Empathy and Imagination

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1. Introduction

Human beings do a lot of imagining. We imagine what would happen if various things were to pass, how to get to various destinations, how to achieve various ends, and nearer to the target of this volume, what it is like for other people. Children and adults engage in imaginative play, and the use of the imagination is central to many forms of art. It is controversial how these different situations which we describe with the verb "to imagine" are related, and how much unity there is to the psychological capacities that we bring to them. It is widely suspected that in childhood development imaginative play, such as pretending that a banana is a telephone or that a teddy bear can understand what is said to him (Harris 2000), develops alongside the capacity for counterfactual thinking ("what would happen if I dropped this glass") (Williamson 2005), the capacity to reason from an assumption "for the sake of argument" (Johnson Laird 2006), and the capacity to imagine the feelings and reactions of others (Leslie 1987, Byrne 2005, Noordhof 2002, Tomasello & others 2005). And it is often argued that

artistic traditions similarly scaffold such capacities in adults. The title of one of the most influential works on the imagination in art, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Walton 1990, for doubts see Moran 1994) reveals the suspicion that childhood play and adult art build on similar human traits. And it is also often argued that some failures of the imagination unite such different syndromes as autism and psychopathy (Happé 1994). But the evidence is ambiguous. (My own suspicion, no more than that, is that there are a number of human capacities, all of which are employed in these different areas, which do not have names in everyday language, and which in normal human life support one another in a way that makes them hard to separate.)

The aim of this chapter is to give a systematic description of imaging the plight of others, without begging questions that await more evidence and analysis. I connect most of the work I shall refer to by linking it to a puzzle about the role of imagining what someone is feeling, and to a proposed resolution of the puzzle (see Gendler 2013.)

2. the puzzle

The puzzle can be described by contrasting two rather different functions of empathy. The first function is that of grasping facts about how situations feel to others in a way that allows one to manage one's relations with them. (It is not our only resource for doing this.) And contrasting with this, there is the

function of *showing* solidarity with people in their situations. There is a tension between these two functions. It can be described in everyday terms as an issue about honesty. The honesty in question is admitting that you do not know what another person is going through, and the context is that in which that person needs sympathy and support. The tension is between understanding and doing. For many purposes we need explanations, models, predictions, and the like, of other people's thoughts, motives, and feelings. These are things that can be true or false, accurate or inaccurate, known or unknown. Very often we simply do not have them: the other person is in some respect a mystery to us. For other purposes we need to show commiseration, sym*path*y, even understanding. Often human social life demands that we act in these "empathetic" ways, even when we do not have the cognitive grasp of the other that might seem to be presupposed. So perhaps we can and even should simply fake it, act according to a script without understanding what lies behind the other role in the script. That is what makes it an issue of honesty.

The possibility of fake empathy raises a central issue. People want to be treated empathetically, but they want it to be real, to arise from a real concern with their real predicaments. I take that as obvious, but also think of the Greek root in "em*path*y" or the root of the German "Mit*gefühl*", signifying that one person shares the painful feelings of another. So the problem is that we want something that is often impossible. The resolution I shall propose

amounts to saying that that the understanding of people we need in many situations does need to be accurate, but it does not need to be accurate in the ways one might naïvely expect. In particular, it does not need to represent their feelings and emotions accurately.

3. Empathy & imagination: definitions and contrasts

I shall take empathy as a broad family of states where one person's emotion causes another to have a closely related emotion. This in turn puts pressure on the concept of emotion. I shall require that emotions have affective and cognitive components - they are associated with characteristic feelings and they affect thought and motivation - which are non-accidentally correlated. (For an introduction to accounts of emotion in philosophy see Goldie 2003, for a survey of psychological data see Fox 2008, and for a comprehensive collection with a helpful introduction see Goldie 2010.) I will not define "closely related" for the pairs of the emotion of the empathizing person and that of the person with whom she empathizes, except to require that the subjective affect of the two should be similar, and in particular they should match in hedonic quality: an unpleasant state should be matched with another unpleasant one. Typically the empathizer's emotion causes her to act in a way that helps the person she is empathizing with. But on some accounts of empathy and especially sympathy, the motive to help is incidental. There are many ways of organizing attitudes but we can

distinguish between resonance - feeling what another person feels; appropriateness - having a suitable reaction to their situation; and identification - having an attitude that makes their aims and troubles into your concern. (Coplan 2011, Maibom 2007, 2014.) A person can have any of these alone, without the others. The possibility that is relevent to our puzzle is that of having appropriateness and identification without resonance. One can care about another and react well to them without feeling what they do, or even knowing what they feel.

