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Empathy and virtue

Abstract: Empathy is widely considered to be a valuable trait, and yet some dimensions of it have been argued to be incompatible with virtue. More concretely, the nature of virtue seems to preclude virtuous agents from empathizing with their vicious or weak-willed fellow humans. This introduces a tension in the idea of virtue, as we would seem to necessarily have to sacrifice something of genuine value in order to become virtuous. I argue that this tension can be avoided if we reconsider the affective and motivational profile of the virtuous agent.

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More than two hundred years after the British Sentimentalists had put *sympathy* at the center of their moral philosophy (Smith 1982 [1759]), it has become almost a commonplace to claim that *empathy*, a modern descendant of the former, is a good thing to have and strive towards.¹ Empathizing with others is valued as fostering emotional communion, mutual understanding and caring. Naturally, heightened attention to the virtues and usefulness of empathy has also led to a counter-reaction which has sought to articulate the negative consequences of too much empathy (Prinz 2011, Bloom 2016). From a philosophical perspective, however, the most interesting kind of tension which has recently been the topic of debate is that between empathy and virtue. If it is an ideal to have both broad and deep empathetic capacities and yet these are, beyond a certain point, incompatible with being virtuous, then we have on our hands a puzzling tension between two plausible normative ideals.

In order to grasp the nature of this tension, we need to answer two questions. Firstly, why and how is it that virtuousness limits our capacity for empathizing with others? Secondly, why is this something to be bemoaned?

I shall start with the first question. On a widespread understanding of empathy, empathizing with someone involves imaginatively sharing their perspective on a given situation, complete with that perspective's affective tonality.² More concretely, it involves imaginatively sharing their feelings towards a particular object. For instance, if you hate having your name mispronounced, my empathizing with you involves two things: imagining

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having my name mispronounced and having an emotional response towards this that matches yours. This account of empathy is not universally shared, and it also raises further questions that will not be attended here, such as what exactly is an (imagined?) emotional response to an imagined situation. I shall nevertheless circumnavigate these issues for the sake of having enough space left to articulate my point and leave the reasonableness of my decision to the judgment of the reader.

Let us suppose that this preliminary articulation of what empathy is, is correct. How and why does it collide with virtuousness? On a plausible conception of virtue of character, one which has its origins with Aristotle (Aristotle 2014) and has recently been revived by John McDowell (McDowell 1979) among others, having a virtuous character involves having a particular affective make-up which translates into tendencies towards specific emotional responses to specific circumstances. These emotional responses themselves amount to instances of evaluative perception. For instance, the affective make-up of the courageous will be such that she responds to certain circumstances with fear and to others with fortitude, some circumstances will seem to her dangerous and others harmless: if one is brave, one will not fear a mouse and will be unable to perceive it as dangerous. Plausibly, with this inability comes the inability to even imagine “responding” to the sighting of a mouse with fear. And here is where the incompatibility with certain instances of empathy comes in. If my friend George is afraid of mice, empathizing with him involves imagining a mousy encounter as a dangerous one, having an imagined emotional response to that encounter (fear) which matches George’s reaction. If I am brave, however, it is in virtue of this that I will not be able to imagine such a thing as being afraid of a mouse and so I will not be able to empathize with George.

So much for the answer to the first question. In its most general form, the answer is that the more virtuous one is the less will one be able to empathize both with less-than-virtuous and vicious people. This is so because the specific emotional dispositions of the virtuous will make it impossible for them to achieve the necessary emotional matching with the non-virtuous emotions that empathy requires. To put this somewhat more dramatically: it seems that the ladder of ascent to full virtuousness is also one which takes me further and further away from the possibility of empathetic communion with my less-than-virtuous neighbor.

Let us suppose, then, that there is an intrinsic incompatibility between virtue and empathy. Why should this be a problem? Why should those who strive at virtue be worried by the impact this would have on empathizing with less-than-virtuous emotional reactions such as George’s fear of mice? Isn’t the very point of these reactions that they are flawed and that one should be happy not to have them, and even happier not to be *able*

to have them? Adam Morton (Morton 2011) and Olivia Bailey (Bailey 2021) have both provided powerful arguments for why it is actually bad news for the virtuous that they have become unable to empathize with non-virtuous perspectives. I shall briefly present both arguments and then focus on Bailey's and what I think might be a successful reply to her.

