

Empathy and the Value of Humane Understanding

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Abstract

Empathy is a form of emotionally charged imaginative perspective-taking. It is also the unique source of a particular form of understanding, which I will call humane understanding. Humane understanding consists in the direct apprehension of the intelligibility of others' emotions. This apprehension is an epistemic good whose ethical significance is multifarious. In this paper, I focus on elaborating the sense in which humane understanding of others is non-instrumentally valuable to its recipients. People have a complex but profound need to be humanely understood. Because we respond to others' very real need when we pursue this sort of understanding of their emotions, empathy is best understood as itself a way of caring, rather than just a means to promote other caring behavior.

A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination.

Percy Shelley, A Defense of Poetry (1821)

I | INTRODUCTION

In the above passage, Shelley describes a perfected version of an activity that his readers are supposed to intimately acquainted with. He has in mind the activity of imaginatively adopting another person's perspective, in a way that somehow engages the emotions of the one doing this imaginative work. I will call this activity 'empathy.' Shelley's claim about empathy's moral significance, that it is *the*

great instrument of the moral good, is presented not as the conclusion of an argument, but rather as a reminder of what we already know. And it does have the ring of a familiar truth. We tend to think that being empathetic is an important part of being a worthy leader, a good friend, a virtuous person. But exactly what contribution does empathy make to our ethical lives, such that empathy deserves to be counted among the greatest of our moral psychological resources?

One enduringly popular answer to this question is that empathy plays a crucial role in generating altruistic concern. This claim dates back to the first wave of interest in empathy, in the mid- to late 18th century, and it continues to be buoyed by major research projects in social and developmental psychology.¹ However, it has also recently come in for criticism from philosophers and psychologists who suspect that empathy might be not just unnecessary for altruism, but also perniciously motivationally distorting. Consider for example the position of social psychologist Paul Bloom. Bloom (2016: 71) argues that we don't need empathy, "the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does," to inspire altruistic action. Compassion, a form of feeling for others that does not involve an imaginative emotional experience, can provide the requisite motivational spur. What is more, he argues, we ought to prefer compassion to empathy as a motivational source. Unlike compassion, empathy is objectionably narrow and inevitably biased. We are bound to empathize more fully with people who resemble us, who feel familiar, and who are attractive, and we are not capable of extending our empathetic capacities to everyone who deserves our care. Consequently, Bloom concludes, empathy leads us to care too much for some and not enough for others.²

Many champions of empathy have moved to defend its motivational significance against such charges.³ However, the debates over empathy's status as a source of altruism have tended to overshadow consideration of some of empathy's most significant features. Here is what I am going to argue: even if Bloom is right that empathy is narrow and biased, and even if it isn't needed for securing or sustaining altruistic motivation, people who lack the capacity or willingness to empathize will still be missing out on something critically important to virtuous human life.

To get a proper handle on empathy's moral significance, we have to reckon with how it matters epistemically. I will make the case that empathy is the unique source of a particular form of understanding, which I will call humane understanding.⁴ Humane understanding consists in the direct apprehension of the intelligibility of others' emotions. This apprehension is an epistemic good whose ethical significance is multifarious. Here, I will focus on elaborating the sense in which humane understanding of others is non-instrumentally valuable to its recipients. People have a complex but profound need to be humanely understood. Because we respond to others' very real need when we pursue this sort of understanding of their emotions, empathy is best understood as itself a way of caring, rather than just a means to promote other caring behavior. This form of care plays a significant role in a variety of relationships central to human flourishing. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that within

¹See e.g. the work of Nancy Eisenberg (Eisenberg and Strayer (1987), Eisenberg and Eggum (2009)), Martin Hoffman (Hoffman (2001), Hoffman (2008)), and C. Daniel Batson (Batson et al. (2003), Batson (2011)).

²For other criticisms of the view that empathy is necessary for altruistic and/or moral motivation, see Prinz (2011), Kennett (2002), Nichols (2001) and Goldie (2002).

³See e.g. Persson and Savulescu (2018), Mastro (2015), Simmons (2014), and Slote (2015).

⁴The idea that empathy's moral significance may be partly or wholly traced to its epistemic significance is not new; it has an 18th century provenance (see Hume (1990 [1740]: 576) and Smith (1982 [1759]: 1)). Typically, though, empathy's morally relevant epistemic significance has been cashed out in terms of its contribution to our knowledge of other's mental states (see e.g. Matravers (2011), Ravenscroft (1998), Paul (2017)) and/or our formation of moral judgments (see e.g. Slote (2010), Kauppinen (2017)). The epistemic contribution of empathy I draw out here does not fit into either of these categories.

the context of some therapeutic relationships, humane understanding is so important that it is literally a matter of life or death.

I will begin by expanding on my conception of empathy. Then, I will draw upon the work of Adam Smith to introduce humane understanding. Smith suggests that the capacity to empathize just is the capacity to grasp what he calls the “just and proper” quality of others’ emotions. If we take on board a few reasonable claims about the nature of emotional experience, we will see that Smith is right that empathy affords us a unique appreciation of an important normative feature of others’ emotions. More specifically, when we empathize with others, we directly understand how their emotions reflect the evaluative properties the objects of those emotions appear to have. After explaining what humane understanding is, and how it is connected to empathy, I will look to E.M. Forster’s novel *A Room with a View* to motivate my proposal about the moral significance of humane understanding.

II | WHAT IS EMPATHY?