In order to make the contrasts between empathy with and without imagination starker,, I shall work with the very broad and basic definition of empathy above as the sharing of states, knowing that there are important distinctions that it ignores. (This is like the account in Stotland 1969.) I will refer to empathy that may not satisfy more than the bare bones of this definition as "basic empathy". A dog can show basic empathy when she picks up that you are upset and licks your face.

Imagination, as I shall use the term, always involves the representation of one thing by a state of mind whose cognitive properties reflect some of its own properties. (See Strawson 1970, Brann 1991, Casey 2000, Stevenson 2003, Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, and Nichols 2006. Few writers argue that there is a deep unity to the range of processes we label as imagination. For an exception see McGinn 2004.) For example imagining spatial relations

between things differs from simply having beliefs about their locations because imagined spatial relations can be rotated, translated, and so on, in ways that parallel the spatial relations of the things themselves. Imagination here tends to be associated with visual and spatial images, though the connection is controversial. (See Block 1981, Kind 2001, Pylyshin 2003, Kosslyn, Thompson & Gannis 2006.) Imagination of states of mind is in a general way similar: when you imagine a person's psychological states you represent them with states that respond to your cognitive processes in ways that imitate, though typically simplifying, the ways that the other person's states respond to their cognition. You make a mental model of mental states. Imagination is not our only way of grasping the states of mind of others; we also have explicit and implicit theories of their states and how they interact. Proponents of imagination-based or "simulation" accounts and proponents of theory-based or "theory theory" accounts opposed each other for decades, but the consensus now is that we have mind-grasping resources of both kinds. (For early simulation accounts see Gordon 1986 and Goldman 2006. The term "theory theory" comes from Morton 1980. For their eventual reconciliation see Stich and Nichols 2003, Morton 2010 and Maibom 2007.)

Imagination, even on the motion, and empathy are different. Imagination fits its target largely in terms of how accurate it is as a representation of the target, as I explain below, and empathy fits its target largely in terms of the extent to which it is caused by it. We can have imagination without empathy,

trivially if it does not represent emotions, and less trivially if it does not motivate empathetic behaviour. More subtly, imagination that centres on a state to which it gives roughly the cognitive and motivational states that it actually has, but which has the wrong hedonic tone, will not be empathy. (A pathological but psychologically acute risk taker imagining an extremely cautious one.) Even more subtly, consider imagination that represents the state as having the psychological properties that it does in fact have, in terms of a state which in fact is similar, but which the imagining person takes mistakenly to have a different affective tone. Then the state is being imagined, but the status of the process as empathy is very problematic. (An old-fashioned self-deceiving closeted gay person imagining a charming encounter with someone they are not in fact attracted to: he thinks it is empathy because he thinks both he and the target field the light, but in fact the target's emotion is delight and his his discomfort labelled as delight.)

Empathy without imagination is also possible. One example is given by cases of emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo and Rapson 1994, Goldie 2003), in which one person's visible emotion causes someone else to have a similar emotion in much the way that yawns are catching, without any cognition directed at the other. In a more interesting class of cases the empathizing person associates another person with a group of people who they think of having some emotion, who they think of as having some emotion, which, as a result, they feel with reference to that person. Call this empathy by

association. In yet other cases the empathiser situates the empathizee in a situation in which it is normal to feel a particular emotion, and experiences some variety of that emotion. (See Coplan 2011, Maibom 2007.) Call this situational resonance.

