

## Three Problems for Contagion Empathy

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Received: 2 April 2016 / Accepted: 13 April 2016 /  
Published online: 22 April 2016  
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**Abstract** In this commentary on Michael Slote’s paper “The Many Faces of Empathy,” I assess the ways in which his theory of empathy aligns with simulation theory, as well as the problems that he needs to address because of this. Overall, I present three problems that need to be addressed: (1) How do we know that we have caught the other’s emotion and not merely reacted on our own; (2) What exactly is it about the other’s emotion or attitude that I am mimicking and catching; and (3) Does empathy provide us with objective or subjective ethical knowledge?

**Keywords** Empathy · Moral judgments · Simulation theory · Emotional contagion · Mirror neurons

In the first part of his paper, Michael Slote explains the often overlooked role that empathy can play in our very judgment that something is right or wrong (Slote 1). That is, he explains the way in which empathy allows us to gain knowledge about the world and about the moral characters of others: “empathy helps to put us cognitively in touch with what others are feeling and does so more directly than by any form of argument or inference” (Slote 1). Slote seems to align himself with the simulation theory of empathy (henceforth ST), or the theory that we understand the mental states of others through a kind of mimicking of their mental states within ourselves. Essentially, when we perceive the actions and responses of others, we mimic them in order to simulate a first-person experience of how they feel. By using my body as the best possible model for the other’s experience, I can then assume that the mental states that I experience are similar to the ones that the other is experiencing. This process concludes by a projection of my simulated mental states into the other.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The simulation-and-projection involved in ST is not meant to be a conscious inference or analogy, but rather a subconscious process that occurs automatically when we perceive others.

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It is clear that ST fits well with Slote's view based on the parallels he draws between his own theory, emotional contagion, and mirror neuron research. When we empathize with others, we “catch” their emotional states (Slote 2). Though Slote and ST refer to this as empathy, the act of catching another's emotional state is often referred to as emotional contagion, since we catch the emotion of the other much like we can catch a contagious disease from the other (Scheler 1954, 12, 14–15; Gallagher 2012, 368–369; Zahavi 2014, 113, 116).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, when comparing his theory of empathy to Charles Stevenson's work, Slote explicitly notes a similarity between his own theory and emotional contagion (Slote 18). While this alignment of empathy with emotional contagion—what we might refer to as *contagion empathy*—is beneficial to his specific project, it does carry with it some theoretical problems. Three of these problems that Slote will need to address concerning his project are as follows:

- 1) How do we know that we have caught the other's emotion and not merely reacted on our own?
- 2) What exactly is it about the other's emotion or attitude that I am mimicking and catching?
- 3) Does empathy provide us with objective or subjective ethical knowledge?

### Whose Feeling is it Anyway?

To begin with, a benefit of Slote's approach is that he is not explicitly interested in empathy as a process by which we understand the other, but rather as a way in which we are caused to feel like the other. This allows him to avoid many of the direct critiques of ST.<sup>3</sup> These critiques usually revolve around showing that ST does not allow one to have the understanding of others that it claims to provide. Simulation alone only provides me with a direct understanding of myself, which I can then project into the other, but a simulation is never a direct experience of the other's experiences.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Slote is able to talk more directly about the ways in which empathy allows us to feel like the other and how this affects our moral values. In other words, aligning with emotional contagion is usually seen as a sign of defeat in discussions of empathy, since it would be admitting that one's theory of empathy is not really empathy at all—at least

<sup>2</sup> In fact, this is also why some philosophers have argued that the simulation-and-projection view of empathy is not really empathy at all, but rather emotional contagion. The term “empathy” should be reserved for the genuine experience of the other as another subject. This, however, is a much longer discussion to be had elsewhere. For now, it is not worth entering into an argument over terms, so contagion empathy can be seen as synonymous with empathy.

<sup>3</sup> There are a number of critiques raised against simulation-and-projection approaches, both historically and contemporarily. Scheler argues that empathy is “true emotional identification,” while ST approaches—such as the one presented by Theodore Lipps—are merely explanations of emotional contagion (Scheler 1954). Edith Stein accused ST approaches as having a discrepancy between “the phenomenon to be explained and that actually explained” (Stein 1989, 23). Contemporary philosophers Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi have also pointed out several objections that can be raised against ST approaches, both together (2012), and separately (Gallagher 2012, 370; Zahavi 2014, 106–107).

<sup>4</sup> This makes sense, since we can never have a first-person experience of the other's experiences without being the other. All we directly experience of the other is the other's body.

in the view that empathy is a kind of understanding of the other. However, aligning empathy with emotional contagion in this way actually works to Slote's advantage.

To begin with, there is good evidence that children are capable of mimicking the faces of others even a few hours after birth (Meltzoff and Moore 1977, 1994; Gallagher and Zahavi 2012, 209). The ability to imitate the actions and intentions of others is so readily available to most children shortly after birth that it is little wonder why philosophers and psychologists have been so quick to accept the explanatory importance of mirror neurons. The importance and problems of an appeal to mirror neurons will be explained in the next section, but focusing primarily on the early ability of infants to imitate, it makes sense that Slote would see this ability as important to our development.

