencing distress when another is in distress seems primitive, native, reasonably universal".¹⁹ There are of course classic counter-instances implying an apparent lack of empathy, though it is interesting to note that even the students involved in the Milgram study²⁰ were not without empathy. A recent duplication of Milgram's experiment (Krebs, 1975) revealed that empathy, measured by levels of physiological arousal as well as verbal protest, occurs in the induced-obedience situation, despite the fact that the subjects still unfortunately submit to the white-coated experimenter's demands.²¹

What remains disturbing about the Milgram experiment is the fact that empathy, however pervasive, apparently needs not evoke helping behavior. This is surprising, because there are strong evolutionary reasons to believe that empathy may have developed as a cuing device to rescue efforts, beginning on the level of lower species (e.g., insects) with a sensitivity to the release of chemical "alarm pheromones" and developing into the highly sophisticated physical and emotional mimicry which we are capable of experiencing today. Hume's analysis seems correct that in many (if not all) cases, empathically experiencing another's pain sufficiently disturbs the subject to cause her to take action in his behalf. Though no human response is beyond the reach of egocentric defeasibility and rationalization, it seems reasonable to expect some increased probability of helping behavior as a result of the experience of empathy. Nonetheless, there is no logically necessary connection between empathy and altruistically coming to aid.

This leaves us with the expected mixed result that most humans frequently but sporadically empathize, generally towards those with whom they are most familiar regarding situations which they can recognize and understand. Where occurrences of empathy with distress situations are most intense, highly altruistic helping behavior will probably result. Unfortunately, humans also have the ability to thwart or repress occurrences of empathy (as in the Milgram experiment) so that, whatever the initial altruistic inclination, the empathic response is inefficacious. The pervasiveness of empathizing, which on the face of it suggests a high degree of human altruism, is thus balanced off by the idiosyncrasy of individual empathizing and the egocentric defeasibility of at least the weaker occurrences of empathy.

Educating empathy and sympathy

This leads us to one concluding difference between sympathy and empathy. This concerns the malleability of the two response-patterns. If, as argued above, empathy and sympathy depend upon different crucial variables determining likelihood of response, we should expect that efforts to change the level and uniformity of each response will also differ. In the case of sympathy, an increase might be gained by indoctrinating individuals with a humanistic concept of the interests they share with all their fellow species members. Needless to say, the task of instilling genuinely efficacious pro-social attitudes toward all humans is more complex than simply gaining assent to a friendly belief system. With Hume, we must wonder how close humans will ever approach to such “universal benevolence,” a “motive too remote and too sublime to affect the generality of mankind”.²²

Modifying empathic responsiveness presents a different, and perhaps more hopeful task due to the different variables affecting the level and occurrence of empathy. Recall that what makes empathy a more generalized response than sympathy is the fact that it often occurs unintentionally. Empathy may occur in situations where there exists no prior attachment to the recipient and no prospect of individual utility gain. The problem is that situations are often misread due either to ignorance or prejudice. Both of these are, in turn, often due to inconsistent familiarity with various persons and situations. But these are exactly the problems that education addresses. It is likely that in our evolutionary past, familiarity (and hence empathy and also the increased probability of helping behavior) did not extend beyond one’s family, population group or tribe. With the growth of civilization and human cognitive abilities, humans have gained the ability to familiarize themselves with increasingly diverse and distant cultural groups. Effective cross-situational, cross-cultural and international education offers the prospect of a broadened and more consistent capacity to empathize. And the more broadly one comes to empathize, the more reliable (because less partial and uninformed) one’s capacity to empathize becomes.

This suggests the need for a kind of empathic education which effectively goes beyond the kind of uninspiring memorization of capitols, geographical details and remote historical events presently making up many “Social Studies” classes. Let us construe empathy as an Aristotelian “state of character,” a disposition which often asserts itself unintentionally, yet which is conducive to long-term development and refinement. As Aristotle argues, “we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our youth ... so as both to delight in and to be pained by the very things that we ought; for this is the right education”.²³ Empathic education, then, might consist of a kind of “sensitivity training” perhaps relying heavily on role-playing and video

resources in response to a variety of situations, persons and cultures. The goal of such a process would be to reduce the partiality of students' empathic responses through non-threatening but emotionally gripping experiences of cultures beyond their own.²⁴ How this is to be done remains, and needs to be explored.

The consequences of confusing empathy with sympathy are considerable. Because empathy is construed as sympathy, the humanistic yet unrealistic goal of getting people to sympathize (like, care for, be good buddies of) all others is attempted, with dismal results. In attempting to generate sympathy for everyone, we overlook the more generalized capacity for empathy. As a result, this capacity remains undeveloped and, being left in this state, functions only inconsistently and idiosyncratically (which appears to make it worth overlooking).

In this article we have proposed that empathy be treated as a distinct phenomenon from sympathy. Empathy consists of an often involuntary vicarious experience of the same feelings as those of the recipient. As an innate response-pattern deriving from our evolutionary past, empathy is fine-tuned to situations by the variable of familiarity (unlike sympathy, which depends upon agreement and the presence of a pro-attitude). This variable might be profitably manipulated by a process of "empathic education" with the goal of a measurable increase in non-partial helping behavior. Development of the capacity to empathize, then, offers promise of beneficial changes in social behavior. This in itself makes it worth studying empathy apart from sympathy as a phenomenon in its own right.