Imagination is always partial and very often inaccurate. This is evident and inescapable in non-psychological imagination. Even imagining the layout of some very familiar location, such as your own home, you will leave out many details and get many others, for example the relative proportions of different walls, wrong. Incompleteness and limited accuracy is a feature of all imagination. Another way of saying this is that we imagine representations of facts, and we humans can never imagine all of any fact and always misimagine something about it. Imagination is in this respect like belief or expectation or memory, even when its vehicle is image-like. (For relations between imagination and belief see Byrne 2005.)

Incompleteness and inaccuracy are also to be expected when one person is imagining the mind of another. This will take different forms on different accounts of psychological imagination, but as long as there is a claim that the imagination is accurate then inaccuracy is a possibility, and as long as some imagination is more extensive than others incomleteness is inevitable given the vast range of potential states to imagine. And all imagination can be assessed as accurate or not, and more or less extensive than another.

Representation brings with it the possibility of misrepresentation, and no single state will represent all of any person's mental states, not even all of those that are causally connected. It is easy to give examples of mis-imagination. There is all the data on the variety of contradictory emotions that one can attribute on the basis of facial configuration (Hastoff and others, 1970.) There is the great range of explanations of people's behaviour that is consistent with everything one knows about them. And people are not as consistent as we tend to suppose, often acting out of what we take to be their characters and influenced by tiny details of their situations in ways that we find intuitively hard to digest (Nibett and Ross 1991.) So consider how easily one can suppose that someone is acting out of affection when they are in fact calculating their own interest, or the reverse, or how easily one can suppose that someone is crying from sorrow, at a break-up say, when in fact they are crying from relief. In all these cases, I shall say that one's reaction is not accurate imagination (Matravers 2011, Morton 2013, part I.)

4. Why does accuracy matter?

There are times when basic empathy is all we want. A friendly lick from a pet who is sensitive to your distress, or an echoing groan from a companion is enough to make us feel better. But these are fairly rare. Much of the time we want something more individual, predicated more on our particular distress. This is particularly so with the reactions of other humans, especially those in

a position to appreciate our particular plight. We can resent empathy that is automatic and based on superficial aspects of our behaviour. Consider for example a person, Melanie, in an unusual and delicate trap. She has encouraged George to become attached to her because Eric has jilted her. Now George has suggested marriage and she might be favourably inclined since she has come to appreciate his straightforward affection and his undeviousness. But Eric has just contacted her and intimated that he has made a terrible mistake and would like to get together again. Her time with George has made her realize quite how devious Eric is, and she is far from sure that Eric is not just trying to mess with George or her, and will be off again once the damage is done. But she retains a deep longing for him. Does she love him? Not really, though she finds him exciting. She meets her friend Helen, who sees how upset she is and asks about it. Helen's reaction on being given the barest outline is "oh you poor thing; these hard decisions can really take it out of you." Melanie snaps at her and changes the topic. The reason for her annoyance is that she is not bothered by the difficulty of the decision at all, but by her knowledge that after a ritual indecision she will choose Eric, knowing that it is a mistake and that it will lead to heartbreak for her and hurt the devoted George. She doesn't bother even trying to explain this to Helen because she has seen enough of Helen to know that Helen will not understand, And that more evidence of her immunity to the morally and psychologically subtle situation will be even more annoying.

Enough melodrama. Life is full of situations in which you want someone to feel a congruent emotion, but once them to feel it for appropriate reasons. We want accuracy. And inasmuch as empathy serves a central role human life, we wanted to be more or less accurate. Some of the reasons for this are clear. We don't bond with people who misunderstand us, because they are likely to misjudge our feelings and preferences on other occasions. And there are times when knowing the reasons for our emotions is needed for helpful action. Helen is unlikely to be able to help Melanie either with her decision or with her emotions. And, harder to express clearly, there is a kind of loneliness that comes when people cannot grasp why you feel what you do.

This presents us with a problem. It is both a philosophical problem and one that arises frequently in our lives. We can rarely imagine the affective tone of other people's emotions at all accurately. This may seem surprising, since most people exhibit a fair amount of empathy, and this kind of imagination seems to be required to do it right. But, as I shall argue, it is rarely more than a rough approximation to the affect that is the target of our imagining.

