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WOLLHEIM ON EMOTION AND IMAGINATION*

I

In this paper I want to pay tribute to Richard Wollheim's work on emotion and imagination. In these areas, as in so many others, Wollheim set the agenda for the rest of us: no one can adequately engage in a discussion of either without attending to what he has to say; and every time I read him I find something new, as I am sure many of us do.

I will draw on two distinctions made by Wollheim with particular brilliance in *The Thread of Life* and *On the Emotions*: first, the distinction between mental states and mental dispositions; and secondly, the distinction between empathy and sympathy. And I will do this in the context of a particular kind of mental state, namely emotional experience, and a particular kind of mental disposition, namely emotion.

These days, it seems, we hear a lot about the importance of empathy's role in our understanding or predicting of others' experiences or actions. Sometimes called simulation, sometimes perspective-shifting, sometimes co-cognition, sometimes central imagining, sometimes putting yourself in the other's shoes, its exact nature is keenly debated, but there is no doubt that many philosophers and psychologists emphasize its great importance (e.g. Gordon, 1995; Heal, 1998; Harris, 2000; Currie and Ravenscroft, 2002).

However, once we see precisely what empathy, as such, involves and requires – and this is something that Wollheim saw very well – I think we find ourselves faced with deep dif-

* Presented in a session in memory of Richard Wollheim.

ficulties concerning our ability to empathize with other people's emotional experiences, at least in the particular kinds of case that I want to discuss – cases which, we will find, are common enough. What lies behind the tendency of philosophers and psychologists to underestimate the difficulty of empathy and to overestimate its frequency is, I think, at least in part, their paying insufficient attention to what was at the forefront of Wollheim's philosophy of mind, namely the psychological reality of our mental dispositions, and, moreover, when we turn to emotional dispositions, their paying insufficient attention to how these dispositions can differ significantly across individuals.

II

Wollheim tells us that mental states are those episodic, transient phenomena that go to make up the stream of consciousness. The examples that he gives are characteristically Wollheimian: "perceptions… sensations… dreams and daydreams; moments of despair, boredom, or lust; flashes of inspiration; recollections; images seen in the mind's eye, and tunes in the head; and thoughts, both thoughts that we think and those uninvited thoughts which drift into the mind" (1999, p. 1). Mental dispositions, which possess psychological reality just as much as do mental states, are, he says, "those more or less persisting modifications of the mind which underlie this sequence of mental states." Examples are "beliefs and desires; knowledge; memories; abilities, powers, and skills; habits; inhibitions, obsessions, and phobias" (1999, p. 2); and, most important for my purposes here, emotions. Both mental states and mental dispositions are intentional, but only mental states possess subjectivity and phenomenology, and only mental states are experienced directly.

Given that Wollheim insists that only mental states are experienced directly, it might seem odd, to say the least, to find him saying that emotions are dispositions, for surely emotions are the very stuff of experience. But this would be to miss the crucial distinction, which language – the English

language at least – helps us to miss: the distinction between emotion and emotional experience; that is to say, between mental disposition and mental state. An expression such as 'I am envious of So-and-so' might be concerned with either: with the disposition, or with the occurrent thoughts, feelings and images involved in the conscious experience of envy.

Emotion and emotional experience, mental disposition and mental state, interact in a number of ways, Wollheim tells us. I want to focus on just two ways of interaction, which will be particularly important in what follows.

Let me continue with envy. A man is, for the first time in his life, envious of a younger man's success, apparently easily won, in an endeavor in which the envious man had, at least earlier in his life, aspired to and might even have achieved greatness, and in which previously he had seen others as friendly collaborators and not as rivals. We should I suppose avoid examples from philosophical endeavor, so perhaps Salieri's envy of Mozart might serve, at least as portrayed in Pushkin's poem.[1]

The first way in which mental disposition and mental state can interact is this: a mental disposition, as Wollheim puts it, "can, from time to time, manifest itself in a mental state" (1999, p. 3). Pushkin's poem in Nabokov's translation shows us how Salieri's envy – the disposition – manifests itself in the agonies of his experiences of envy. These are Salieri's reflections:

> Is there a man alive who'll say Salieri
> Has ever stooped to envy – played the snake
> That, trampled underfoot, still writhes and bites
> The gravel and the dust in helpless spite?
> Not one! …Yet now – I needs must say it – now
> I am an envious man. I envy – deeply,
> To agony, I envy. – Tell me, Heaven!
> Where now is justice when the holiest gift,
> When genius and its immortality,
> Come not as a reward for fervent love,
> For abnegation, prayer and dogged labor –
> But lights its radiance in the head of folly,
> Of idle wantonness? …Oh, Mozart, Mozart!