The main "vice" that Morton finds with the loss of empathetic breadth which pertains to the virtuous (in his telling language: the "decent") is their acquired incapacity to understand less-than-virtuous motivations and actions. According to him, the virtuous will find it difficult to *identify imaginatively with important parts of human possibility* (Morton 2011, 1). More precisely, the connection that Morton sees lies between (1) the fact that the decent have internalized norms that keep them from even imagining doing things that violate these norms while (2) empathy with the in-decent who find such actions attractive requires exactly this. Therefore, a large part of human motivation is bound to remain inscrutable to the decent. This Morton aptly calls the *blinkering* effect of decency. Though Morton's use of words comes with other connotations and plausibly rests on other psychological models, his argument parallels the point made above about how the affective make-up of the virtuous keeps them from being able to imaginatively embody other affective perspectives. Importantly, this is not a matter of the bad consequences, of too much or too little empathy, it is on account of their nature that virtue/decency and broad empathetic capacities are incompatible. On the normative level, this turns out to be an incompatibility between two ideals: broad knowledge of *human possibility* on the one hand and human decency on the other hand, with the latter involving the incapacity to even consider vicious, indecent or atrocious courses of action.³

With Bailey, the issue is another one, its location even closer to the core of what it means to be virtuous. According to Bailey, and building on McDowell's theory of virtuous perception, part of what it is to be a virtuous agent is to reliably apprehend the world in a particular "emotional light": to acknowledge and be attracted to the things which one ought to do and be indifferent to or repulsed by those which one should not do. This emotional perspective is what one imaginatively recreates when one empathizes and so, for the reasons already mentioned, one cannot empathize with vicious or weak-willed or merely continent perspectives.⁴ This is, in its turn, bad. Firstly, it is bad because (1) we often need to be empathized with even when our emotional perspective is less-than-virtuous, as being empathized with offers relief from a particular form of suffering. Secondly, it is bad because (2) a virtuous person is one who effectively ministers to other's needs.

The picture of the virtuous as, among other things, one who can effectively minister to other's needs, is certainly a plausible one, especially

provided that those needs are legitimate and important ones. And that such needs – to be empathized with even when one’s emotional state is far from virtuous – are *sometimes* both legitimate and important can hardly be denied. Jealousy, envy, laziness, Schadenfreude, anger, sadness at losing something one did not rightfully own – such feelings and many others like them are often unavoidable for us mortals and can make our life more bitter than we would like. To this, our sole consolation is often “that relief which nothing can afford him but the entire concord of the affectations of the spectators with his own. To see the emotions of their hearts, in every respect, beat time to his own.” (Smith 1982 [1759], 22)

From this purview, it seems like we have a puzzle on our hands which is even more challenging to our conception of virtue than the one proposed by Morton – not because the intuitions behind it are stronger but because it touches upon something which is even more internal to virtuousness than knowledge of “important (albeit vicious) parts of human possibility”. At least on our contemporary, moralized conception of virtue – one which the author shares – it would be highly counterintuitive to expect progress in virtuousness to be necessarily associated with regress in our capacity to “be there” for others by empathizing with their less-than-virtuous emotional reactions. Indeed, we know ourselves to be capable of more than a little jealousy, laziness, anger, envy or Schadenfreude and we also believe to know ourselves to be needful of the very same consolation Adam Smith so eloquently describes in the quote above.

Should there be any chance of escaping this conundrum and avoiding an incoherency at the very heart of the concept of virtue, I contend that this chance must lie in a closer examination of the nature of our need to be empathized with precisely in connection to our imperfect or problematic emotions. The best place to begin with is a closer look at what Olivia Bailey, the very proponent of our dilemma, has to say about this.