5. What we do and do not imagine

We experience a lot of what I have called simple empathy. One kind is emotional contagion, already mentioned. Another is situational resonance. We see someone in a situation and we have the emotion that we associate

with the situation. (People tend to speak of empathy more when the emotion is unpleasant: pain, loss, or frustration. Then it motivates sympathetic action.) Someone hits her thumb with a hammer and we say "ouch" while feeling an echo of the agony. But if we were to judge these like real imagination, as representations of someone else's mind, we can ask how often they would be accurate.

The answer is surely that they would often not be very accurate. Even when it comes to pain, what the empathetic person feels and what the target person feels are rarely very similar. The hammer hits the thumb and the person curses and bounces around. How high is their pain threshold, and for that matter is the reaction really to the damage or to the thought "oh shit, I've missed the nail and hit my thumb"? Questions such as these multiply for more complicated unpleasant situations. Someone has just learned that she is losing her job, and you really feel for her, as you say. This is partly a reaction to the disturbed look on her face, partly from summoning your own uncertainties about your job situation, and partly because you know that losing one's job is a notoriously stressful thing. But do you understand the balance between fear for her future and anger at her boss? Do you have any sense of whether some anticipation of this was lurking beneath everyday awareness? Do you know whether the fallback plans and opportunities that are now open are occurring to her, or whether they are buried in the tempest of bad feeling? (Goldie 2011.)

Where there is little precedence in your own experience you are likely to feel a wide stereotypical reaction rather than something tuned to the person's state and situation. Consider the Helen and Melanie example again. Does Helen have any hope of reproducing the balance between fear, indecision, anger, despair, and self-loathing in Melanie's mind? Can she even identify these components of Melanie's upset, explicitly or implicitly, as part of imagining them, let alone imagine the balance between them? I have portrayed Helen as reacting mechanically and unsubtly, but accuracy would be a tall order even for a focused and intuitive person. Most of us would take ourselves to have empathy for what it is like to be a refugee forced to give up the life that was familiar and live somewhere without status or grasp of the language or social customs, and no way of earning anything other than the most menial living. But we are very unlikely to be able to capture the real combination of desperation despair, and hope - the feeling of out of the fire and into an unknown frying pan - that a refugee may actually experience. (Maibom, 2016.)

The difficulties pertaining to measuring feelings stand out, even if we grant that any imaginative grasp of another person is incomplete and of limited accuracy. Contrast the imagination of feeling with imagining spatial navigation and reasoning. Two people have a plan to meet around noon at a downtown restaurant. One is arriving by train at person would like to arrive

at the restaurant at the same time as the first, and so she imagines the first person's route from the station to the restaurant. She begins by imagining the shortest series of roads and crossings that will get him there, and then she imagines him walking it, knowing him well enough that she can simulate his pace and progress. She concludes that the trip as imagined will take him between 25 and 30 minutes, though she could do it in less time, and she knows from her experience that she can get to the restaurant in 15. So she leaves at 5 to 12. Or consider imagining another person doing arithmetic. You want to know what he will say if asked what 13×14 is. So you do it yourself, see what you get, and report that as the answer he is likely to give. Similar things hold when the task is more difficult or the other person would do it in a way that is different to yours but which you can imagine (Heal 1986.)

We can also imagine other people's decision-making and action-planning with a fair degree of accuracy. This is one of our resources for anticipating the actions and reactions of others, without which human social life would be impossible. Though we think of others as affective creatures, with feelings and experience, it is their cognitive side that we most easily imagine. This can be put in a paradoxical way: simulated experience grasps thought and simulated thought grasps experience.

Perhaps then imagination - or any capacity that can be judged for accuracy - is not a good tool for empathy. Perhaps we should stick to emotional

contagion, situational feeling, and whatever else makes us upset when others are upset. But these are not attractive options. We have already seen why: people's need for empathy is a need to be understood, to be the object of fellow-feeling for the right reasons. Is this a deep desire for the impossible?