Thus does an emotional disposition manifest itself in the thoughts and feelings of Salieri's conscious experience – thoughts and feelings which arise, many of them uninvited, without prompting by any external event. It is specifically to *Mozart* as the intentional object of his emotion that Salieri's thoughts, feelings and images "turn and cling" - to use Wollheim's marvelously evocative phrase (1999, p. 70).

A second way in which mental disposition and mental state interact is when an external event causes a mental state, but, again quoting Wollheim, "the causal chain that runs from the first to the second passes through a number of relevant dispositions, which filter the external event" (1999, p. 3); the mental dispositions shape both the mental state's thought-content and its subjectivity. Pushkin's poem goes on to tell us that Salieri empties poison into Mozart's glass – another manifestation of his envy. And then, immediately after, but before the poison has begun its work, Mozart plays for Salieri his *Requiem*, which Salieri hears for the first time:

> These are tears
> I've never shed before – painful yet anodyne,
> As if I had discharged a heavy debt,
> As if the surgeon's knife had lopped away
> A sick and throbbing limb! These tears, dear Mozart…
> You must not mind them. Oh, play on, make haste,
> Flooding my soul with sound.

Thus the very way that Salieri hears the playing of the *Requiem* – the external event – is 'filtered' through his envy, and through his knowledge that he has, by poisoning Mozart, lopped away the sick and throbbing limb that was its source.

In identifying these and other ways of interacting, Wollheim puts before us a wonderfully rich conception of the mind, and in particular of emotion and conscious emotional experience: we cannot adequately characterize emotional experience unless we have a grasp of its underlying dispositions: of how these dispositions can manifest themselves in emotional experience; and of how these dispositions can 'filter' the experience of external events. The stream of conscious

emotional experience is *surface*, and the dispositions that are beneath the surface, equally psychologically real, constrain and shape conscious experience in these and other ways. In particular, the emotional dispositions are the source of, and serve to explain, the characteristic passivity of much of our conscious emotional experience: the way Salieri's thoughts, feelings and images, often unbidden, turn and cling to Mozart; their thought-content and their subjectivity; the way Salieri hears the playing of the *Requiem*; all these and more. Salieri is truly in the *grip* of envy.

I now want to turn to the other distinction which Wollheim discusses, that between empathy and sympathy. Once that further distinction is in place, I will be in a position to raise some of the difficulties we can face in our attempts to empathize with others' emotional experiences – difficulties of a kind that can arise irrespective of whether the other is a fictional character, a historical figure, or an intimate friend or close relative.

III

In imagining a sequence of events, I might imagine what happens from no point of view within the imagined scene. This is what Wollheim calls acentral imagining, or what I am now inclined to call imagining from an external perspective. In contrast, in centrally imagining a sequence of events I imagine them from the point of view of someone within the imagined scene: I imagine 'from the inside' his thoughts, his feelings, his experiences. Wollheim provides us with an example which is now justly famous. In imagining the entry of Sultan Mahomet II into Constantinople on May 23rd, 1453, I might visualize the events unfolding acentrally, from no point of view within the imagined scene. Or I might visualize them from a point of view within the scene, and specifically I might imagine them from the point of view of the Sultan himself. This is centrally imagining, with the Sultan as the protagonist in my imaginative project.

We can relate this, as Wollheim does, to a distinction which goes back to Aristotle – a distinction between two types of audience: the empathetic audience and the sympathetic audience, or what Wollheim more generally calls the reactive audience. Observing the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*, the empathetic audience, as contrasted with the sympathetic audience, "must be that part of the audience which feels what Gloucester feels, not that part which feels for Gloucester" (Wollheim, 1974, p. 66). So the empathetic audience, which observes Gloucester enduring his blinding, feels terror, and the sympathetic audience feels pity; or, if the reactive audience considers Gloucester's fate to be deserved, it will feel grim satisfaction (Wollheim, 1974, p. 66). The stance of the reactive audience is thus evaluative, although, of course, it might on occasion react with indifference.

