

Far from Heart, Far from Eyes: Empathy, Personal Identity, and Moral Recognition

*Corazón que no siente, ojos que no ven: empatía, identidad personal y
reconocimiento moral*

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Abstract

Do we empathize with the others because first we have recognized them as somehow equals, or do we recognize them as equals because first we have empathized with them? This article explores the relation between affective empathy, the moral recognition of the others, and personal identity. I defend that, to recognize others as valuable and act in line with this, one must be able to feel affective empathy for their situation, and, to do so, one has to 1) be curious about them to surpass indifference, and 2) feel that your identity is not threatened by recognizing the others. Otherwise, rationalizations and justifications of antisocial behaviors would arise. Thus, I focus on how the construction of the self plays a key role in prosocial behaviors and the activation of affective empathy, which has been overlooked by moral philosophy in the debate on empathy. In order to do so, firstly, I explore cases where moral recognition is broken, secondly, I explore the dichotomic debate on the role of empathy for moral recognition and moral agency, and, thirdly, I try to enrich the debate by shifting the focus to the prerequisites to feel empathy, such as curiosity, a well-integrated self and healthy narcissism, addressing so how the construction of the self plays a key role in the possibility of empathizing with others and, therefore, in epistemic virtues and moral agency. As a result, I advocate the importance of psychological education for moral agency.

Keywords: indifference, moral damage, empathy, emotional education, narcissism.



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Resumen

¿Empatizamos con el otro porque primero lo hemos reconocido como un igual o lo reconocemos como igual porque primero hemos empatizado con él? Este artículo explora la relación entre la empatía afectiva, el reconocimiento moral de los otros y la identidad personal. Defiendo que, para reconocer al otro como valioso y actuar en consonancia con ello, se debe poder sentir empatía afectiva por su situación y, para ello, hay que 1) tener curiosidad por el otro para superar la indiferencia y 2) sentir que tu identidad no se ve amenazada por el reconocimiento del otro. De lo contrario, surgirían racionalizaciones y justificaciones de conductas antisociales. Así, me centro en cómo la construcción del yo juega un papel clave en las conductas prosociales y la activación de la empatía afectiva, que ha sido pasada por alto por la filosofía moral en el debate sobre la empatía. Para hacerlo, primero exploro los casos en los que se rompe el reconocimiento moral, describo el debate pendulante sobre el papel de la empatía para el reconocimiento moral y la agencia moral y, en tercer lugar, trato de contribuir en el debate cambiando el enfoque hacia los prerrequisitos para sentir empatía, como la curiosidad, un yo bien integrado y un narcisismo sano. Así, abordo cómo la construcción del yo tiene un papel clave en la posibilidad de empatizar con los demás y, por tanto, en las virtudes epistémicas y la agencia moral. Como conclusión, defiendo la importancia de la educación psicológica para la agencia moral.

Palabras clave: indiferencia, daño moral, empatía, educación emocional, narcisismo.

1. To feel or not to feel: Moral coldness, brakeage, and interferences in basic moral expectations

As a form of inner imitation (Stueber 2006, 15) or a capacity to be emotionally tuned to others' experiences, empathy¹ has become a central object of study in fields dealing with human agency, such as moral philosophy and moral psychology. Among the vast group of topics related to empathy, one of the cases that creates more perplexity to both moral philosophers and psychologists is the indifference toward someone else's suffering and their demands of justice or, to put it differently, the instances of lack or suppression of empathy that may lead to justify aggression and violence toward the "enemy". Cases of moral blindness toward someone else's situation or cases of moral coldness are a challenge. As these cases break the bridge between the *I-the others* relations, they may help shed some light on the roots of moral recognition as well as they may also provide us with worthy information on the preconditions to moral agency.

¹ The definition of empathy has been a question of debate in contemporary ethics and analytic philosophy. On this matter, see Stueber (2006); Coplan & Goldie (2011) or Aaltola (2013).

As Jean Améry remarked, a human world is based on epistemic trust, that is, on the expectation of reciprocity and recognition as a being with moral status. One expects not to be assaulted or harmed, and if so, one expects then some recognition and reparation in the form of help or support (2001, 91-92). However, both human history and our every day's life are rich in providing cases where one or the two expectations are broken. That would be the case of xenophobia, as well as age, ethnic, religion, and gender biases, just to name a few.

As moral agents and spectators, we might not see that we are causing an instance of moral damage, we might not see it as relevant, or we may see it, but we might think that the victim somehow deserves it, justifying the lack of recognition or the depersonalization of the victim. That would be the case of punishment, kidnaps, and terrorist actions (Morgado 2011).

Some frequently discussed cases where the others are no longer seen as morally relevant beings are cases where contempt, cruelty and aggression toward the others are activated, as well as cases concerning executioners and torturers' moral coldness. Here a phenomenon of depersonalization has crystalized, and reciprocity and recognition are lost, in both the agent and the spectator. In the recent literature and cinema, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Boyne 2006) perfectly portraits this disconnection in the *I-We* identity versus the others: you are not one of us, therefore, you are not morally relevant, and, in turn, I become blind and/or indifferent to your suffering, –or I justify why you deserve it.

Equally eye-catching are the cases where a sudden reconnection appears. Again, literature provides philosophy with poignant examples to challenge moral assumptions. *Soldiers of Salamis* (Cercas 2004) presents us with the case of a soldier who is about to shoot against *his* enemy in a war, but suddenly, when he looks him in the eyes, he finds himself unable to shoot another human being. At that moment a connection between the *I-the others* structure appears, as if a short-circuit in the *I-the others* relation would have suddenly been repaired. Something similar can be found in *The adventures of Huckelberry Finn* (Twain 1884) when Huck, a 13-year-old white boy, helps Jim escape, a black adult slave whom the boy regards as his true family throughout the story. After helping Jim escape from slavery, Huck decides that what he should do, the right thing, is to return him and hand him over to his masters. However, when he has the opportunity to do so, Huck finds himself unable to do what he considered the best. Thus, instead of returning him to his pursuers, who want Jim to return to the plantation, Huck decides to protect him and help him flee. Huck's family considers this a case of weakness of will, as the boy has not been able to act according to his moral principles.