6. Empathetic behaviour

It is important to comfort people, support them, make them feel that they are not alone. This hardly needs defence. Clumsy comfort is often resented, though. People don't want others assimilating their situation to that of everyone else whose case has some generic similarity. But, also, people don't want to be probed, analysed, or generally to have their state of mind be the object of someone else's speculation and curiosity. Or, very often they do not. Even when it seems that one person has miraculously resonated to the way that someone else's situation feels to that very person, the person who is being imagined will often resent it, thinking that the other person is exhibiting some intuitive impudence or presumption in being right about them. It seems that we cannot win.

These considerations are somewhat less important when it is not a matter of giving comfort to someone in their presence, but helping them, possibly without their knowledge. But this too requires an accurate understanding of what will be of use to the other. And with this, some element of the same

danger returns. The person may either find that the supposed help is not what they want or need, or, less common but still a real possibility, find that an accurate assessment is presumptuous or demeaning. For an example of this, consider an offer to help with someone's education that takes into account their actual tendency to boredom and distraction, and therefore avoids the high level fantasy education that the person might want to be offered

So it is delicate. One might just pretend, with whatever level and kind of assumed understanding that will please the other person. But of course we usually want to do good, in a way that is deeper than simply acting in a pleasing way. And we don't want our efforts to be wasted, as they often will be if the manner of our efforts to help are constrained by the style in which it would please the person to be helped.

Simply asking the person may not solve the problem. In fact it is often does not. One reason is that they may not reply frankly, perhaps because they anticipate that you will react badly to an admission of their true feelings. Another reason is that in the situations in which people are most in need of empathy they are often not at their most introspective or expressive. In fact, there is another theme here, that of the tension between accurate capture of someone's emotional stateand faithfulness to what is they take their state to be, often mis-imagining themselves (Sherman 2014.)

Sometimes expression of empathy does not enter the picture. One case is that in which one suddenly comes to understand what it was like for the recipient of one of one's past actions. This can result in unexpected remorse. Although this is fairly frequent in human life, at least in mine, I shall say no more about it.)

7. A solution

I have organised my exposition around a problem, which is as much a problem of practical social life as it is one of theoretical understanding. The problem was that of producing the kind of empathetic behaviour that is likely to be emotionally useful to other people in the ignorance we usually have of their detailed mental states, and in particular of the way they will react to our well-meaning gestures. It looks as if we cannot win: either we act on inadequate evidence, and thus often get it wrong, or we hesitate because the evidence is inadequate, and are blamed for lack of empathy.

Well, nothing is going to make the problem go away. There is a divide between large-hearted, hasty, and often mistaken empathetic styles, on the one hand, and more careful styles in danger of seeming cold or aloof, on the other. The discussion of imagination in previous sections, though, gives us some suggestions about how to handle it. In a way, the solution is obvious.

We are rarely very accurate in imagining the detailed feel of others' emotions. That is an understatement, if what I have been saying is correct. But we are much better at imagining their thoughts, desires, intentions, and so on.

There is a basic reason why we imagine beliefs, desires, and the like more accurately than we do affective states. They are propositional attitudes, taking the form "person p desires/wants/hopes/fears/etc that s" where the s space is occupied by an English sentence. So to understand that someone hopes that, say, Sally is elected to the senate, one has only to understand the meaning of "to hope" and of "Sally is elected to the senate." And any normal ten year old can do this without drawing on great depths of psychological intuition. It is an analog/digital distinction: imagination of feeling is analog, with arbitrarily fine distinctions and gradations, while imagination and attribution of propositional attitudes is digital, based on fixed relations to discrete objects without intermediary cases. Moreover on one noe dominant account of propositional attitudes they are relations to individual things in the environment rather than to mental contents (Braun 1998) so that to give a standard example "Hammurabi believes the evening star will soon rise" and "Hammurabi believes the morning star will soon rise" are both relations between Hammurabi and the planet Venus, which is both the evening star and the morning star. This leaves even less room for variety and

subjectivity.