Empathy, as such, is not simply centrally imagining from another person's point of view, or imagining his experiences from the inside. Centrally imagining another might be either empathy or imagining yourself in the other's shoes. A mark of the distinction is this: if I imagine myself in the shoes of the Sultan it is possible that I could imagine coming face to face with the Sultan; whereas if I empathize with the Sultan it is not possible that I could imagine this, although I could imagine coming face to face with myself.[2]

This is a mark of the distinction, but the distinction is more psychologically profound than the mark suggests. Putting yourself in the other person's shoes is less demanding on the imagination, as it does not require you to take on the other's mental dispositions as part of the imaginative process; all that is required is centrally imagining yourself experiencing the events as they unfold, imagining yourself from the inside having certain experiences, responding emotionally, deliberating, deciding what to do, and so on. Empathy, by contrast, involves centrally imagining the experiences *of another person*.

IV

Given this general constraint on empathy, I am now in a position to raise some of the particular difficulties that empathy presents us with where emotional experience is concerned. Let us go back to Salieri. Are we able to empathize with Salieri's envy of Mozart?

What we have to empathize with are Salieri's *experiences* – with the gnawing agonies of his envy. Now, as we have seen to be the case, Salieri's *actual* experiences are constrained and shaped in a number of ways by his emotional dispositions. Then, if empathy is substantially to mirror Salieri's actual experience, our process of empathizing with him should be similarly constrained and shaped. Thus I must either share Salieri's relevant dispositions or I must somehow in imagination make my relevant dispositions similar to his. Otherwise I will not be able empathetically to experience envy as Salieri actually does – at least in the way that Pushkin so ably portrays.

Now, as it happens, I do not share one of Salieri's emotional dispositions – one that is crucial for the empathetic project: I am not envious of Mozart. Can I take on in imagination being envious of Mozart, where this expression – 'being envious of Mozart' – picks out having the mental disposition and not the mental state? I think that this is where the heart of the difficulty lies. Let me explain what I mean.

We need to be clear, if it is not already clear, that Wollheim's notion of an emotional disposition that is relevant here is of a disposition that is already object-directed – already directed, in this case, towards Mozart and his undeserved brilliance. So what is relevant is not, for example, the general disposition to feel envy of other people's successes; indeed, it is clear in Pushkin's poem that Salieri was not previously disposed to envy in the general sense. No, the mental disposition that is relevant is Salieri's envy of Mozart. This is already in place. And it is just this disposition that is at the heart of the explanation of the characteristic passivity

of Salieri's emotional experiences: without appeal to this disposition one cannot explain the way his envious thoughts and feelings and images turn and cling to the undeserving Mozart; and one cannot explain the way he hears the *Requiem* through the filter of his envy.

If that is what Salieri's emotional experiences are like – and we surely do know them to be like that – then how are we to empathize with him if our relevant emotional dispositions are not similar to his: how can a consciously driven imaginative project manage in any substantial way to mirror Salieri's emotional experience, where so much of what is conscious is being constrained and shaped by the dispositions that underlie the surface of consciousness (see Goldie 2002)?

A natural response to my question here, a response which I now think fails, is to insist that of course – as has just been admitted – we know what it is like to feel gnawing envy: for example, we might be deeply envious of the philosophical successes of a colleague, Jones, and know what it is like to listen to one of his brilliant talks through the filter of that mental disposition; and so we might try to read across from our own envy of Jones to Salieri's envy of Mozart. Surely it is just this kind of shared emotional experience that makes empathy possible. Other cases abound. For example, if I now, or at some time in the past, have hated my neighbor, then I can readily empathize with a man's hatred of his neighbor; or, if my mother has recently died, I can readily empathize with a woman's grief at the loss of her mother.

We might well try to do this with Salieri. But I doubt that the strategy delivers up anything like the desired result – namely empathy with Salieri's envious thoughts and feelings towards Mozart. It might, however, deliver up much else besides, for of course there is much in common between our envy of Jones and Salieri's envy of Mozart, and it is just this kind of shared experience that makes it so easy for us to understand Salieri and to know what it must be like for him to be eaten up by envy of Mozart. It is not as though Salieri is in any way emotionally distant from us, unintelligible, uninterpretable. On the contrary, Salieri's envy is as near to

us psychologically as is this man's hatred of his neighbor, or this woman's grief at the loss of her mother.