Moral philosophy has dealt with these cases as examples of inverse akrasia (Kleist 2009), especially from objectivist accounts. On their part, those coming from subjectivism and

second person accounts have seen here the key example to illustrate how compassion and/or empathy is at the base of morality and prosocial behaviors. In this sense, Tugendhat, in line with Schopenhauer's example², provides a perfect synthesis of these cases:

Someone has wanted to kill another one, but ultimately he distances himself from his purpose, not out of caution, but for moral reasons. (...) What is the moral motivation that he finds compelling? Would he seem convincing if he said that he has not done it because then he could not universalize the maxim of his action? Or because, in that case, he would not have treated the other at the same time as an end in himself? (...) To all this contrasts the answer: I did not do it because compassion overwhelmed me ... I felt sorry. (Tugendhat 2000, 167)

Irrespectively of the normative and metaethical interpretation of these examples, all these cases lead us to the following question regarding moral psychology: do we empathize with the others because first we have recognized them as somehow equals, or do we recognize them as equals, as relevant beings, because first we have empathized with them? Assuming the perplexity these cases have caused in moral philosophy (Stroud & Tappolet 2007) as a starting point, I aim to answer this question by exploring how the lack of recognition of someone's moral status and a lack of moral sensibility are linked to some failures in the prerequisites of empathy.

Specifically, I will defend that affective empathy³ is a necessary condition to recognize moral damage as such and, in turn, to recognize the others as morally relevant. In this sense, I will defend that affective empathy is a key element for prosocial behaviors. However, I will neither defend that empathy in a general sense is always a precursor to positive social behaviors nor that empathy is the only precondition. First, because empathy is an umbrella concept used to name the social or secondary emotion (affective empathy), but also emotional contagion, vicarious emotional responses, and the cognitive understanding of the others (cognitive empathy) (Maibom 2020). Second, I will not defend that thesis because empathy is a multidimensional phenomenon (Zaki *et al.* 2009) and motivation and decision making are multifactorial and affected by many other elements. Rather, I will defend that, in order to recognize others as valuable and act in line with this thought, one has to be able to feel

² The original example by Schopenhauer in *The basis of morality* would make the same point regarding the role of compassion as an interruption to act in line with your first judgment (Schopenhauer 2014, part III, chapter VIII). However, as Schopenhauer focuses on what argumentation would be better (one based on compassion or one based on other ethical principles), and as the author defends compassion as the only non-egoistic motivation and identifies real morality as unselfish justice, I prefer Tugendhat's version of the example for the sake of clarity. I neither aim to defend compassion as the basis of morality nor I aim to develop the potential normative consequences of that claim. Rather, I mention compassion and moral coldness as examples of connections and disconnections that affect our ability to recognize the others as morally relevant, and interfere, for better or worse, with what we considered our best judgment. In this sense, my interest here is moral psychology rather than normative ethics.

³ On affective empathy see Maibom (2017).

affective empathy for their situation, and, in order to do so, first one has to be curious about them. However, this epistemic virtue, curiosity, would only be activated if you feel that your identity is not threatened by recognizing the others. In this sense, the construction of the self plays a key role in prosocial behaviors. Nevertheless, this element has been overlooked by moral philosophy in the debate on empathy. Thus, I will try to integrate a piece somehow missed in the philosophical debate.

When I state that affective empathy is a necessary condition to recognize moral damage and moral status, I do not mean by this that empathy becomes a normative criterion. I only state here that affective empathy is a necessary condition for the recognition of moral status and, therefore, for moral agency, but not a sufficient one. Hence, this does not mean that empathy leads directly to prosocial behaviors. Again, affective empathy is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one. Motivation and action are multidimensional. This does not mean that every prosocial behavior is generated only by empathy. One can act in a prosocial way for many reasons and motives, including instrumental ones⁴. Rather, my thesis is that a lack of affective empathy can always be found under the surface of antisocial behaviors. Here, therefore, it is important to distinguish prosocial, passive, and antisocial behaviors: not being prosocial does not directly translate into being antisocial.

I only aim to explore what occurs when someone is able to disconnect from the others and act as an executioner or torturer, for example, and what consequences these cases have for our understanding of our moral dimension. I do not aim to state here “you should help only those you are able to empathize with” or “if you feel empathy, then you should help them”. Those would be normative claims out of the scope of this article. Rather, I try to address that, if we are not able to feel affective empathy for the others, if our ability is somehow truncated, then *voids* on our moral agency appear, becoming so morally blind. Thus, the focus of this article is moral psychology, although there might surely be normative implications.

In other words, in this article I aim to explore the mentioned cases where moral recognition is broken or interrupted. To do this, I will first address the debate on what role affective empathy⁵ could play for moral recognition and moral agency, as the philosophical debate has

⁴ Another question would be if we consider those acts morally correct in normative terms. On the topic of instrumental prosocial behavior and narcissism see Konrath *et al.* (2016) and Yuk *et al.* (2021).