“Empathy” has an impressive range of meanings. Sometimes it is used simply to refer to any kind of transmission of feelings between people, including the kind of contagious transmission that happens when the mere sight of another’s weeping causes one to tear up. It is also not always clearly distinguished from what we might call sympathy or compassion, that is, feelings of loving concern. But empathy in the sense that interests me is importantly different from both emotional contagion and compassion.

For one thing, empathy as I understand it here necessarily involves using one’s imagination to “transport” oneself, such that one considers the other’s situation as though one were occupying the other’s position. So, for instance, when we try to empathetically imagine how things are for a recent widower, we might imagine having just lost a spouse or other loved one. We can think of others’ situations in more or less expansive terms, as encompassing more or fewer details about (for instance) the other’s particular character, history, physical features, and material circumstances, and an empathizer’s imaginative recreation of another person’s situation may be correspondingly more or less ambitious. There is a difference between imagining being myself, transported with my character, history, and physical features intact, into the widower’s location by the graveside of the beloved, and imaginatively taking on as many aspects of that widower’s physical, historical, and psychological characteristics as possible, in the manner of a method actor. But these extremes exist on a scale with many intermediate grades.⁵

A second essential feature of empathy as I understand it here is that it is not a cool, intellectual enterprise.⁶ In certain critical respects, the emotional experience of the one who empathizes closely resembles the emotional experience of the target of empathy. An admittedly metaphorical but still apt way of thinking about how emotions are implicated in empathy is to conceive of the empathizer as encountering their imaginative recreation of the other’s situation through the same emotional lens that

⁵Some philosophers stress the difference between imagining being *myself* in your situation and imagining being in your position as you, often reserving the term “empathy” for the latter phenomenon. See e.g. Kaupinnen (2014: 101), Oxley (2011: 18-22), and Hoffman (2001: 54ff). However, this proposed distinction quickly runs into difficulties. If I imagine being a 18th century French statesman with Napoleon’s battle ambitions but also my own terror of violence, am I imagining being Napoleon, or me in Napoleon’s position? The question doesn’t have an obvious answer; it will depend upon the particulars of our conception of personal identity.

⁶Many philosophers and psychologists divide empathy up into “cognitive” and “affective” sub-types (see e.g. Kaupinnen (2014), Aaltola (2014), Hoffman (2011), and Batson (2009)). In claiming that empathy (in my sense) involves both emotion and perspective-taking, I do not mean to deny that *some* forms of perspective-taking are affectless.

the target of empathy does. The widower apprehends his loss through the lens of grief. We as the widower's empathizers also allow our thoughts to be directed in the ways characteristic of grief: we imagine losing a loved one, and that imagined loss absorbs our attention. Our processing of the imagined situation may also involve registering its features in a bodily way. The imagined absence of our beloved may be felt as a tightness in the throat or hollowness in the stomach. The isomorphism between this empathetic experience and the original grief of the widower strongly recommends the conclusion that when we empathize, we do not merely imagine *that* we are feeling some emotion. Rather, we actually experience an emotion.⁷

One may hesitate to accept this conclusion, on the grounds that there is an important difference between the widower's grief and my empathetic engagement. Emotions are characteristically connected not just to patterns of thought and bodily feeling, but also to patterns of action. Anger typically involves a drive to seek revenge, fear an inclination to seek shelter, and so forth. But empathetic engagement with others' situations seems not to preserve these same connections to motivation and behavior. We don't expect those who empathize with their neighbor's anger to go out looking for vengeance, after all. How can we accommodate this asymmetry between empathetic and "original" responses to a given scenario, while still maintaining that the empathizer's experience is genuinely emotional?

The solution is to recognize that empathetic emotions are thought-directed. We can distinguish between belief-oriented emotions, which concern what we believe to be the case, and thought-oriented emotions, which concern scenarios or objects that we are only thinking about. It is possible for me to be terrified at the thought of spelunking even if I believe this scenario is nowhere on the horizon.⁸ Thought-directed emotions do not have the same relation to action as their belief-directed counterparts do. Because pride at the thought of winning an award (for instance) has what the proud person realizes is a non-realized event for an intentional object, it will not prompt her to crow about her achievement.

We should understand empathetic emotion as a special category of thought-directed emotion, one that is directed at what we take to be our imaginative recreations of other people's situations. The emotion that wells up in me as I attend to my imaginative recreation of another's situation from the inside is perfectly real: when I imaginatively place myself in the widower's situation, I feel actual sadness at the thought of losing my loved one. But, critically, this emotion only qualifies as empathetic if I who am experiencing it persistently understand my own emotion in a particular light. I must retain a firm awareness of two facts: first, my emotion is responsive to a situation that is not actual for me, and second, it is responsive to a situation that *is* actual for the other. Furthermore, I must interpret my own emotion as corresponding to at least some degree to other's original emotional response to their situation.

This proposal vindicates our sense that we actually feel when we empathize, while also explaining why empathetic emotions do not have the same behavioral consequences as ordinary emotions. It also helps to highlight two ways in which empathy can be fragile. First, it is possible to lose sight of the fact that I am not myself really in the given situation. In such cases, empathy shifts into delusion. More commonly, though, we fall out of empathy when we allow the fact that the other really is in the situation to fade from view. When that happens, we can slip from empathy to self-preoccupied fantasy.

Empathy comes in degrees of completeness, and empathy's completeness is affected by several variables. I have already mentioned that our imaginative recreation of the other's situation can vary in scope. We can think of empathy as being more complete, all other things being equal, the more

⁷The claim that the empathizer's affective experience is one of genuine emotion is widely endorsed (see e.g. Prinz (2011: 215), Blum (2011: 172)) but not universally accepted (see e.g. Deigh (1995: 175), Walton (2015: 281ff)).