However, this is not the issue. The issue is whether or not we can *empathize* with Salieri in a way that enables us in imagination substantially to mirror his emotional experiences. Knowing what it is like for him, or understanding him, or sympathizing with him, or disapproving of him, or remembering what it was like for us when we last experienced envy: none of these are the same thing as empathy. So why does this strategy of reading across from our envy of Jones to Salieri's envy of Mozart fail?

The strategy fails, I think, because it fails to take sufficiently seriously the intentionality of emotional dispositions; our mental disposition, envy of Jones, is not something from which its intentional object, Jones, can be readily detached, to be replaced in imagination by another intentional object, Mozart, in order to get our imaginative project going – as a kind of 'cut and paste' job. One might put it like this: Salieri's disposition is *envy-of-Mozart*, and the best we can manage with this strategy is to try to combine a kind of unlocated general envious disposition with imagined perceptions of Mozart and imagined thoughts about Mozart. This strategy will not yield up anything like the emotional experience of envy of Mozart, with all its characteristic passivity. And thus our attempt to empathize will fail to yield up any substantial understanding of Salieri's emotional experiences beyond what can be achieved in the other ways that I have been canvassing. Moreover, without the required passivity it will not leave us in a residual condition – to use Wollheim's phrase – that mirrors that of Salieri (see Wollheim, 1984, pp. 70, 78), and accordingly it will fail to yield up any substantial predictive power.

What is the particular kind of passivity that is characteristic of much of our conscious emotional experience, and which our attempt to empathize will fail to mirror? This is a question I am not able fully to answer here, but perhaps I could make a few rather programmatic remarks to clarify roughly what I have in mind.

The idea is certainly not to suggest that the emotions are, simply, passive, in contrast to other kinds of thinking, which are active. This cannot be right because, for example, perceiving, judging, and remembering, are in many respects passive. The idea, rather, is that there is a characteristic mixture of activity and passivity in emotional experience which marks it off against other kinds of conscious experience which are, in different ways, also active and passive. Naomi Eilan has said, of perception, that "getting perceptual intentionality right is a matter of getting right the mixture of activity and passivity distinctive of perceptual experience" (1998, p. 193). In just the same spirit, I should like to say that getting emotional intentionality right is a matter of getting right the mixture of activity and passivity that is characteristic of emotional experience. So getting emotional intentionality right will show, amongst other things, in what respects the passivity of perceptual experience differs from the passivity of emotional experience.

Now, we can attempt to capture the characteristic passivity of much of our emotional experience through examining what is special about its phenomenology, and this is part of what I have been pointing towards in considering Salieri's experiences: the way his envious thoughts and feelings turn and cling to Mozart; the feelings of agony in his envy; the vicissitudes of his envy, coming over him in waves; the way his attention and his perceptions are shaped and guided by his envy; his motivations; and no doubt the feelings of the bodily changes that accompany his envy.

It may well be that appealing to the interaction between emotional disposition and emotional experience to explain the passivity of much of our emotional experience will not ultimately be adequate. Eilan has argued in respect of perception that the passivity of perception should be explicable in terms of non-conscious processing; and the same will apply, for example, to how temporarily forgotten names, or the right answer to a crossword puzzle clue, suddenly 'come to us.' This may well be right, and, if so, this processing could be understood in Wollheimian terms as being the interaction

between mental disposition and mental state. Materially different mental dispositions across individuals will imply materially different interactions or non-conscious processes, and thus materially different conscious experiences. Thus the passivity of Salieri's conscious experiences of envy of Mozart depends on his mental dispositions, and if we are adequately to empathize with Salieri, the sequence of imagined experiences in empathizing must substantially mirror this passivity, and this cannot be attained without the relevant emotional disposition in place. This is not an optional extra; without it, empathy will not succeed.