⁵ I would like to make clear that when empathy is related to morality, this does not mean that empathy becomes a normative criterion. Labelling empathy as a moral sentiment, such a shame or guilt, does not mean that these terms become moral principles. That is, it does not mean that they can work *per se* as normative criterion on what we should do. Thus, when these psychological terms, part of our emotional repertoire, are considered moral terms, they must still be interpreted as dimensions of our psyche that enable our moral dimension, as tools to develop moral agency, but not necessarily as normative criterion, unless one makes the explicit leap from one dimension to the latter. In this sense, empathy does not work as a moral reason, it does not justify *per se* any moral demand. Empathy, shame or guilt may be at the basis of some behaviors that latter should be justified following sharable universal claims in a context of justification. In this sense, descriptive and normative ethics should be well distinguished.

oscillated from against to in favor approaches. In fact, whether empathy is or not necessary for the moral recognition of others⁶ and, therefore, for morality is one of the most persistent issues in the intersection of ethics⁷ and moral psychology. Secondly, I will try to move the debate forward by shifting the focus beyond the previous antagonist perspectives. To do so, I will delve into the prerequisites to feel empathy, such as curiosity and a healthy narcissism. By doing so, I will address how the construction of the self has a key role in the possibility of empathizing with others. Specifically, I will focus on the role of healthy narcissism for affective empathy and, in turn, for epistemic virtues, such as curiosity and flexibility, which are key for moral and prosocial behaviors. Finally, as a result, I will advocate not only the moral importance of emotional education for morality⁸, but also the key role of psychological education.

Hence, throughout this article I will firstly try to defend that, without affective empathy, prosocial behaviors are severely truncated, and, secondly, that epistemic virtues such as curiosity for the others, and a healthy construction of the self, a healthy narcissism, are prerequisites for affective empathy, becoming so key elements for moral agency often overlooked in the philosophical debate on the role of empathy for morality.

2. *To do or not to do: Empathy and prosocial behaviors*

Over the last decades, moral philosophy has provided a fruitful debate both on the definition of empathy and its role for moral agency. Assuming here the integrative and comprehensive definition suggested by Aaltola, “empathy consists of movement between resonance and responding, between the first-order level and the meta-level: we resonate with the other, and then respond by positioning this sense of resonance within the wider horizon of experiences, emotions, and ideas” (2013, 252-253).

Contemporary approaches, also in psychology, have swung from those who understand empathy as a precondition to moral reasoning and prosocial behavior (Eisenberg & Miller

⁶ The scope of this article refers only to human interactions. Thus, by the recognition of the others I only mean the recognition between moral agents, assuming here an anthropocentric view. Although much of what will be said can be applied to moral patients such as newborns, great apes and sentient beings, the scope of this article is limited to the problematic and paradigmatic cases of lack of recognition between humans, where there is no asymmetry in terms of moral development. The rest of the cases about the moral community are complex enough to be treated separately.

⁷ I will use the terms *moral philosophy* and *ethics* as synonyms, both referring to the field or discipline of philosophy dedicated to study and reflect on human’s moral dimension.

⁸ I will use morality here as a synonym of moral agency. Although this term can be understood only in relation to the capacity and the development of practical reason, this article focuses on the capacity of acting in a morally correct way. In this sense, I will not delve into the metaethical debate on correctness and will assume that acting correctly in moral terms means recognizing the others as morally relevant, caring for them, avoiding their suffering and respecting their rights.

1987; Slote 2007; Hoffman 1990) to those who deny any role of this complex emotion (Prinz 2011a; Goldie 2011). While the first group considers empathy the core element to untangle the problem of indifference, contempt, cruelty, and social disconnection, the second group criticizes the role of empathy regarding motivation and the elaboration of moral judgments.

Nevertheless, whenever a philosophical discussion, in what it seems an unresolvable dilemma, swings from positions against and for, we might probably be missing part of the puzzle. For this reason, to overcome the pendular dynamic, it might be useful to rescue the challenging points from both perspectives, for there must be something accurate in both approaches.

On the one hand, if we focus on what is claimed by those defending the role of empathy in morality, it is undeniable that, with de Waal (2006) and Damasio (1994; 2003), empathy is at the center of human social behavior, which is the bridge to morality. Empathy is involved in our social and moral life. In other words, following Damasio, the moral dimension would not arise without our social or interpersonal dimension.

On the other hand, as the critical perspectives highlight, it may be true that we should surpass vague formulations of emotional terms, such as empathy and compassion, and their function, and be specific regarding the terminology. In this sense, some of the reasons why the dichotomic debate does not move forward may be based on the lack of clarification on whether we are talking about the role of empathy for the development of morality, or empathy as a normative criterion, empathy as a tool for moral motivation, for action, or for morally good behaviors. Likewise, many times it is not clear if we, philosophers, are talking about cognitive or affective empathy. Besides, some important factors seem to be overlooked, i.e., the relation between empathy and the construction of personal identity.

Sometimes empathy is seen as an emotion, sometimes as a virtue, others as a capacity. As the critic accounts point out, empathy should be distinguished from moral imagination (Goldie 2011). Empathic imagination and the theories of the attribution of emotions and mental states to others, which are based on what the subject would experience in such a circumstance, would be neither addressing affective empathy nor cognitive empathy, since empathy is not a question of imagining what I would feel in such a circumstance, but to “read” or feel what the other feels in that circumstance. Empathy is a question of knowing (cognitive empathy) or feeling attuned to someone else’s feelings (affective empathy), regardless of the question about whether I would agree with that reaction or not, or if I would evaluate that situation in the same way.

Also, in a critical sense, one might think that empathy hides a selfish motivation. That has been sometimes the popular interpretation of Schopenhauer’s quote “weeping is sympathy with ourselves”⁹ (2000, I-4, §67). Something similar appears in Prinz’s essay against empathy

⁹ I would like to highlight that Schopenhauer’s intention is the contrary, as he defended an ethics of compassion: “Therefore people who are either hardhearted or without imagination do not readily weep; indeed, weeping is

(2011a). Those who see a selfish motivation behind empathy would defend that what moves us to tears is not the suffering of others, but our own suffering, because, in our imagination, we put ourselves in the place of the person who suffers, which reminds us of our human condition. As a result, we always end up crying for ourselves.