⁸For more on thought-oriented emotion see Lamarque (1981), Carroll (2003), and Moran (1994).

fine-grained, expansive, and accurate the recreation of the other person's situation is. Empathy's completeness is also a matter of the extent to which the would-be empathizer manages to emotionally engage with the imagined situation in a way that mirrors the emotional response of the one empathized with. The more one's own emotional response to the imaginative recreation of the other's situation resembles the other's original response, all other things being equal, the more complete one's empathy is. The relevant sense of resemblance here is itself multi-dimensional: one's empathetic emotion can more or less closely match the other's original emotion in strength, in valence, and in tone.⁹

The characterization of empathy I've just offered leaves many details to be resolved, of course, but it should be enough for us to be getting on with. We can now turn to the question of how empathy matters.

III | EMPATHY AND HUMANE UNDERSTANDING

In casting empathy as a necessary condition for the "great goodness" of a person, Shelley offers a hint as to why empathy might have this moral status: with empathy, our usual relation to our own "place" is swapped for a relation to another's place. Shelley casts empathy as taking something of our way of relating to ourselves and what is ours, and transferring it to our relations with other people and what is theirs. The idea that empathy's significance derives from such a transference is widespread amongst epistemologists, moralists, psychologists, and anthropologists. Amy Coplan (2011: 18) characterizes empathy as a "means of rescue" from a kind of primitive solipsism. When I empathize, she suggests, my previously unique relation to my own "mental island" is extended to apply to your territory as well. Schopenhauer (2010: 263) describes empathy as the way of overcoming the "wide chasm" egoism posits between self and other. Other authors describe a "gap" or "divide" between persons to be "overcome" or "bridged" by empathy.¹⁰ Given the great disagreement in the literature about exactly what work empathy can do, the broad consensus embodied in this geographic motif is especially striking.

One way to flesh out this bridging picture is to claim that empathy leads us to care for others' joys and sorrows in something like the immediate, practically inevitable way we care about our own fortunes. That is the kind of option that Bloom targets in the criticism of empathy I mentioned above. But the possibility I want to focus on here is an alternative articulation of the bridging picture, one that pictures the advantage to be secured through empathy as, ultimately, epistemic rather than motivational. Is there a special feature of our epistemic standing relative to our own inner lives that could via empathy be extended to the inner lives of others?

In his 1759 work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith moves to bind empathy to an appreciation of what he calls the "propriety" of others' emotions. Smith constructs his theory around a rich diet of cases in which people manage or fail to empathize. To understand exactly how Smith ties empathy to the appreciation of propriety, let us consider one of them. Smith mentions the case of a parent whose child has recently died. Suppose an observer finds himself face to face with this parent. How will the observer's empathetic engagement with the mother unfold? First, the observer will immediately detect a deep sadness in the mother, embodied in her posture and expression. Then the observer will acquire knowledge about the mother's situation and begin to undertake what Smith calls

⁹Complicating assessments of overall completeness is the fact that these variables may interact in complex ways. Greater accuracy and fineness of grain in one's imaginative recreation of the other's situation will not always ensure a closer match between the empathetic and the original emotional response; in fact, the opposite will sometimes be true.

¹⁰"Gap" is used in Davis (2004: 19) and Coplan (2011: 16), "divide" in Mageo (2011: 77) and Lohmann (2001: 113).

“enter[ing] into” her situation. This is the activity of imaginatively re-centering one’s perspective. When we engage in this activity, Smith says, “[a] passion arises in our breast from the imagination” (1982 [1759]: 12). After the observer has done the imaginative work of placing himself in the mother’s situation and felt some emotion well up in him in response, he compares the emotion he feels with emotion he believes the other is actually feeling, and notes the degree of concord between them. Smith explains that once this process is complete, the observer is bound to regard the emotions of the other in a particular light:

When the original passions of the person principally concerned are in perfect concord with the sympathetic emotions of the spectator, they necessarily appear to this last just and proper, and suitable to their objects; and, on the contrary, when, upon bringing the case home to himself, he finds that they do not coincide with what he feels, they necessarily appear to him unjust and improper, and unsuitable to the causes which excite them.¹¹

So, in our example: if the observer believes the mother is deeply distraught at her loss, but finds he can only summon mild discontentment at the thought of losing a son, the mother’s emotion will appear to him unjust and improper. Conversely, if the observer also feels very distressed at the thought, the mother’s emotion will appear just and proper. This appearance, Smith emphasizes, is concerned not with the strategic usefulness of the target’s emotion, but rather with whether the emotion is “right,” “accurate,” “agreeable to truth and reality” (Smith 1982 [1759]: 20).

Smith immediately moves beyond the claim that empathizing guarantees an appreciation of the apparent propriety of the other’s emotions. He goes on to propose that empathizing with another’s emotion also guarantees (or even constitutes) the judgment that the other’s emotion is correct, that it reflects the actual evaluative properties their situation has.¹² And it is this latter proposal that has attracted the most attention from both Smith’s critics and his admirers.¹³ But I think that if we want to get the whole story about empathy’s epistemic and moral value, we should not, as it were, rush to judgment. Grasping the apparent propriety of other’s emotions may itself be a distinct accomplishment with an epistemic and moral significance of its own.

Before we can turn to questions about the value of this grasping, though, we must ask: is Smith right to claim that when we empathize with others, we apprehend the apparent propriety of their emotions? This claim will have little appeal if we think of emotions as brute urges or raw bodily sensations that don’t have any representational quality. In that case, neither the other’s original emotion nor our own empathetic emotion would qualify as the sort of thing that can ever appear “agreeable to truth and reality.” But this is not the only possible way of thinking about what emotions are.