Now, in some cases, unlike our attempt to empathize with Salieri, we will share with the other person their relevant mental disposition: that is to say, we will not only share the general disposition, we will also share the intentional object. For example, I dare say we share a fear of poisonous snakes and a dread of major surgery. In such cases, the particular difficulties with empathy that I am pointing towards will not arise (although I think that there are other difficulties that I will not discuss here). Thus I can empathize with your feelings of fear when you see the poisonous snake as you walk barefoot down the path towards the beach, or your feelings of dread as you think of the major surgery you are about to undergo, sharing with you as I do the related emotional dispositions which are the source of those feelings. In effect, the required passivity of empathy will be achieved by my simply putting myself in your shoes; in other words, the two kinds of imaginative project will deliver up the same residual condition.

But empathizing with Salieri is a very different kettle of fish: my imagining the object of Salieri's envy as a type – a successful person in the same field of endeavor, say – will not do the trick, and the strategy fails. We might put it like this: one poisonous snake is as good – or as bad – as another for our attempt to empathize with someone else's fear of a poisonous snake, but it is *Mozart*, in all his particularities, with all his idiosyncrasies, that Salieri envies, not just a successful person in the same field of endeavor who happens to be

Mozart but who might just as well have been someone else. I rather suspect that the importance attached to empathizing with other people's emotions by many philosophers and psychologists, and the facility that they associate with the process, arises in part from placing too much focus on simple examples such as fear of a poisonous snake, where differences in emotional dispositions across individuals is not material to the process, and thus where the imaginative projects of empathy and of putting yourself in the other's shoes achieve the same result.

Wollheim himself was, of course, fully sensitive to the importance of the passivity of our empathetic imagining, if it is to mirror the passivity of so much of our actual experience. He talks of occasions when "I set out to imagine doing something or other, and the various stages through which my imagination passes, or my successive imaginings, are not themselves something that I initiate." He then furnishes us with an example: "For instance, I try to imagine how a friend would behave in certain circumstances, and my knowledge of him is such that at each stage I seem not to be at liberty in what I imagine him doing or feeling next. If it is my friend John whom I imagine entering a room, filled with such and such people, painters and old ladies, then I have no choice what I must imagine him doing, and what he will say to each group and when. My knowledge of him establishes a repertoire for him in my imagination" (1974, p. 70). This knowledge, he says, "may be latent, and I may be quite surprised by the wealth of it when it finds expression." (1974, pp. 70–1).

I fully accept these points about imagination, but I do not think they hold for centrally imagining John if his relevant dispositions are not like mine. (They hold, rather, for acentrally imagining, or imagining from an external perspective; but that is another story.) Given that our dispositions are different, putting myself in John's shoes will not deliver up the required result. And, as for empathy, it is not enough for me just to know John's repertoire, or just to imagine having his repertoire. It is necessary for empathy that John's repertoire has, in my imagination, the required causal powers that are

the source of the required passivity. And this, even if John is a very close friend, is something that is not so easily done.

This last remark suggests perhaps an alternative strategy which is more cognizant of the difficulties inherent in our taking on in imagination the intentionality of other people's emotional dispositions when they do not match our own. But it is a strategy which I think faces other difficulties. The idea, often appealed to by those who take seriously the *Verstehen* tradition, is that we should somehow think ourselves into the other person's mental dispositions, rather as method actors of the Stanislavski school are supposed to think themselves into a part (e.g. Gordon, 1995). Thus, in trying to empathize with Salieri's envy of Mozart we should immerse ourselves in his life, drawing on all the material that is at our disposal, beyond just what we can glean from Pushkin's poem. We should try, maybe over an extended period of time, to make our mental life as much like Salieri's as we can – at least within the bounds of sanity and normal existence.

Whether or not this is a good strategy for an actor (and I have my doubts about that), it certainly has possibilities for us in our attempts to empathize with Salieri. But the sheer complexity of the task should not be underestimated. So far I have oversimplified, suggesting that the only relevant mental disposition of Salieri's for our imaginative project is his envy of Mozart. But it would be an error to think that mental dispositions are discrete entities, readily separable from the rest of someone's mental economy and then adoptable as part of an imaginative project. The user of the Stanislavski method also has to adopt in imagination Salieri's beliefs about his own limited musical achievements, his beliefs about how fervent love, abnegation, prayer, and dogged labor are necessary for success to be deserved, and many other relevant and connected dispositions. If we take seriously what is involved in this 'method-acting' strategy, a large part of the initial appeal of empathy, particularly its simplicity and its speed as a so-called 'hot' methodology, is lost.