However, contrary to what is commonly assumed, empathy is not based on or related to selfish motivation *per se*. Firstly, empathy should be distinguished from empathic imagination, as already mentioned. Secondly, empathy is not based on fearing what the other experiences will happen to me, that is, it is not based on an ultimate interest in oneself -which, on the other hand, would be perfectly legitimate and *a priori* morally indifferent-. Rather, it is based on unease, in the case of negative emotions, produced by the situation of others, and on concerns for the others, so that the selfish motivation is not, *a priori*, an integral part of it. In any case, even if this were the situation, a self-centered empathy would in fact provoke great empathic distress because it would directly connect the affective state of the victim to the agent's needs, so that in this case an excess of self-interest could even be morally beneficial (Hoffman 1990). In other words, the connection between self-interest and moral wrongness seems to be an echo of a specific cultural paradigm that relates moral wrongness with self-interest rather than a necessary connection.

Also, although “neuroimaging studies of moral judgment in normal adults, as well as studies of individuals exhibiting aberrant moral behavior, all point to the conclusion that (...) emotion is a significant driving force in moral judgment” (Greene & Haidt 2002, 522), some authors understand that this does not necessarily imply empathy. That is, one can recognize the role of the emotional dimension for morality, the need of being provided with an emotional repertoire and the role of shame, guilt, etc., without necessarily having to recognize the role of empathy. That would be the case of Prinz (2007, 2011a, 2011b). Here, however, the problem of terminology arises again, as empathy cannot be limited to just a “vicarious emotion that one person experiences when *reflecting* on the emotion of another” (Prinz 2011b, 214). That interpretation would mean reducing empathy just to cognitive empathy.

Likewise, given the recent research (Pajevic *et al.* 2018; Kiehl 2008; Kenneth & Fine 2008; McGeer 2008; Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia 2006; Damasio 2003) it seems hard to maintain a critical approach against empathy in logical terms: if the emotional dimension is necessary for morality, and affective empathy is part of the emotional dimension, then it seems sensible to state that affective empathy may play a role in moral agency, especially when it is a secondary emotion that relates the subject with the others and when morality deals with intersubjectivity and reciprocity.

always regarded as a sign of a certain degree of goodness of character, and it disarms anger. This is because it is felt that whoever is still able to weep must also necessarily be capable of affection, i.e., of sympathy towards others, for this enters in the way described into that mood that leads to weeping” (2000, I-4).

In line with Prinz's critical arguments, one might defend that empathy is not the key element for morality, for the development of moral reasoning, since in fact we do not seem to be able to empathize with large numbers of people. When we hear some news where the victims are millions, or the number surpasses our imagination, the mass is depersonalized, and empathy is not activated. When the victim is distant from us (Unger 1996) or the numbers of victims go beyond our imagination, we do not feel (affective) empathy, but are still able to recognize that there is something morally wrong happening. Therefore, it is argued, empathy is not necessary for morality.

Nevertheless, this argument against empathy could in fact explain cases as the mentioned in *Soldiers of Salamis* or *Huckleberry Finn*, where there is a face-to-face interaction. In both cases the agent reconnects with the patient and acts against what he considered his best moral judgement in the first place (i.e., an evaluation done when the patient was depersonalized, treated as the enemy or when one was not in a face-to face relationship with the other), becoming in fact an argument in favor of the role of affective empathy in recognizing someone else's moral relevance and prosocial behaviors¹⁰.

In any case, this argument could not explain the cases of executioners or torturers where the interaction is face-to-face, the emotional connection is deprived or avoided, and the patient is depersonalized¹¹. Those cases could be explained when the element concerning

¹⁰ One might think that, we assume that we have moral obligations to unknown and distant people -such as, for example, the duty to lessen the impact of famine in Africa or a duty toward future generations- precisely because we recognize them as morally relevant. Then this claim would be incompatible with a view centered in affective empathy, which seems to be restricted to a narrower scope -i.e., to the scope of those with whom we can interact face to face. The same could be claimed in the case of any tragedy we watch in the news on television. At this point, distinguishing the case of a distant person from the cases of collective victims would be key, as one could indeed feel affective empathy for a single distant victim. However, my aim here is not to focus on why we disconnect from distant people, but why we disconnect from the near ones. That being said, here I would like to stress the distinction between descriptive claims and normative ones. I focus here on the fact that you can know the problem, you can see the victims, you can watch them on television, and still say "it is not my responsibility", and stay indifferent, contradicting the popular saying: "far from eyes, far from heart". You can see it and still be not motivated to act, whether because only cognitive empathy was activated, or because you see acting in favor of the others as a threat to your wellbeing or, in the worst cases of unhealthy narcissism, because you see the others as a scapegoat. Therefore, I aim to defend in this article how a healthy construction of the self is key to the affective empathy and, in turn, to the moral recognition of the others. Finally, in relation to the normative claim about the given example, you can recognize the others' moral status and empathize and still stay passive, especially if you think that your duty is impossible to fulfil. This would lead to the classic problem of *ought versus can*. You may think you have an obligation that you cannot fulfil because it is out of your range of action, or you can think that, therefore, you are only responsible of those potential obligations that you can in fact fulfil. Irrespectively on the normative claim that one can defend on collective responsibilities, actions, omissions, and intentions, I would like to clarify that I do not aim to defend any normative claim on collective obligations here, as that would surpass the scope of this article.

¹¹ One might think that focusing on the role of affective empathy would lead to the impossibility to justify duties towards distant people, future generations, etc., unless the role of cognitive empathy and imagination were

personal identity is included in the debate, as I will do in the next section. At this point, explaining them as examples of emotional suppression or activation of negative emotions such as rage, hatred, or contempt would be sufficient.