Suppose I have just discovered that you passed along a secret of mine. I told you about my troubles in confidence, and now they seem to be public knowledge. I am angered by what you’ve done. What does that anger involve? There are the bodily symptoms: I feel hot and tense, with a pounding heart and sweaty palms. I may also be moved to act and express myself in particular ways: to speak harshly,

¹¹Smith (1982 [1759]: 16). Note that Smith uses “sympathetic” and “sympathy” to pick out the same quality and phenomenon I label “empathetic” and “empathy.” Smith describes the empathetic and the original emotion as perfectly *concordant*, rather than identical, because he holds that the one will inevitably be weaker than the other. Given the picture of empathetic emotion I’ve articulated, talk of “concord” is suitable for a different reason: while the target of empathy may be experiencing a belief-directed emotion about her situation, the empathizer’s emotion can only match that original emotion *qua* thought-directed analogue.

¹²Smith writes: “To approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them” (1982 [1759]: 16).

¹³Thomas Reid’s “Lecture 100th” is a blistering criticism of Smith’s attempt to link sympathy and judgment (see Duncan and Baird (1977: 517)). For recent defenses of the attempt see e.g. Kaupinnen (2014), Ben-Moshe (2020).

to stamp my feet, to refuse attempts at reconciliation. And my anger will also encompass characteristic patterns of thought: emotions focus our attention of some features of our situation, pushing others into the background. I stew over your perfidiousness, over the way your cheerful greetings now seem calculated to artfully twist the knife you've stuck in my back, and I let your many good qualities recede from view.

Those symptoms, actions, and expressions, which are all an important part of anger, are not just an arbitrary assemblage. They are unified by their connection to my perception of certain features of the situation as outrageous.¹⁴ It is helpful to think of emotions as being, at heart, ways of seeing in virtue of which things take on a particular evaluative sheen. Emotions present certain objects, events, or features as inviting or demanding particular kinds of treatment.¹⁵ In this case, my anger presents the situation as demanding the behavioral, attentional, and physiological responses characteristic of anger. It looks like I *ought* to dwell on your offenses, avoid you, perhaps lash out at you. This presentation of the situation also critically influences how I register my ongoing somatic responses. The feeling of surging adrenaline I might have otherwise taken to manifest high-spirited excitement feels to me, in these circumstances, like "boiling blood," a bodily response to the outrageousness of the offense.

Once we recognize that emotions involve a presentation of the world in a certain evaluative light, the connection between the first-personal experience of an emotion and our grasp on that emotion's apparent propriety will become clear. Being angry does not mean I must judge that my anger is all-things-considered appropriate. Emotions can persist in spite of judgments that they are not correct; I can judge that my friend's slip-up doesn't really merit my anger and still carry on fuming despite myself. One thing, however, is not available to me while I remain in a state of anger: I cannot be totally mystified by my own anger.¹⁶ That claim requires careful qualification. When I am angered, I see something as outrageous. That way of seeing, as we've said, is the thing that unites anger's behavioral, physiological and attention-directing features. And when I see in this way, I cannot deny that my anger is tracking the situation's apparent evaluative features. When we appreciate that our anger reflects the evaluative features the situation appears to have, the apparent presence of those evaluative features (it looks like the situation is outrageous, like it calls out for revenge, and so on) inevitably gives our emotion itself the appearance of propriety. Emotions are *actually* "proper" when they accurately reflect a situation's evaluative features, but they can *appear* to be proper without actually being proper. The situation appears outrageous, so (of course), seeing it as outrageous appears proper. We might use the language of intelligibility here: when we feel an emotion, it cannot simultaneously be unintelligible to us, which is to say when we feel an emotion, we cannot register it as failing to track the apparent evaluative properties of the situation.

This is not to say that whenever we feel an emotion, that feeling is inevitably accompanied by a reflexive awareness of its own intelligibility. We are not always aware of the intelligibility of our emotions, and very small children, for instance, are likely not capable of reflecting on their own emotions at all. The point is just that the first-person experience of an emotion constrains the reflective

¹⁴Note that my characterization of emotion may entail that not all feelings are emotions. Moods are sometimes characterized as non-representational feelings. If that is the right analysis of moods, then I am prepared to accept that moods are not emotions.

¹⁵This characterization of emotion will look familiar to those acquainted with perceptual theories of emotion. For recent articulations of the perceptual theory, see Tappolet (2016) and Döring (2007). Like Tappolet and Döring, I think that the language of "seeing as" does a good job of capturing emotions' distinctive phenomenology. However, I do not mean to endorse the standard perceptualist claim that emotional perception furnishes justification for belief in much the same way that sensory perception does.

¹⁶My claims here apply only to conscious emotions.

possibilities for us. I can simultaneously experience an emotion and be surprised by it. I can feel that that it is out of character for me, not something I can reconcile with my broader set of convictions and plans. But I cannot experience an emotion and simultaneously find it unintelligible.

Crucially, experiencing an emotion is also *indispensable* for the appreciation of its intelligibility. We cannot appreciate the intelligibility of our emotions from a standpoint that is, as it were, not their own. I realize that that is a controversial claim. It is also hard to assess, in the case of an occurrent emotion experienced first personally, simply because we will inevitably be having the emotion we are meant to be assessing unemotionally. But to make the proposal more palatable, let us consider a case where the emotion in question is one we are currently considering, rather than currently experiencing.