Notes

1. Though a survey of several dictionaries of psychology revealed widespread confusion of these concepts, there have been a few recent efforts to clear up the ambiguity; e.g., Stanley L. Olinick, "A Critique of Empathy and Sympathy," in *Empathy: Volume II*, ed. Thomas Loewenstein (Analytic Press, 1983), pp. 137–166.
2. Less easily analyzed is the statement, "I can empathize with you." Lawrence Blum ("Compassion," in *Explaining Emotion*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980], pp. 513-f.) suggests that to say this affirms the understandability or worth of the recipient's feelings. The willingness to affirm that the recipient is feeling what is normal suggests an implicit positive regard. Efforts to show or express empathy, then, may actually evidence the presence of sympathy as well as successful empathizing.
3. This review is taken from the *Liddell-Scott Greek English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940 edition), and F.E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon* (New York: New York University Press, 1967).
4. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. and ed. by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, third edition), p. 189 (original edition numbering).

5. Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy* [*Wesen und der Sympathie*], trans. P.L. Heath (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954 edition). Scheler employs a variant of the term we use below for empathy (he uses *Einsfühlung*, as opposed to Lipps's *Einfühlung*); he uses it, however, to refer to a pathological kind of emotional identification, as when a human acts like an animal or allows another's ego to possess her in schizophrenia.
6. Nicholas Rescher, *Unselfishness: The Role of the Vicarious Affects in Moral Philosophy and Social Theory* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), pp. 6–13.
7. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in *British Moralists, Volume II: Hume-Bentham*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, D.D. Raphael (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 202.
8. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. and ed. P.H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, second edition), 2.1.11.
9. Theodor Lipps, "Empathy and Aesthetic Pleasure," trans. Karl Aschenbrenner, in *Aesthetic Theories: Studies in the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Karl Aschenbrenner, Arnold Isenberg (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 403–412.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 409.
11. Cf. Edith Stein, who argues in *The Problem of Empathy*, [trans. Waltraut Stein (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970 ed.)] that empathizing involves a shift of intentional focus to the recipient's viewpoint, yet without loss of self-awareness; as such, empathy is "a kind of act of perceiving sui generis" (p. 11).
12. The animal studies cited are summarized in Stuart J. Dimond, *The Social Behavior of Animals* (New York: Harper-Colophon Books, 1970); the human neonate studies, which discovered that infants of 48 hours age respond selectively to the cries of their peers by crying, are summarized in Grace B. Martin, Russell D. Clark III, "Distress Crying in Neonates: Species and Peer Specificity," *Developmental Psychology* 18 (1982), pp. 3–9.
13. E.g., Hume's "weak sympathy" which "produces hatred or contempt" (*Treatise* 2.2.9). Thus "a barren or desolate country always seems ugly and disagreeable, and commonly inspires us with contempt for the inhabitants. This deformity, however, proceeds in a great measure from a sympathy with the inhabitants ...; but it is only a weak one, and reaches no farther than the immediate sensation, which is disagreeable." I propose that when Hume describes "weak" sympathy, he is actually referring to empathy, while by "extensive" sympathy, he refers to genuine sympathizing.
14. Martin L. Hoffman ("Is Altruism a Part of Human Nature?," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 40 [1981]) notes: "Finally, there is evidence for an involuntary element in empathic arousal. Stotland (1969) found that simply instructing adult subjects to 'avoid experiencing the same type of emotion as the person experiencing the heat treatment' did not result in a reduction in their level of physiological arousal. To diminish one's level of empathic response apparently requires special efforts like thinking distracting thoughts or instructing the subject to fragment the victim – for example, by carefully observing his leg and arm movements ..." (p. 129).
15. Other factors affecting the tendency to empathize are reviewed in Douglas Chis-mar, "Empathy: Its Nature, Determinants, and Importance for Moral Decision-Making" (The Ohio State University, 1983), pp. 49–85.
16. See C.D. Batson, et al., "Is Empathic Emotion a Source of Altruistic Motivation?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 40 (1981), pp. 290–302; see also the valuable series of articles in the *Journal of Social Issues* 28 (1972).

17. *Treatise* 3.2.2; cf. 3.2.1: "In general, it may be affirmed that there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relation to ourself."
18. I have expanded on this in my forthcoming article, "Hume's Confusion about Sympathy."
19. Gardiner Murphy, *Social Behavior and Child Personality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), p. 295.
20. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).
21. Dennis L. Krebs, "Empathy and Altruism," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32 (1975), pp. 1134–1146.
22. *Treatise*, 3.2.1.
23. *Nicomachean Ethics* II.3 (1104b).
24. The most difficult component to duplicate of naturally-occurring empathy would be the functional role played by the recipient in the subject's life. While the increasing interdependence of the world's people can be affirmed on a cognitive level, involving students in such concepts so as to generate empathy requires more extensive interaction with the recipients.