What Prinz and Unger address connects in fact to a popular belief, represented in the saying: *far from eyes, far from heart*. It is popularly believed that, once you know and see the others, you can start recognizing them as a morally relevant being or, in other words, that you cannot empathize with those who you do not see. It is popularly believed that you can only empathize with someone once you see and hear them. Following the previous examples of reconnection, once you see your enemy as a real person, you feel unable to shoot or execute your plan. However, in what follows, I will try to defend the opposite thesis, namely, that you must first feel affective empathy for others to include them in the circle of moral relevance. To see someone else's situation as an instance of moral damage, first that being must be seen as morally relevant. You must feel that whatever happens to that being is important: You do not feel empathy because you have seen the specific case, but you are able to see the specific case as morally relevant because you have previously felt emotionally connected to it. Otherwise, depersonalization and justifications of hatred, discrimination and indifference could easily be maintained (Morgado 2011). To put it differently, just knowing and seeing the specific others does not translate into considering them as morally relevant. Indifference is still possible, as well as the justification of discriminations, violence, etc. Terrorism perfectly portrays this. It is not the case that the aggressor does not know that certain actions would hurt and cause an extreme case of moral damage. Rather, he does not see that specific patient's suffering as morally relevant. Indifference and rationalizations about why a being deserves a certain treatment will arise (Morgado 2011). Therefore, if no emotional connection is established, the others, specific individuals or in large numbers of people, will remain depersonalized beings.

Those who defend that empathy plays a key role in moral recognition would explain the previous cases as examples of emotional disconnection arguing that emotional coldness leads to moral indifference. A good example on this is provided by Dawes when he highlights that Nazi officers, when asked about their actions, "instead of indicating that they have been overcome by their emotions (...) generally indicated that they had suppressed their emotions to pursue what they believed on "rational" bases to be policies that benefited their country and

also recognized. Here I would like to highlight that the scope of this article is to delve into the role of affective empathy and its relation to both, moral agency and a healthy construction of the self. This means that I do not state that affective empathy is the only necessary element to moral agency and the recognition of others. Focusing on the role of affective empathy does not imply that one has to deny any role to cognitive empathy. In any case, as already stated, the question of how to justify obligations toward the others would be a normative one, out of the scope of moral psychology. In order to defend any normative claim, we do not need in fact any statement on how we are (moral psychology). We could easily justify duties toward the others using the categorical imperative, utilitarian rules or whatever normative criterion we would defend. Again, descriptive and normative claims should be well distinguished.



the world” (Dawes 2001, 36). Thus, they defended emotional coldness as a virtue to be able to act in line with what was considered a superior goal. In this sense, feeling empathy toward the out-group would have been an obstacle to do their duty. As R. Dawes affirms, tolerance to moral damage, coldness, and indifference toward discriminated beings (the out-group) is based on the suppression of emotions, and this indifference is a cause of irrationality, also in the field of morality.

Likewise, other emotions could be activated and help justify their actions. This could be the case, for example, of rage, contempt, or hatred in the confrontation between the in-group and the out-group, that is, the *I-We* and the *We-the others* identities. In this sense, indifference and/or a negative evaluation of the others can lead to a slippery slope where violence and aggression are justified and the others are depersonalized, even though you know that you would not want to be in their shoes, even though you know that the action implies an instance of moral damage. Therefore, the lack of affective empathy can easily lead to indifference or to the justification of moral transgression, which are both examples of a lack of recognition of the others’ moral status.

Similarly, following Ignatieff, one could conclude that the intuition “that human beings should not be beaten, tortured, coerced, indoctrinated, or in any way sacrificed against their will (...) derives simply from our own experience of pain and our capacity to imagine the pain of others (Ignatieff 1999, 60). In short, it could be said that it derives from our capacity to empathize. Empathy would, then, allow openness to others: it allows knowing, understanding, and feeling from the perspective of others, it allows us imagining “the pain and degradation done to other human beings as if it were our own (Ignatieff 1999, 60). Thus, the ability to imagine pain and be emotionally attuned to others would turn out to be necessary and surely beneficial to avoid indifference toward suffering.

Another line of argumentation in favor of the role of empathy in moral agency would consist in defending that, without empathy, we would not experience any type of contempt, rejection or negative emotion when we see that someone has caused some suffering to someone else. We would be indifferent to someone else’s suffering. To simplify the argument, morality would be the result of sociability, and sociability would not be possible without those secondary emotions that help us read someone else’s minds, intentions, values, and aims (Damasio 2003).

Those in favor of the role of empathy have provided a rich group of examples and studies on psychopathy, as contrafactual cases. This is, for example, what J. Kennett y C. Fine do when they define a psychopath as an individual “who supposedly makes moral judgments¹² but is not at all motivated by them. He or she might agree that killing, promise breaking,

¹² Their ability to make moral judgments should be understood as limited since the judgments they are capable of making do not imply any internalization, failing to distinguish between moral judgments and social conventions.

and the like are wrong, but does not see this as having any practical relevance. The amoralist allegedly suffers no failing of moral knowledge or understanding; he just doesn't care about morality" (Kennett & Fine 2008, 173).

Our emotional dimension is our first evaluative system. Without emotions and, therefore, without affective empathy, among others, there is no deliberation or moral action. There would be no way of making evaluative judgments in moral terms (Damasio 2003; Greene 2004). If you are not able to empathize, the suffering of others becomes indifferent, first because it cannot be understood in all its dimensions and with its implications for those who suffer it, and second, because knowledge is not enough for moral deliberation and action. In a nutshell, *knowing* what it is to burn your fingers does not imply understanding what it *feels* like to burn your fingers. Thus, a lack of empathy leads to not being able to put yourself in the other's place, which makes it difficult to understand the core of any basic moral norm, and, therefore, the consideration of the other as a morally relevant subject. It is well reported how a lack of development of social emotions translates into a lack of moral development or, in other terms, in moral coldness or blindness. The studies on psychopaths and their profound lack of empathy, remorse and guilt, and irresponsibility (Kiehl 2008), are a good example of this point. Affective empathy is a secondary or social emotion. Affective empathy, like the rest of social emotions, would therefore have an important role in the moral consideration of potential moral patients, and, indirectly, in the recognition and respect of others.