Here we have a person who is attending a party while in the grip of intense ennui. She is contemplating the possibility of feeling delighted by the event. Perhaps our bored subject acknowledges, intellectually, that joy *should* be the response for her to have. The smiling faces of friends, the upbeat music, the clink of champagne glasses: she knows that these are the kinds of things that she would normally find delightful. But despite *knowing* that these are the things that invite joy, she now finds herself unable to experience them as wonderful. Instead, they look dull, pathetic, alienating. And given that they look this way, the prospect of being delighted by them lacks a certain intelligibility for her. Perhaps she approves, overall, the prospect of a joyful response to the party. And if asked to explain why joy would be appropriate in these circumstances, she would be able to name the relevant features. But joy in this case would in a very real respect not make sense for or to her, because it would not be responsive to the qualities the features of her situation appear to her to have. For the emotional intelligibility of a joyful response to be secured, she would have to change her way of seeing— which would mean changing her feelings.

Judgments that things have certain evaluative properties can be cold. I can know that something is sad without being saddened by it. And I can also make predictions about what things would be likely to appear terrible, or delightful, or otherwise evaluatively valenced to me without needing to emotionally apprehend them as such, based on my knowledge of my emotional track record. The absence of a direct apprehension of the apparent evaluative properties of a situation does not entail that I will be totally at sea, equally bewildered by all possible ways of seeing that situation. But the real test of whether a particular emotional response actually makes sense to us is not whether it aligns with our previous patterns of emotional apprehension. We might have every reason to believe, based on our history, that something will probably have a certain evaluative appearance for us, and yet when we actually confront the situation, we are surprised: we thought the loss would appear awful (say), but when it comes, we experience it only as a relief. In that moment, emotional relief makes sense to us, and emotional pain does not.

What does this all mean for empathy? Well, the application is quite straightforward. We have said that our own emotions are inevitably intelligible to us. We have also said when we empathize, we feel emotion. So, empathy involves feeling emotions that are inevitably intelligible to us. Now, suppose I succeed in empathizing with someone. Let us stipulate, for the time being 1) I have an excellent knowledge of their situation, 2) I know what their emotional response to it is, 3) I make no mistakes in imaginatively reconstructing their situation, 4) my empathetic emotional response is concordant with their original emotion and 5) I recognize this concordance. If all of the above conditions are satisfied, I will have fully appreciated the emotional intelligibility of the other's emotion first-hand: I will have what I will call *humane understanding* of the other's emotion. And I will not just be entitled to the conclusion that the other's emotion is intelligible, I will be absolutely bound to accept it.

Furthermore, if I am right about the relationship between emotion and the appreciation of its intelligibility, this humane understanding of the other's emotion is unique to empathy. To humanely understand another's emotion is to have a first-hand appreciation of the emotion's intelligibility. Securing

that appreciation means imaginatively taking up the other's first-personal perspective and seeing the world as calling for the emotional response that the other is experiencing. And this form of seeing, achieved within the context of this imaginative effort, just is empathy itself.

The conditions I've just described won't all be fully met in most attempts to empathize. Two sorts of misalignments are possible, each of which will have a different influence on the epistemic outcome of my empathetic effort. On the one hand, there are the possible problems with the empathizer's efforts. There will always be some imaginative slippage, and there will always be questions about whether I have missed some nuance concerning the other's situation or the character of their emotion. These possibilities will make it appropriate for me to modulate my confidence that the emotional outlook whose intelligibility is now plain to me is precisely the outlook that the target of my empathy actually has. On the other hand, there is the possibility that I might fail to achieve full concordance with the empathizer's emotion not because of some methodological imperfection, but because my emotional sensibilities really are relevantly different from the target's. In that case, the warranted conclusion will be that the other's outlook is not fully intelligible to me. It is also possible for both of these sorts of misalignment to be present in combination. Still, appreciating the intelligibility of another's emotion is a substantial epistemic achievement, even if that appreciation is partial.

Importantly, humane understanding of another's emotion is not merely a "weaker" version of a judgment that the others' attitude is appropriate.¹⁷ Approving judgment and humane understanding are often fellow travelers. And approving judgment often follows close on the heels of humane understanding. This is because we often take our emotions to be a good guide to the actual evaluative properties of the situation. When we experience a party as delightful, we are generally strongly inclined to conclude that is really *is*, unless we have some special reason to be suspicious of our sense of joy. Still, we should bear in mind that humane understanding and approval can come rather dramatically apart. We can judge others' emotions to be all-things considered inappropriate and still deeply empathize with them, and (conversely) we can judge others' emotions to be perfectly correct while finding that they leave us cold. For example: perhaps I am convinced by philosophical arguments to the effect that stoic indifference is the right attitude to have toward loss. I might still find, upon attempting to empathize with someone who exhibits such stoicism, that I cannot find my way into that cool outlook, no matter how much I strain my imaginative and emotional capacities.¹⁸

IV | HUMANE UNDERSTANDING AS A NON-INSTRUMENTAL MORAL GOOD

Now that we have humane understanding and its connection to empathy in view, we can ask how it matters to living a "greatly good" life. Two versions of this question suggest themselves. First, we might ask about how a lifetime of pursuing and receiving such understanding shapes our relations with others and our sensitivity to the evaluative features of the world, and whether or how a life devoid of this good would be constrained. And second, we might ask what of moral significance would be missed in an individual instance of a failure to secure humane understanding. Both of these questions

¹⁷Here my account diverges from those of Heal (2003) and Stueber (2010), with which it otherwise shares a good deal in common. Heal and Stueber both argue that a form of perspective taking ("co-cognition" for Heal, "empathy" for Stueber) uniquely ensures an appreciation of the *rationality* of others' attitudes, but they do not entertain the possibility that empathy might afford a divergent form of sense-making, one that tracks emotional intelligibility rather than rationality.