One of the roles imitation may play, as Slote argues, is the role of helping us develop our moral judgments of which actions are virtuous and which are vicious. To use Slote's own example, when a child sees her parents acting as if they are afraid of a snake, the child subconsciously mimics this fear, causing her to feel a similar fear, which the child then associates with the snake (Slote 2). Just as when infants mimic facial expressions, they can also mimic and learn emotional reactions. After some time, simulating the fearful response to snakes will cause the child to have the attitude of automatically reacting to snakes as worthy of fear. According to Slote, this means having "empathy with others is also a way of learning about the world beyond those others" (Slote 2). When we empathize with the fear of snakes we learn that snakes are fearful, thus gaining knowledge about the world from others through empathy.

Tying into his argument concerning moral development, Slote shows that empathy also applies to more specific ethical scenarios, such as trust (Slote 2). As Slote says, "If the child feels their parents' trusting attitude toward Aunt Tilly, they can learn what their parents have already learned earlier on: that Aunt Tilly is someone they can rely on" (Slote 2). The attitude of trust can be simulated by the child and eventually learned to be the child's own emotional reaction to Aunt Tilly. In empathy, the child learns information about the world that the parents had to learn on their own. Along these lines, it would also make sense to argue that when a child is caught in a lie or sees someone else caught in a lie, the child simulates the outrage and/or disappointment of the offended party, eventually habituating the feeling of outrage and/or disappointment with lying.

This is where a problem arises. Again, there are good arguments that contagion empathy does not provide us with a genuine understanding of others, and it may not be a problem of Slote's argument to need to explain how contagion empathy could provide us with an understanding.<sup>5</sup> However, there is a related problem that needs to be addressed: how do we know that my empathized emotion is actually the same as the other's emotional state, and not simply my own emotional reaction? For instance, imagine a situation in which my mother sees a snake. She jumps when she initially sees it, but a second later is fine. She is not afraid of snakes, but was simply startled because she was not expecting to see one. However, when I see her jump and I see the snake, I

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that Slote does claim that contagion empathy "puts us in touch with what people believe and know about the world" (Slote 8). This makes it seem as if empathy does allow us to understand the mental states of the other. If this is his view, then he will need to answer the problems that arise for ST as a theory of understanding other minds.

feel fear, and argue that I am afraid because she was afraid. Is not there a problem here? My mother was not actually afraid, but I caught fear from her. How can we catch something that was never passed? Certainly we could resolve this problem by asking my mother if she is afraid, but this does not really solve the problem of the initial response, or my confusion between my own emotional reaction and the emotional contagion. If we need to appeal to something beyond contagion empathy—such as dialogue—to truly develop a moral attitude, then it does not seem like contagion empathy itself is a good guide to moral knowledge. Is this just a feature of emotions and emotional contagions—that they cannot be easily distinguished—or is something else missing here?

Consider an example in morality. When a soldier kills someone for the first time and the situation causes the soldier to vomit. This scene may cause an onlooker to catch the soldier's nausea towards the act of killing, causing the empathizer to feel disgusted by killing. However, the soldier might not value the kill as morally vicious, but rather be disgusted by the sight of blood or nauseous from the rush of adrenaline. In short, the soldier does not actually feel the negative moral attitude that the onlooker caught. The soldier may genuinely feel like there was nothing immoral with the act, or may see the act of killing an enemy soldier as being honorable. If this is the case, then it seems like contagion empathy neither teaches us about others nor the world, but only really about ourselves. It needs to be explained how exactly we catch another's moral attitude in empathy, such that it can be distinguished from one's own emotional reactions.

## Mirroring

One possible answer that is popular among simulation-theorists is the appeal to mirror neurons. Slote notes that mirror neurons give important support to his theory. They provide the physical basis by which we can argue that empathy senses moral values (Slote 7). However, mirror neuron research is relatively new and very contentious, so appeals to mirror neurons should be careful (Turner 2012, 383–384). Additionally, while mirror neurons may seem like a promising solution to the first problem, they also raise a new problem. That is, even if we can argue that we are able to simulate the feelings of others because mirror neurons provide us with a subconscious simulation, we can still ask: What exactly is it that we are mirroring of the other in contagion empathy?

The obvious answer may be that we are catching the other's moral attitude itself—specifically, the warmheartedness or coldheartedness of the other (Slote 5). However, this can be taken in one of two ways: either we catch the intentionality of the action or we catch the feeling of performing the action. The former seems to make the most sense as far as mirror neurons are concerned, but it also seems to greatly oversimplify what goes into a moral attitude. Typically, mirror neurons only fire based on the intentionality of the actions being observed (Iacoboni 2009, 75–77). If a hand is reaching for a cup, then the “hand reaching for cup” mirror neurons fire. When it comes to a moral action though, this would mean that we catch the intentionality of giving food to the poor or taking a life (as if we were performing those actions), but it would not mean that I actually feel their warmheartedness or coldheartedness. Along the same lines of the previous objection, there would be a disconnect between seeing the other's action

and what I feel as a result of the action. My feeling about the mirrored intentionality may only be my own. We can simulate what it is like to give food to the poor, but feel very differently from the person who is actually giving to the poor. Intentionality is not itself morally valuable, so this answer does not seem to work.