Also, in relation to the connection of empathy and prosocial behavior, the argument of the sadist often arises. Although it seems true that empathy reduces aggressiveness towards others and the ability to manipulate them (Vv.Aa. 2009), this occurs as long as the other is understood as somehow related to the *I*, as I will explore in the next section. Thus, it is argued that empathy does not necessarily lead to prosocial behavior as one can be empathic and use that information to manipulate or hurt the other person. However, this again shows a lack of distinction between cognitive and affective empathy. The sadist, as a sociopath, would be the perfect example of someone able to cognitively empathize, because she can recognize and read the other's emotions. However, she would be still unable to feel affective empathy and, therefore, blind in terms of moral reciprocity (Pajevik *et al.* 2018). In fact, narcissistic traits, Machiavellianism and psychopathy are considered by the psychological literature the dark triad for both their negative relation to moral agency and their social adversity (Schimmenti *et al.* 2017). Equally, the sadist case perfectly illustrates a philosophical inattention to the role of narcissism and personal identity, which I will try to explore in the next section. At this point, it is important to at least highlight that what fails in the sadist case is not the role of (cognitive) empathy itself, but the construction of the self, that is, a healthy narcissism and a well-integrated self, which would explain the lack of affective empathy.

Finally, I would like to emphasize the experiments with social animals such as rats and monkeys (de Waal 2006), which suggest how these animals with an undamaged emotional brain show aversion to the signals of anguish and pain in others. This connects to Crockett's research on how we tend to value other people's pain as worse than our own one and how

humans show aversion to peers' suffering (Crockett *et al.* 2014). The key issue now is who we consider as *peers*, which is closely linked to the construction of the self and personal identity, as I will explore in the next section.

That being said, and in order to offer a slightly different perspective on the discussion, I will delve into the role of personal identity regarding affective empathy and the *I-the others* relations for moral recognition and prosocial behavior.

3. *To be or not to be: the key role of personal identity for empathy*

In this section, I explore the relation between affective empathy and the construction of the self in order to enrich the moral philosophy debate on the role of empathy in morality. I aim to advocate the role of empathy in a slightly different way compared to the previous arguments. By doing so, I hope to offer a more nuanced approach that, with the contributions from moral psychology, could help surpass some dichotomies and enrich our understanding of our nature as moral agents. Thus, I defend that affective empathy is necessary for recognizing the others' moral status and that, for someone to empathize in a prosocial way, they must possess an integrated self. That is, one can be aware of someone else's feelings and ignore them or use that information in a cruel way. This is possible through cognitive empathy. In this sense, I focus on the preconditions to feel empathy in a prosocial, morally well-attuned, or healthy way. In other words, in order to feel affective empathy and recognize someone else's suffering as morally relevant, in order to *see* the others and recognize someone's experience as damage, first you have to be open and curious to someone else's experiences and points of view. In turn, to count with this epistemic virtue, you have to possess an integrated personal identity, avoiding both exaggerated and masochist narcissism. As a result, our openness to the others, our ability to feel affective empathy and modulate our actions taking the others into account as relevant beings depend on how well integrated our personal identity is.

Empathy, as well as our personal identity, is relational. We build our sense of self in relation to others. We keep a balanced tension between being what the others are not and recognizing something in common with them. If the other is perceived as a threat, as what is not "another me", empathy would hardly be activated and the other would be depersonalized, they would become someone/something outside the moral community. As a result, empathy is related to the recognition of moral status in others. In turn, this ability is modulated by how threatened we feel by the others. In this sense, our capacity to feel empathy is related to our identity, to how our sense of self is constructed. That is the process frequently seen in history when a nation, a religious group, or a party becomes the enemy or the scapegoat. Automatically, they stop being seen as people, that is, as morally relevant beings. In fact, a phenomenon of depersonalization and animalization begins (Volkan 2013). Therefore, affective empathy is necessary for morality in terms of prosocial behaviors, to surpass indifference, cruelty, etc.,

toward the others. And for this to happen, first, affective empathy requires two interrelated elements, namely, curiosity for the others' experiences, and an integrated self. Without paying attention to these two conditions, many cases would appear as failures or irrationality.

In the psychological literature, many authors have shown how empathy is related to the construction of the self and how empathy is deactivated when you feel your narcissism threatened, both individually and in a group (Klein 1946; Kohut 1959, 1971; Erikson 1959, Mahler & Furer 1968). As Luchner and Tantleff-Dunn state,

Empathy and narcissism are connected theoretically, diagnostically and empirically. However, narcissism and empathy have been treated as unitary constructs [although] vulnerable narcissism was predictive of dysfunction in three forms of empathy, with the most variance accounted for by negatively identifying with others' emotional distress (2016, 597).

From a psychological point of view, it is clear how our recognition of others is related to how our personal identity is built. In relation to the construction of a well-integrated self, or a healthy narcissism, at least three elements appear as necessary: a sense of continuity, a sense of uniqueness, and a sense of balance. That is, I need to know that I am always me, the same through time (continuity), that I am different from the others (uniqueness), and I have to possess as a result a positive self-image, that is, there has to be a positive balance between my negative and my positive qualities. If this positive, yet balanced, self-image is not achieved, if the person is not able to integrate and accept the negative traits in her self-image, then the need to project them into others appears. When the negative traits, the wounds, etc., overpass the positive traits, then the balance is lost and mechanisms that alter our ability to empathize appear (Baskin-Sommers 2014).