¹⁸Stocker and Hegeman (1996) and Johnston (2007) also defend the claim that what one finds intelligible can diverge from one's evaluative judgments.

are important. Here I will concentrate primarily on the latter, leaving questions about humane understanding's developmental importance for another time.

Contemporary work on empathy's moral significance has tended to focus on how empathy affects the one who empathizes. Rather ironically, it has had very little to say about how it matters from the perspective of the one empathized with.¹⁹ But that is a perspective we need to pay attention to if we want to get the whole truth about how empathy and its humane understanding matters. For some help in effecting this shift in focus, I will look to an episode from Forster's *A Room with a View*.

In the middle of the novel, the protagonist Lucy Honeychurch finds herself in a remarkable position. She has been kissed by George Emerson, a man whose unconventional nature both attracts and disturbs her. She is eager to bare her heart to her cousin Charlotte:

The luxury of self-exposure kept her almost happy through the long evening. She thought not so much of what had happened as of how she should describe it. All her sensations, her spasms of courage, her moments of unreasonable joy, her discontent, should be carefully laid before her cousin. And together in divine confidence they would disentangle and interpret them all.

(Forster 1922: 177)

However, she finds that Charlotte is unwilling to pay attention to the real texture of her emotions. Charlotte comforts Lucy, but rather than trying to appreciate what, exactly, struck Lucy as joyous, as disappointing, as calling for courage, Charlotte immediately sets about trying to cover up the whole affair. Lucy's disappointment is acute: she describes Charlotte's response as a "rebuff," a "wrong not easily forgotten" (126). Her experience of injury in this case is juxtaposed with her "revival" later in the novel, which occurs when Emerson Sr., George's father, tearfully gives voice to Lucy's innermost feelings: "Now it is all dark. Now beauty and passion seem never to have existed. I know" (310). When he speaks thus, Lucy recognizes that Emerson's is "the face of a saint who understood" (310). Being understood, it seems, effects a dramatic transformation in Lucy's relation to herself and the world. She finds herself able to carry on despite a tormented heart and the knowledge that her choices, in particular her choice to break her engagement with the snobbish Cecil Vyse, will be received by many as shocking and lamentable.

Charlotte's failures in relation to Lucy go beyond a lack of empathy. One can listen to someone voicing their feelings without empathizing with them, and Charlotte declines to do even that. But it certainly looks like Emerson Sr. revives Lucy from the "deadened" position into which she has been cast by Charlotte's "rebuff" by empathizing with Lucy's predicament. Emerson Sr. is voicing a perception as if from Lucy's point of view, and one has the sense that this expression is not issued from a position of intellectual abstraction. When he speaks, he seems to be looking out at the world through a lens of despair and bewilderment.

Why does Emerson's empathy effect this revival? It is not that Lucy is revived because (as some contemporary accounts might anticipate) she expects Emerson's empathy to spark helping behavior in him. After all, Emerson's disposition to help Lucy was already publicly established— he graciously gave her the eponymous room. Nor can we explain Lucy's revival by claiming that Emerson's empathy constitutes an endorsement of her emotion. When Emerson gives voice to her despair, he is not saying

¹⁹Smith was not guilty of the same error: he stresses that one who suffers will "passionately desire" others' empathy, and that others' empathy "constitutes his sole consolation" (1982 [1759]: 22). Betzler (2019) is another important exception to this generalization: Betzler characterizes empathy as a relational good, and highlights numerous respects in which both the one who empathizes and the one who is empathized with can and do value empathetic exchange. Betzler does not, however, focus on the particular good of understanding that I am concerned to bring to light here.

Lucy's emotion is correct. He is not enough of a cynic to believe that there is no beauty or passion in the world. So, we must have another story to tell about the value to Lucy of Emerson's response.

In fact, I believe that the right story will not describe the value of humane understanding just in terms of its contributions to some other, more philosophically familiar good, because being humanely understood is something we value non-instrumentally. One way to bring out this value is to reflect on our experiences of *not* being humanely understood. These experiences are often characterized by a particular form of anxiety. I have argued that our own emotions cannot be unintelligible to us. But what can plague us, in moments where we keenly feel the absence of others' empathy, is the suspicion that our emotional outlook is alien, such that we make sense *only* to ourselves.

This anxiety is not the same as the fear that one's attitudes will be judged to be incorrect, and it cannot be relieved by mere approval. Suppose, for instance, that Lucy were to say to her suitor Cecil Vyse "everything seems dark to me now," and suppose that Vyse were a person so irrepressibly cheerful in his thinking that he couldn't at all imaginatively work his way into Lucy's grim perception. In his view, all is light and joy, and so her pessimism is beyond the bounds of what is humanely understandable for him. But suppose, also, that Vyse were to regard his own indomitable optimism as an epistemic handicap, much in the same way that a person with chronic pain insensitivity might regard their faulty nerves. Even though Vyse cannot see anything, his own situation or others', as "all dark," he might trust that "all dark" is the appropriate way to see things sometimes. And he might regard Lucy as the ultimate authority on whether her situation has an inky cast or not. So, he approves of Lucy's emotion, because he trusts her to get things right in this domain, even though he cannot empathize with it.