One might object to this that while ascription of propositional attitudes is in this way digital imagination of them is a more varied and nuanced business. Now not all ascription draws on the imagination, unless pure simulation accounts are correct, but imagination-based ascription is still ascription. One person imagines that another wants to drink some water, so she grasps imaginatively his belief relation to the proposition "I want a drink of water": the grasp is imaginative, and may tell her something about him besides this particular desire, but it is a grasp of this relation and no other to this proposition and no other. The implications for anticipating his reactions and other behavior are the same whether the procedure used is imaginative or not, though the mechanisms of both ascription and prediction may be different. In the example the ascription in both cases supports the prediction that the person is likely to walk over to the water cooler, and that he is likely to become angry if told to stay at his desk for an hour. So while imaginatively attributing propositional attitudes may give one less of a feel for what it is like to be a particular person, it opens a less delicate way to the anticipation of some of that person's future actions, on which much human cooperation and interaction depend.

As a result we can consider different ways of interacting with the person who needs our attention, and we can assess which ones will be judged as callous,

sympathetic, supportive, intrusive, presumptive, or whatever. We can focus on the other person's reactions to our rough take on their feelings rather than on the details of their feelings themselves. In fact, imagining the emotions of the other is often the least important aspect. Our imaginative efforts are best expended at grasping the other person's reactions to our expressions of empathy. If we get the reactions to our empathetic actions and gestures right, then accuracy about the person's feelings about their situation is much less crucial. If we are wrong about them and still do the right thing, our efforts will be appreciated, while if we are right about them and do the wrong thing, all is wasted.

Here are two examples, to illustrate this theme. First, refugees again. The situation of a refugee is so different from that of average middle class academics in comfortable countries that our attempts to imagine the states of mind of a refugee are inherently suspect. You can know a lot about a refugee's objective situation without having any idea whether they are elated (to have escaped a grim situation), demoralized (because their present situation is grim), or incomprehending (because the new grimness is so puzzling). And trying to decide between these is presumptuous. All you need to know is that these people need help, and know how it will be best received. The second example is a real recent situation in my town, Vancouver. Disabled people in a welfare hotel have been stuck on the upper floors without food because the landlord refuses to repair the elevators. Are

these people resigned, in the face of the latest assault on their dignity, or angry, in the face of offensive indifference, or desperate, in the face of imminent hunger? I have no idea, although my situation is just a little bit nearer to theirs than those of the average reader of this piece. (I too live on an upper floor, cannot get down by myself, and am trapped when the elevators are not functioning. But mine is a nice building and I have money.) But we don't need to know any of this: all that matters is that these people are stuck with no access to food, and that we find a way of alleviating the situation that does not offend or demean them. The solution to being bad at imagining some things is to imagine more things and to situate the areas of feeble imagination among them.

This may seem arrogant or impersonal, as it may seem to recommend pleasing the other without really understanding how it is for them. No: it is our best bet for helping, comforting and aligning our interests with those of the other person. It may require sacrifices on our part. And that is the point of being empathetic. We can do well by putting a lot of effort into entering into an imaginative grasp of our relations with other people, even at the price of a very rudimentary grasp of what that particular person in that particular situation feels.

In fact, there is a way in which the strategy I am describing does engage with details of what people are feeling. First, it creates a line of

communication between people, giving time and a suitable context to get more information. More profoundly, though more controversially, it allows and encourages a lot of mutual imagining. Each person can get a sense of the other person's reactions to their reactions towhatever it is they are reacting to. Among these reactions are thoughts that each person has about their feelings. "This is a really painful topic for me but she seems insensitive to that", "if I say this more carefully he may understand that jealousy isn't a factor here", "I find it frustrating that she isn't comforted by my pointing this out." But if you know how somebody thinks they feel, and what they make of somebody else's reactions to what that person thinks they feel, you have at any rate a sense of what their subjective life is like. If we combine this with an assumption that our naïve emotions of fellow feeling are at any rate a starting point for grasping the affect of the other, then the gap between what we are good at imagining and what eludes us is beginning to close. (A picture somewhat like this is sometimes associated with Wittgenstein and called "expressivism". See Wittgenstein 1953 sections 285, 304, 580, Mulhall 1990, and Morton 2003 exploration II.)

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