On the contrary, when these three elements are well integrated, then this person builds a healthy narcissism. Narcissism is variable according to the degree of maturity and its potential to generate damage or activate aggression (Kohut 1959). Healthy narcissism provides the individual with a sense of identity and security: you know who you are in the world, you belong to something, you are provided with a feeling of security, you are part of a group, you know what to expect from yourself, the in-group, and the other groups. The *I* is different but still integrated in the *We*, so the others are not seen as a threat.

However, there are different levels of pathological narcissism, which directly affect the agent's ability to empathize and, as a result, her moral agency. Identity instability is related to unhealthy narcissistic traits and a lack of affective empathy (Di Pierro *et al.* 2018). At the same time, unhealthy narcissism is related to feelings of entitlement and a lack of recognition of the others, which connects to moral agency. Therefore, I aim to delve into the role of narcissism and personal identity and add these elements in the equation on morality and empathy.

First, exaggerated narcissism is a more immature or primitive version, which is activated in threat situations. The person (or the group) feels superior to the others. This provides the person or the group with some “glue”, which unites the members of the group against the threat (or the common enemy, the scapegoat) and helps regain the lost balance. This easily transforms into a normative predicament, falling into the naturalistic fallacy, which interrupts any attempt to empathize with the other: *I am better than you, therefore I deserve better than you*¹³(Sidanius *et al.* 2013; Morgado 2011).

Second, masochistic narcissism also implies immaturity and forms of victimization. Here the sense of superiority comes from the perception of being a constant victim. This form of narcissism implies a potential risk of aggression as, in some circumstances, it can lead to malignant narcissism. This third version is the one most linked to wars and ethnic cleansing. Here again, projections and a breakage between *We* and *the others* help legitimate a leap to normative judgments: *If we are better and the others are inferior, bad or dangerous, then this legitimizes us to defend ourselves or attack*. Here again the naturalistic fallacy is activated while affective empathy is deactivated because we do not see the others as legitimized others, as relevant moral patients somehow similar to us in their humanity, but as “monsters” by a phenomenon of depersonalization: *If you are not another me, if you are not a person, then you are an object, or a beast, and therefore I am legitimized to treat you as a being without moral status*.

When your self-image is in a state of stability and balance, you are able to care for the others, for their reasons, their experiences and their stories. But when the group or an individual loses her narcissistic balance, the other becomes a projection screen, and separation mechanisms are activated. These processes that start by a fissure in our self-image and self-esteem make impossible for us to see the other’s petitions as relevant (Watson *et al.* 1992). This may happen between countries, in political crises, in relation to socially excluded groups, in cases of epistemic injustices (Fricker 2007) or in personal cases.

In group cases, it is known how a sense of threat is reactivated when the dialogue processes between two groups in conflict begin to be fruitful and the groups begin to get closer to each other, when they begin to understand each other, and find similarities between them. You begin to see that you could vanish, that your identity and the others’ identity could

¹³ One might think that, since the premise is built in evaluative -and not purely descriptive-terms, this may not be a naturalistic fallacy. However, the claims mentioned in the article imply an interwoven vision of descriptive traits and evaluations, of facts and values, where, in the first place, certain traits are judged to be better or worse than others, and, secondly, there is a leap from that hierarchal judgment to the justification of a certain behavior. This leap to the normative field, based on the assumption that if X is worse than Y, then X is entitled to behave in a certain way toward Y, constitutes a classic naturalist fallacy, widely criticized by feminism (Warren 1998; Prokhovnik 1999). In this sense, this kind of argument implies deriving an *ought* from an *is*. Another question would be if that *is* can be only descriptive or if even our descriptions entail evaluative judgments, cultural biases, etc. Even if this were not considered a naturalistic fallacy, there is a leap from evaluate judgments to normative judgments that is not justified.

somehow melt. Thus, the fear of losing a sense of differentiation in your identity can generate a boomerang effect, so that you return to a basic form of unhealthy narcissism (Volkan 2013; Rosenberg 2015). In this sense, the two poles jeopardize our openness to others and work as handicaps for affective empathy and moral agency. Feeling too similar to the others leads to a self-affirming reaction (*I'm not like you*) while feeling too different leads to feelings of helplessness, victimization and humiliation that may end up validating forms of aggression or punishment to compensate for the lack of recognition. In both cases there is a magnification of difference and an attempt to dehumanize the other and project anger, frustration, and helplessness onto the other.

In individual cases, it is well reported how anxiety and fear may reduce the disposition to feel empathy as the attention is focused on the worry and the personal goals, and not on the others. In this sense, “experiencing emotions associated with uncertainty increases reliance on one’s own egocentric perspective when reasoning about the mental states of others” (Todd *et al.* 2015, 374). That is what popular culture has captured in the “every man for himself” saying when we use it in stressful or life-threatening situations. Hence, even an everyday life case could be an example of how one first needs to feel well with herself and be in a balanced state in order to be curious and open to empathize to someone else’s experience. Otherwise, one does not even hear their demands. Even in non-pathological cases, a person has to feel that her identity and well-being is not somehow threatened or at risk in order to empathize and really *see* the other (Levine *et al.* 2005; Dovidio *et al.* 2006; Latané & Darley 1970).

Let us see the case of Mary and Lisa to illustrate this:

Mary and Lisa are housemates. Mary suffers from chronic neck pain and Lisa is a cancer researcher who works in a lab conducting experiments with rats. When they meet for dinner and start sharing their day, Mary stretches her neck to release the tension and the accumulated pain, which leads to some loud neck cracks. Then, Lisa, annoyed and disgusted by the noise, tells her friend that she sounds like the rats in her lab every time she has to sacrifice them. She also tells her that the sound is disgusting and that she is going to break her neck if she keeps on doing that.