This response I've imagined for Vyse could not be substituted without remainder for Emerson's engagement with her situation, and still be as effective a source of "revival." In a case like this, Lucy would not be alienated from Vyse as completely as she is from Charlotte, who does not respect Lucy's testimony about her feelings. Being trusted, as Vyse trusts Lucy, is at least a way of being honored as an important source of information. But notice that there is still a kind of loneliness involved in some ways of being seen as an authority. Imagine what it would be like if others regarded you as a kind of guru, but also couldn't see where you were coming from. Suppose everyone around you took your word that the loss was devastating, the sculpture was beautiful, the goal was worthy, but that they nevertheless could not bring themselves to see things as you see them, such that they grasped the intelligibility of your emotional outlook. In that case, it would be perfectly natural and reasonable to feel profoundly isolated. And for thoroughly social creatures like ourselves, isolation in all forms is a bad thing. Standing in intimate relations to others is a central element of our flourishing as human beings. In Lucy's case, it seems to me, Emerson's expression of empathy effects a particularly dramatic transformation because the outlook he is empathizing with is, precisely, a lonely one. Lucy feels herself to be by herself in the dark, not tied to others by the connecting strings of passion, facing down the prospect of ostracization from her community. But, in empathizing with her very alienation, he offers her a relief from this particular anguish.²⁰

It is important here to distinguish between the value of humane understanding and the value of another phenomenon in the vicinity. The mere thought that other people do feel the same way as us

²⁰The relief from loneliness I am describing here has something in common with Stephen Darwall's (2011) concept of "being with." According to Darwall, "being with" involves willingness to see oneself through the others' eyes, such that one takes the other's view of oneself seriously, and empathy is required for that operation. That is not the relevant dynamic in Lucy's case: Emerson is not engaging with how Lucy sees *him*, but rather the world at large. But while "second-personal answerability" is Darwall's core concern, he also notes that empathy can matter to the quality of intimate relationships in other ways. Specifically, he claims: "We can adequately register them [another's concerns] only by seeing his situation from his perspective...Only then do we really hear or "get" him" (2011: 19). I agree with Darwall that is very important for us that our friends and loved ones "get" us; the account I've offered here can be understood as an attempt to spell out exactly what "getting" consists in, what it has to do with empathy, and why it is valuable to us.

may be consoling. If I think that I am the only person in the world who apprehends the extinction of the *Levuana iridiscens* moth as devastating, and then I learn that in fact there is another entomophile out there who feels just the same, that may itself be a relief. I may relish the thought that *I am not the only one who cares, after all*. But in a case like this, what I am valuing is not yet the other's humane understanding, for after all the other bug lover may not at all even be aware of me. Crucially, the state of humane understanding necessarily involves an orientation toward the other and her attitudes. Humane understanding has two faces. The one who understands grasps the intelligibility of the outlook in which she is imaginatively immersed, and in so doing she also recognizes the other as one whose emotions are intelligible.²¹ That recognition is itself important to us, regardless of further consequences.²² We want to be seen as what we are: creatures whose emotions, however irrational they may be, nevertheless make perfect human sense.

Admittedly, some of us ambivalent about not being understood. Hegel is said to have complained "Only one man has ever understood me. And he didn't understand me."²³ Kierkegaard ups the ante: "People understand me so little that they do not even understand my laments over their not understanding me" (1978 [1836]: 59). A cynic could suspect that Hegel and Kierkegaard, for all their lamentations, would not care to be understood *too* readily. A person who regards their own sensibilities as uniquely refined might not want a simple person to be able to humanely understand his feelings.²⁴ But as against the cases of potential outliers like these, we should also note that what may be a matter of negligible or uncertain value to some is literally a lifesaver to others.

Suicidology researchers and therapists have developed a set of related intervention strategies, based the pioneering work of psychiatrist Jerome Motto, that have proven remarkably successful in reducing rates of repeat suicide attempts. They involve some combination of in-depth interviews, in which a therapist listens carefully to a patient's story of her suicide attempts, and a series of letters or text messages in which the therapist expresses appreciation of the patient's particular outlook as well as interest in her well-being. In contrast to approaches which prioritize somatic therapy, Motto-style treatment protocols place empathetic response at the center of the treatment plan: the treatment depends upon the therapists' ability to grasp how things feel to the patient.

Patients report that these kind of treatment processes makes them feel "understood and hopeful," and this feeling seems to have important behavioral consequences: one 2016 study showed an 80% reduction in the risk of suicide reattempts for recipients of this form of intervention.²⁵ The suicidologist Stacey Freedenthal says of this sort of approach: "Some therapists stand in the light and call out to the person in the darkness, 'Come out, there's light here, there's hope here,' ... but sometimes what the suicidal person needs is for the therapist to join them in the darkness and show them a way out" (Cherkis 2018). For suicidal people, believing that they have been understood, that others continue to "get" their perspectives, may just be the thing they need to go on living.

²¹Edith Stein (1989 [1917]) (see also Jardine (2015)) makes a similar point in her analysis of the empathetic "grasping (*Erfassen*)" of another. I thank an anonymous reviewer for the reference.

²²That is not to say that the further consequences are *unimportant* to us. For one thing, being understood as someone whose emotions are intelligible may effectively bar the one who humanely understands us from treating us in certain bad ways. If someone humanely understands me, they cannot coherently treat me as a mere thing or as an unfeeling alien. It is also worth highlighting that being humanely understood may be valuable to us as either a prerequisite for or as partially constitutive of certain valuable relationships, most centrally the relation of friendship. Humane understanding may be valuable to us in many respects other than the one I am focusing on here.