Essentially, Bailey argues that we have a basic need to be understood, one connected with the need for a certain intimacy which becomes impossible when understanding is lacking. This need for being understood is itself related to the basic fact of the normative intelligibility of our emotions for ourselves: Even when we refuse to endorse our laziness or our Schadenfreude, in being gripped by these emotions they will appear to us as intrinsically intelligible reactions to adverse circumstances. It is the failure of the virtuous to appreciate this intelligibility, to *get it*, which becomes a failure to *get us*, and as such a breaking down of the intimacy which only mutual understanding makes possible. In small doses, this can be tolerable, but where it repeats itself or where larger life-events are in play, this can lead to genuine suffering – a suffering which often fails to materialize in real life because we are lucky enough not to be surrounded by hyper-virtuous friends.

Let us suppose, to build on Bailey's own example, that I find myself in a situation in which I have a duty to tell the truth but where doing so would come at a great personal cost. For instance, suppose I have come upon evidence that there is egregious corruption going on at the governmental agency I am working for. I have been working here for only a year and have just managed to settle into a modicum of financial stability in which I feel I can afford to even consider fulfilling my dream of starting a family. However, I cannot simply let this pass: the scale of corruption is such that it affects innumerable people who are themselves in a much more precarious situation than me. I know what my duty is, but the cost of fulfilling it means that I am greatly tempted to forego doing the right thing. Sharing my situation with a friend, I certainly don't expect any encouragement to pursue the self-interested course of action. But I do expect – and sorely need – some understanding for the difficulty of my choice. Alas, my friend is virtuous and in her virtuous perspective on the situation she fails to grasp my dilemma. For her, telling the truth and exposing corruption in this case is clearly more important, and thus more attractive, than remaining silent. Remember that to be virtuous is to have one's affective responses attuned to the normative aspects of the situation, and so the virtuous will naturally want to do the right thing. And so, I am left alone with my troubles – convinced, perhaps, of what I should do and *that I will do it*, but still alone and misunderstood in my plight.

The case seems strong for the incompatibility of being virtuous and being capable of intimate communion with the non-virtuous and of “ministering” to their very needs of such intimacy. And yet, I believe that a closer look at the psychological profile of the virtuous and at the needs of the less-than-virtuous will show us that things are not as dire as they seem.

Firstly, one of the main obstacles to understanding according to Bailey is the fact that the virtuous, on the now classic McDowellian account, cannot find the non-virtuous course of action attractive at all. According to Bailey, the virtuous will simply be uninterested in the bad course of action and will certainly fail to be pained by the fact that she may not pursue it. For my part, I am skeptical about some of these assumptions concerning the moral psychology of virtue. I see no reason why the virtuous should not be saddened by the prospective loss of material well-being. Indeed, I am somewhat inclined to suspect that an implicit “stoic” picture of the virtuous is in play here, one on which the virtuous only cares about virtue itself or moral value and duty. Otherwise, one must assume that the virtuous agent would normally care about their material comfort, but that they miraculously stop caring when something morally more weighty hangs in the balance.

However, the weightier objection against this picture of virtue seems to me the following. We have, I take it, as part of our cultural

heritage, a model of perfect virtue that both aims to surpass in normative ambition anything offered by Greek philosophy and is obviously less rigoristic in its ethics of affect than Bailey and McDowell would accept. It is the biblical portrait of Jesus Christ in the garden of Gethsemane praying "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39 NIV) The fact that this is generally perceived not as a sign of weakness and lack of virtue on behalf of Jesus Christ but as a sign of humanity that is compatible with his perfection shows something important about our intuitions concerning the nature of virtue. It shows that we do not expect of the virtuous to be indifferent towards their losses, towards what they must give up considering the circumstances. But if they need not be themselves indifferent to their losses in order to be virtuous, they can just as well empathize with our own plight. Just as I do in my weakness, they can *also wish* that they would not have to suffer and give up central aspects of their well-being. Ergo, they can empathize with my own wish.

There is, I believe, a further root to Bailey's skepticism about the empathetic possibilities of virtuous agents. It is not only my attraction towards the morally inferior course of action which I need my friend to empathize with, it is my failure to be adequately attracted to the good. Even as we need not conceive the virtuous as failing to be saddened by her prospective loss, we certainly must imagine her as sincerely preferring the moral course of action, as being more attracted by *that*. And yet...