If you ask them about this interaction, the two would complain about how the other one has not empathized with her situation. Mary would complain about how egocentric and unconsidered Lisa was, comparing her cracks to the rats in her lab without acknowledging how painful it is for her to live with chronic muscular pain. On the other hand, if you ask Lisa, she would say the same about Mary and would complain about how unconsidered she was stretching her neck while talking as she hates having to kill the animals in the lab breaking their neck when the rats have reached the final stage of the experiment. Both of them complain about a lack of empathy and consideration in the other, while both are unable to see the other one’s demands simply because they are too focused on their own emotional state. In other words, in order to empathize you have to be curious about the other, and in order to be curious, you have to feel well enough with yourself. Otherwise, your chances of

being open to the others' experiences decrease. When we are under stress or feel attacked, we diminish our curiosity toward the others, we are less open to consider that we may be missing something relevant in their experiences. Thus, without this epistemic virtue, your moral agency, in terms of openness to prosocial behavior, would be to some extent jeopardized.

In a nutshell, if I am not interested or curious about knowing why you do what you do, I will not activate the mechanisms to empathize because I will not even be open to listen to your story or your reasons¹⁴. If I am not open to listen to the other one, I am at risk of doing an exercise of moral imagination, instead of empathizing, where my projections and prejudices about the other person can crystallize, so that I end up self-confirming my prejudices and hypotheses about the other. As a result, far from prosocial behavior and moral recognition of the others, I will likely fall into a form of epistemic injustice, perpetuating in this way forms of moral damage. Therefore, the cases of emotional and moral breakage or blindness described in the first section cannot fully be understood without taking into consideration how affective empathy is related to a well-integrated sense of self.

4. Conclusion: From emotional to psychological education

So far, I have tried to show how our ability to feel affective empathy depends on how the self is constructed and is closely linked to our self-image and self-esteem, that is, it depends on how well integrated our positive and negative traits are. By doing so, I hope to have contributed to enrich the debate on the role of empathy for moral agency shifting the focus from a question on whether empathy leads to good prosocial behavior to a question on what prerequisites are lacking when empathy is truncated and what conditions are necessary for the agent to feel empathy, recognize the others and overcome indifference. Instead of swinging from approaches against empathy to approaches in favor, I hope to have shown how the debate is more complex, first by having distinguished cognitive and affective empathy, second, by having introduced a third element in the debate on morality and empathy, namely, the role of personal identity and the types of narcissism.

In this line, I have tried to show how affective empathy is linked to an epistemic virtue, namely curiosity, and, in turn, how this openness to the others depends on how healthy the construction of the identity is. In light of these claims, the cases presented in the first section

¹⁴ One might think that this thesis would raise an issue concerning universality. Evidently, one cannot feel affective empathy for each and every person at the same time, but one can feel affective empathy for a distant one. The second person perspective has dealt with this and offered a well-built alternative between subjectivism and absolutism (Darwall 2011; Altuna 2010; Gomila 2008). However, my intention here is neither to defend that empathy is the basis of morality nor that affective empathy is the only prerequisite to prosocial behavior. Again, the concern about universality is a normative one, out of the scope of this article, not a question of moral psychology and motivation. In any case, you can be curious about the distant ones, both in time and space. That is what we do when we research. We also make judgments, as previously suggested, about distant people when we personalize a country and see them as our enemy, our scapegoat, or as our saviors.

can be read not as examples against the role of empathy, but as examples that show how affective empathy and prosocial behaviors cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the role of personal identity, the relation between the *I-the others* identity and pathological narcissism. These elements are key to understand the processes where empathy is somehow jeopardized. The adults in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* or the torturers see the certain others as non-morally relevant beings or as a threat, and, therefore, are indifferent toward their suffering. They would only be able to see the specific case as morally relevant if they had not interpreted the others as a threat to their own identity. On its part, cases as *Soldiers of Salamis* or *Huckleberry Finn* show how the agent reconnects with the patient and acts against what he considered his best moral judgement in the first place, a judgment done when the patient was depersonalized or treated as the enemy, that is, when it was considered part of the out-group, which shows again the connection between the relational aspect of personal identity and our ability to feel empathy toward the others. In this sense, these cases illustrate the role of affective empathy in recognizing moral status and how a lack of affective empathy is found under antisocial behaviors.

By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest some consequences that the thesis defended throughout this article would entail for some practical questions about the role of emotions, not only for the motivation of prosocial behavior, as already addressed, but also for another dimension, namely, moral education. By doing so, I intend to open a door to further research on the question about the role of emotions for moral education.

If, in order to feel affective empathy toward the others, first we have to be open to them and open to consider them as morally relevant beings, and if, in turn, this is only possible from a healthy narcissism where the person possesses a well-integrated self-image, then this implies a specific consequence on the question of whether emotional education translates directly into moral education.

Certainly, the development of emotional competences such as being able to recognize emotions in me and the others, being able to feel empathy and being able to manage and regulate my emotions entails a benefit in terms of ethical behavior. It is well reported how emotional education programs have an impact on the reduction of aggressiveness, violence, etc. (Vv.Aa. 2009; Munro *et al.* 2005). However, considering the role of the construction of the self for moral agency, I would like to suggest that, although emotional education is a necessary element for moral education, is it not enough by itself. In this sense, emotional and moral education cannot be completely identified (de Tienda 2019). Rather, emotional education would be, along with psychological education, the key for moral education. Moral education also requires psychological education in order to provide the agent with the knowledge and the tools to build or rebuild a well-integrated self, acquire assertive communication skills without projections and victimizations, and epistemic virtues such as curiosity, flexibility, humility and openness toward the others. In brief, psychological education is needed to activate epistemic virtues that, in turn, are necessary to feel affective empathy toward the others. In this sense, I could not agree more with Cortina when she highlights how “reciprocal

altruism and strong reciprocity are not enough, but it is necessary to delve into the structures, rational and sentient, of reciprocal recognition. It is necessary to delve into the structures of human cordial reason” (2010, 146-147). Otherwise, indifference, depersonalization, and the justification of violence will continuously arise.

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