²³Quoted in Heine (1982: 157).

²⁴We may have other, more noble reasons for rejecting others' efforts at humane understanding, too.

²⁵Gysin-Maillart et al. (2016). Cited in Cherkis (2018).

Jesse Prinz, like Bloom a critic of empathy, agrees that “We would all like to have empathetic friends,” that it is *nice* when our “near and dear” can empathize with us,” but claims: “it does not follow that empathy is desirable as a *moral* emotion,” because “an endorsement of empathy requires more than a warm fuzzy feeling. We need an argument for why empathy is valuable in the moral domain” (2011: 214). Prinz is right that we should approach the question of empathy’s significance with care, and that we must be prepared to have some of our pre-reflective attitudes about empathy overturned. But we should not unduly discount the significance of warmth and fuzzy feelings, either. Facts about how we experience empathy are highly relevant to its moral status. We find a special relief in being humanely understood. That fact gives us an immediate (albeit defeasible) moral reason to empathize with others; in empathizing, we can diminish others’ genuinely painful sense of alienation.

It is important to emphasize that the goodness of empathizing, and the exact nature of the empathy that will best meet the other’s needs, is highly contextually dependent. One person might need for their specific emotion, with all its detailed texture, to be understood by another. For another person, such details may be irrelevant: their sense of isolation could be effectively relieved by more coarse-grained empathy, and efforts to achieve a more detailed appreciation might be received as unhelpful or intrusive. Sometimes, empathy might even be entirely beside the point. We can think, for instance, of Bill Clinton responding to the activist Bob Rafsky’s demand for an action plan for defeating AIDS with “I feel your pain”—Clinton may well have been empathizing with Rafsky, but that was not at all what Rafsky was asking for, and as such Clinton’s response was inapt.

The context sensitivity of humane understanding’s value means that practical wisdom will be required in order to reliably recognize when empathy will satisfy others’ needs, how much empathy is required, and whether others’ needs to be understood are superseded by other considerations. Practical wisdom will also be important for maintaining a properly humble assessment of one’s own empathetic abilities—others’ misplaced confidence that they *do* understand can add a special piquancy to the pain of not being understood. It is easy to put a foot wrong when it comes to the practice of empathizing, and the process of acquiring the requisite sensitivity cannot be expected to be entirely smooth. But that is true of many of the sensibilities that are at the center of our ethical lives.

In this paper I have focused on one important respect in which being humanely understood is valuable to its recipients. It matters to us that others appreciate the intelligibility of our emotions, and it matters that they recognize *us* as people whose emotions make sense. This is something many of us care about for its own sake. But there remains much more to be said about the value of humane understanding, particularly when it comes its developmental impact. We might consider, for instance, how our experiences of being humanely understood help to shape our self-understanding. I have claimed that when we experience an emotion first personally and attend to the question of that emotion’s intelligibility, we are bound to regard the emotion as intelligible. Still, the ability to attend to our emotions in this way is something that we have to acquire. Very young children, for instance, are not able to engage in this kind of reflection. It may be that others’ attempts to offer us humane understanding actually have a critical role to play in our developing that reflective ability.

In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith intriguingly suggests that it is only through being on the receiving end of others’ empathetic efforts that we come to recognize our emotional perspectives on the world *as* perspectives. That dawning awareness, he urges, is essential for the formation of our concept of self.²⁶ Adapting the point, we might say that when others engage in what we can call em-

²⁶Smith writes: “Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face... Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before” (1982 [1759]: 110). See Fleischacker (2019) for an enlightening exploration of this thought experiment.

pathetic dialogue, articulating to us their understanding of how our own emotions make sense to them, they help us to recognize our own emotions as evaluative presentations of (some part of) the world. It is because our parents say to us: “You’re angry, I get it, I see how that terrifically unfair that looks!” that we start to recognize our anger as an evaluative presentation, rather than merely unselfconsciously seeing through our rage. Interestingly, if this proposal is correct, then it will turn out that the humane understanding that others (especially our caretakers) offer us as we grow actually undergirds the non-instrumental desire to be humanely understood I have focused on here. If we didn’t understand our emotions as the sorts of things that can be intelligible, we would not yearn for others to grasp their intelligibility.²⁷ A complete defense of this idea will have to be the work of another day. But now that we have humane understanding and one central aspect of its value to us in view, we are better placed to explore the other, perhaps still more basic dimensions of its significance for our moral lives.

V | CONCLUSION

I began with Bloom’s concern that empathy may be capricious or unduly limited. And indeed, when it comes to mediocre moral agents (which is to say, most of us), it is practically inevitable that not everyone will receive the empathy from us that that they need or deserve. We will be reluctant to immerse ourselves in perspectives that are uncomfortable to imaginatively inhabit, or we will simply be deaf to certain calls for understanding. But if empathy is in fact the *only* way to relieve a particular sort of pain, then something would undoubtedly be lost if we were to try to curb or squelch our empathetic efforts in favor of attitudes that are pro-social, but that don’t require us to work our way into others’ emotional perceptions. I have not tried to prove here that the heft of that potential loss definitely outweighs concerns about our empathetic efforts’ susceptibility to bias, but if we were to follow Bloom’s counsel to suppress empathy, we would be giving up an important source of comfort to many. Concluding that we should still try to do away with empathy because of Bloom’s concerns about its limitations feels a bit like insisting that we should try not to love *anyone* on the grounds that we cannot love *everyone*, and that our distribution of love is subject to bias.²⁸

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²⁷I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to highlight humane understanding’s possible contributions to our self-awareness and self-conception.

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