Somewhat unexpectedly, the very example of Jesus' prayer in the garden seems to disprove this assumption as well. Jesus is supposed to be perfect, a model of virtue the likes of which the world has not seen. And yet, there he is, expressing a clear preference for an outcome which, as the whole story presupposes, is normatively inferior: the outcome in which he does not suffer and die on the cross. Again, I take it that we are not meant to understand this as a moment of falling away from virtue, of temptation which reveals imperfection. The point of the story seems to me that Jesus *does not waiver*, but he nevertheless experiences a moment in which the good he is striving towards is somehow eclipsed by the suffering which awaits him. I take it that the very point of the story and the crowning of his *human virtue* is that he remains loyal to his good mission despite this goodness being temporarily hidden from view.⁵ I believe this too fits our intuitions about virtue and shows how it is possible for the virtuous to empathize with less-than-virtuous emotional perspectives. It is possible for the virtuous to be steadfast in their commitment to do good and yet fail to be immediately moved by and fully aware of the goodness of the right course of action – indeed to be, on a certain level, more moved by what they are in danger of losing. Because this state is not incompatible with virtue, myself being in

this state of feeling more attracted to the self-interested course of action is not incompatible with being empathized with by my virtuous friend.

In introducing these claims, do we run the risk of completely erasing the distinction between the motivational profile of the virtuous and that of the non-virtuous? At least one distinction does seem to remain just by looking at our examples, namely that of steadfastness. The virtuous appreciates the value of what she is about to lose in acting virtuously and wishes she did not have to lose it but at no point does she consider straying from the virtuous path. In other words: she may be torn emotionally – she will still be attached to what she is about to renounce – but she is not torn practically. In ours and Bailey's example of non-virtuous motivation, on the other hand, we may freely acknowledge the possibility of both ways of being torn. We are torn on the emotional level because we fear and loath giving up our material well-being and we are torn on the practical level because we are actually wavering between the two options: the whistle-blowing option of making our knowledge of corruption public and the self-interested option of keeping quiet. The crucial question is whether *this latter* component of our situation is one we need others to empathize with, lest we suffer of being lonely and not understood. To my mind, this is not the case, and certainly nothing that Bailey writes seems to me to commit her to this position. Moreover, if the distinction drawn above is correct, namely between being emotionally torn – something which the virtuous can empathize with – and being practically torn and wavering, then it follows directly that the latter state cannot be object of empathy since it is not an emotional state at all.

To sum up: there are more things the virtuously motivated can empathize with than might have been initially apparent. This is because the virtuous is not someone whose emotions immediately home in on the right thing to do and remain indifferent to everything else. On the contrary, they might even prefer doing something else without losing their virtuous steadfastness. This is possible on account of a fact which I believe has not been sufficiently appreciated by theorists of virtue: the fact that, while the virtuous will remain steadfastly attached to the good, the *goodness of the good* will not always be immediately and fully apparent. It may be eclipsed by suffering and regret or simply be temporarily absent. Seeing such a state as an essential dimension of human virtue as opposed to a mark of imperfection might be connected to intuitions about the value of humanity which are themselves eclipsed if one remains too tied to an Aristotelian framework of thinking about these matters.

Notes

¹ See for a forceful and recent defense of the value of empathy, Bailey, Olivia. "Empathy with Vicious Perspectives? A Puzzle about the Moral Limits of Empathetic Imagination." *Synthese (Dordrecht)* 199, no. 3/4 (2021): 9621–47.

² See, for instance, Bailey, *Empathy with vicious perspectives* and Morton, Adam. "18 Empathy for the Devil." In *Empathy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

³ We are reminded here of Bernard Williams' critique of utilitarianism as involving *one though too many*, i.e. as being indecent. The critique appear at the end of the paper *Persons, Character and Morality*, in: Williams, Bernard. *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973-1980* / Bernard Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

⁴ On the distinction between virtue and mere continence, see McDowell, John (1985). Values and Secondary Qualities. In Honderich, Ted, and J. L. Mackie. *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J. L. Mackie* / Ed. by Ted Honderich. London [u.a: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985: 110-129.

⁵ I take the culmination of this hiding from view to be Jesus cry on the cross "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46 NIV)

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