However, the alternative for the mirror neuron argument is that we are mirroring the other's feeling of his or her action? In other words, we are mirroring the warmheartedness or coldheartedness of the other when the other is acting. This seems promising, since I can feel as the other feels while observing the same action. This would allow me to connect my simulated feeling to the other's action on my own. I feel the other's warmheartedness as I watch the other give food to the poor, and then associate this warmhearted feeling with giving to the poor. But what is it to catch warmheartedness? It is a feature of both mirror neurons and ST that we only simulate intentional actions, but warmheartedness is a state of being, not an intentional action. If warmheartedness is a state and not an action, then how can I mirror it? What exactly is being mirrored? Unless this can be answered, it does not seem like mirror neurons will be able to act as a solution to the first problem. Either there is a disconnect between the mirrored intention and the moral attitude, or it needs to be explained how we can mirror an entire state like warmheartedness.<sup>6</sup>

## Objectivity in Moral Judgments

Another possible advantage of Slote's view of empathy as it relates to morality is the way that it explains the development of entirely new judgments. Again, Slote is not talking about empathy as an understanding of the other, but rather empathy as a judgment of the world that we are catching from the other. In this sense, we do not need to have experienced the emotional reaction before. Especially when we are young, we tend to catch moral judgments—and therefore learn most of our moral judgments—from our parents and other adults. It is by feeling like the others that I learn to feel a certain way about events in the world. However, this raises the problem of whether empathy gives us objective or subjective ethical knowledge. Slote's answer to this is ambiguous.

At times, Slote seems to want to claim that empathy only provides us with subjective moral judgments. He argues that empathy does not necessarily give us any knowledge of the inherently virtuous or vicious, but rather allows us to learn various ways of valuing things in the world by empathizing with those involved (Slote 3). Accordingly, this could teach us a disposition to care for all living beings, or it could teach us racism and bigotry (Slote 3). Therefore, that which we value as virtuous is simply a reaction that we have learned from others, but it is possible that we could have learned the exact opposite reaction.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps Slote could argue that the moral attitude is necessarily connected to the intentionality of an action, such that the simulation of the intention necessarily leads one to the same moral attitude. If this were the case, then simulating the intentional action of giving to the poor would necessarily make one feel warmhearted about giving to the poor. This seems to be supported when Slote says, "It is at the very least a priori and necessary that moral goodness consists of being generally warmhearted, or, as we may prefer to say, caring, toward other people (or sentient beings generally)" (Slote 7). However, this view would still require a lot of additional support and leads to another problem concerning whether moral attitudes and moral judgments are objective in this way, which is addressed in the following section.

On the other hand, Slote also argues that empathy allows for us to feel the virtue and vice of individuals, making it seem like there is some objective moral character that we perceive in the other (Slote 3–4, 8). Relating to Hutchinson’s work, Slote says, “Human beings have a moral sense that enables them in something like a perceptual way to detect the moral goodness/virtue or moral badness/vice of other people” (Slote 4). We might want to interpret this as feeling a kinship with those who have learned to feel the same way about the same actions, which could still mean that the moral judgments are subjective. In fact, this interpretation seems to be supported when Slote says, “When we are thus warmed by another, we are, in a most basic way, morally approving of them or their actions,” as well as that we disapprove of the coldhearted person’s actions when we are chilled by them (Slote 4).

However, this interpretation seems to be contradicted a few lines later when Slote says, “just as we can empathically register the pain of another, we can register the moral goodness or badness of someone’s actions or attitude by empathically taking in the warmth or coldness that person is displaying in their actions” (Slote 5).<sup>7</sup> This again makes it seem like there is something objectivity moral that we perceive in the other through empathy, just as we perceive pain in the person who jerks his or her hand away after pricking a finger. It is their caring attitudes that possess warmth and we feel that warmth when we perceive their actions (Slote 6). Therefore, it follows that virtuous people perform warmhearted actions, while vicious people perform coldhearted actions, and we learn which actions are right and wrong by feeling this warmth and cold (Slote 7).

Slote’s answer to whether contagion empathy provides us either subjective or objective knowledge is currently unclear, and there are several background assumptions here that need to be clarified, of which Slote is well aware (Slote 7). However, until at least some of these noted ambiguities are overcome, it is difficult to say whether or not empathy actually provides us with either objective or subjective moral judgments. Overall, if Slote wants to argue that we actually gain moral judgments through empathy, then he needs to explain how it is that we catch the other’s attitude, how we know that the caught attitude is in fact the other’s (and not merely my own), and whether or not all virtuous actions share a similar warmheartedness.

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<sup>7</sup> Slote also refers to what we learn about the world through empathizing with others as “facts about the world that... lie beyond and are independent of the other minds we empathize with” (Slote 2). This seems to imply that the information gained through empathy is objective.

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