However, one might object, surely our attempts to empathize with others need not be an all-or-nothing strategy; surely we often do the best we can, attaining at least a measure of success where we know the other's mental dispositions fairly well.[3] Taking Pushkin's poem as a case in point, surely we are able, more or less, to 'feel our way' into Salieri's mind through reading the poem.

I think we are, but there remains the question of how we are to do this. Centrally imagining Salieri, whether partial empathy or complete, involves some kind of shifting of our perspective, and this faces all the difficulties that I have been canvassing in this paper. I doubt that empathy is the psychologically more natural, or the better, way of 'feeling our way' into Salieri's mind, as compared with the emotionally engaged stance of seeing the other as radically another.[4] So could it not be that what we do, as good readers of Pushkin's poem, is not to empathize with Salieri, but to do all sorts of other things, such as think what it must be like to be Salieri, to know what he thinks and feels, to compare his experiences with our own past experiences, to understand him, and yet at the same time to evaluate him negatively, responding with shock at what Salieri's envy leads him to do – to poison someone who is both a great genius and a kind and generous soul. This kind of engagement with a work involves plenty of imagining, including in particular acentral imagining or imagining from an external perspective; and moreover, it involves plenty of emotional engagement with Salieri. It is not as though a good reader, according to my lights, is going to be left unmoved emotionally by reading or hearing the poem. To be sure, we might *speak* of empathizing with Salieri, but I think this is a loose way of saying that it is his thoughts and feelings that we are encouraged by Pushkin to focus on and 'feel our way' into, rather than those of Mozart, whose thoughts and feelings Pushkin, so to speak, places in the background of the narrative.

V

Two conclusions emerge from this about the role of central imagining, both of which are to be found in Wollheim. First, as Wollheim puts it, "it remains undisputed that, in the majority of cases, the person whom I centrally imagine will be myself" (1984, pp. 76, 78). Secondly, and conversely, the stance towards others is typically not empathetic. We return, rather, to the sympathetic or reactive audience, which, again to cite Wollheim, "may not merely note and try to comprehend the mental state that each character is in, but it may respond to such states and respond exactly as it would to those of a fellow human being with whom it shared a common life… it is in this respect," he says, "that the sympathetic audience models the normal participant in human intercourse" (1984, p. 67).

This is a quite general point about empathy and sympathy. Furthermore, in particular, and this has been the burden of my paper, empathizing with another person's experiences where emotion is concerned is both less frequent and less easy than is commonly supposed in those cases where we do not share the same emotional dispositions as that other person, just as I do not share Salieri's envy of Mozart; the sympathetic, or reactive, evaluative stance is the normal stance, more easily attained than the empathetic stance. The mixture of activity and passivity, characteristic of our emotional experiences, is easy to understand and to react to with sympathy or in some other way, but, as I hope to have shown, is not so easy to mirror in our attempt to empathize with the other person. And the explanation of this mixture of activity and passivity will lie in the interaction between emotional disposition and conscious emotional experience. So, on this note, let me give the last word to Wollheim, to whose profound influence this paper is a tribute: "in illustrating how mental dispositions relate to mental states," he says, "I could not find convincing examples without using the emotions" (1999, p. 9).[5]

NOTES

[1] This version can be found at http://www.tnr.com/classic/nabokov04211941.html.

[2] Wollheim (1984), p. 76. I discuss this in Goldie (2000). Thus if I empathize with the Sultan, I would feature peripherally, to use Wollheim's term, in what I imagine – in effect I see myself as the Sultan sees me, and in that sense I imagine myself from an external perspective. Imagining myself from an external perspective is not my concern in this paper; I discuss it in Goldie (forthcoming).

[3] Thanks to Anthony Savile for pressing this point.

[4] What do I mean by 'better' here? It is epistemically better in that it yields a better understanding than attempts to empathize; it is better in that we do not lose sight of our evaluative perspective; and the sympathetic stance is better morally than the empathetic stance. I am developing these ideas in work in progress.

[5] Many thanks to Dom Lopes for his support and help as editor, and to Rob Hopkins for valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier draft.

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