

## Empathy for the devil

### **An unwelcome conclusion**

You may not like what I am going to say. I shall argue that there is a blinkering effect to decency. Being a morally sensitive person, and having internalized a code of behavior that restricts the range of actions that one takes as live options for oneself, constrains one's imagination. It becomes harder to identify imaginatively with important parts of human possibility. In particular - the part of the claim that I will argue for in this chapter - it limits one's capacity to empathize with those who perform atrocious acts. They become alien to one. This is in itself a limit on one's capacities that has consequences in terms of the ease with which one can understand many important, if awful, human actions. But it also creates obstacles to understanding some very ordinary, relatively harmless, actions. It is a problem that decent people have to grapple with.

### **why versus how**

To begin, an account of the explanatory force of empathy: how taking another's point of view can result in understanding their actions better. Empathy is not a luxury in human affairs. We need it in order to negotiate our way around one another, with our diverse motives and characters. To elaborate on this, I will have to give my understanding of what empathy is. I think the following is reasonably close to the consensus among contemporary philosophers and psychologists. (Ravenscroft 1998, Goldie 2002, Hutto 2002, Preston and de Waal 2002, Currie 2004.)

One person, A, has empathy for another, B, with respect to a particular state of mind, when B experiences an emotion or attitude and A has a representation of B's state which shares its affective tone and perspective.

The definition is not completely sharp, but neither is the concept of empathy. In particular it requires that the empathiser share some of the "tone and perspective" of the person they are empathising with. That can be taken several ways. To require that "the same emotion" be shared would be too weak, as it would allow a representation of annoyance as empathy for rage, since both are instances of anger. But emotional identity is too strong, or we would rarely empathise with despair or agony. Talking of imagination may help here, since one can imagine more than one can experience. (One can in some sense imagine the extent of space, or the origin of the universe.) But some imagination is too distanced to support empathy. I have required just that one "represent" the state of the other person, but in a way that captures its affective tone and perspective. I intend this to involve the same sort of emotion felt in the same sort of way, but I am not requiring that the fit be perfect. I do have in mind, though I am not writing it into the definition, that the way one represents another's state of mind in

empathising with them enable the kind of understanding of the person that empathy should support.

An example: B is pausing on the high board and will either dive into the pool below or back out and descend. A is watching and knows two things. First he knows that B is fearful, and in fact he knows how B's knees shake and how the water seems far far below. Second that B's fear is shaped around being in that position on the board, looking along and down, and imagining two possible futures (each in a different way unwanted.) By representing B's state as having this affect, its particular feel of fear, and this perspective, spatially and temporally, A's grasp of B's fearful indecision is one of empathy.

As I am telling the example and using the term, A does not have to like or approve of B. A may think that B is silly and selfish, having got herself into a situation she could easily have anticipated and wasting the time of other divers lining up at the steps. That does not matter. It is still empathy. For that matter, A may be B, considering her own situation from some time later. (And a sex-change, given my use of pronouns, but we can ignore that.) Identity will not ensure that empathy succeeds: sometimes one has no fellow-feeling for one's former self.

Now suppose that B after an inner struggle gets herself to run along the board and dive, with a hesitating departure that results in an awkward entry into the water below. A has a grasp of what lay behind B's action, based in part on his empathy. The empathy is not needed for B to know *why* B dove at that moment. In fact it is not particularly helpful in the why-explanation. For that A needs to know B's desires – what possibilities she is aiming at in diving then – and her beliefs – what situation she takes herself to be in. And if A knows these things in sufficient detail he knows why B did what she did. But this will not allow A to know *how* B was able to do it. That is, given the scary height and the competing attraction of coming feet-first down the ladder rather than head-first in the air, A can identify B's motives without understanding why these were the motives on which she acted.

To put it differently, knowing why a person performed an act is not the same as knowing why the person did that act rather than others for which there were also strong motives. This distinction is obscured by descriptions of human choice that assume that there is always a comparison of the all-things-considered motives for competing actions, so that a rational agent can simply choose the act with the stronger motives. (Or that the options have equally strong appeal, in which case the agent can make a trivial and arbitrary choice between them.) I shall assume, as I take to be overwhelmingly plausible, that these are unrealistic descriptions. Life is just not like that; we can rarely rank our motives in such a simple way. Usually, it takes something else to push us in one direction or the other. (Morton 1990, Richardson 1994.)

Sometimes, to go in one direction or the other we have to overcome some barrier or inhibition, based on fear, sympathy, disgust, or decency. It is this last that concerns me here. Suppose that instead of hesitating on a diving board B is pausing before pulling the trigger of a gun pointed at the head of another person. Suppose that the other is her husband and after years of abuse she has finally been pushed to a point where given an opportunity to express her rage and despair, and to avoid the beating that will otherwise soon follow, she is prepared to kill. Still she hesitates. She is not a violent person; she takes killing to be forbidden; and once she loved this man. But after a few seconds of indecision that feel like hours, she shoots. She will have overcome a deeply ingrained barrier against violence, and another against acts she has been raised to abhor. (See chapter two of Morton 2004.)

We can tell the story so that her act is wrong. There are alternatives to killing that she could have seen and would have preferred if she had been able to reflect. The consequences of allowing him to live while nasty are not dire enough to justify killing. Then the barriers that she had to overcome in order to pull the trigger are rightly placed. They should be preventing her from acting. Still, we can empathize with her. We can represent to ourselves an emotion that is directed along the axes of her situation and that gives us some grasp, not of why she made a choice that rid her of a great menace, but of how she was able to make it.

You may wonder about the accuracy of the empathy in this case. Is the emotion we feel on her behalf similar enough to the emotion that allowed her to act, that we do in fact grasp something real about how she could do it? That is a serious question, central to this paper. Not everything that feels like empathy can do empathy's work.

### **Evil acts**

The example of the abused wife is special, in that while we may think, intellectually, that she should have acted differently, the tone of our condemnation is rather muted. We sympathize. We are not sure that in similar circumstances we might not have done something similar. Things are different with cases in which the act is truly repugnant, where it would damage our self-respect to believe that we could have done anything analogous. There is no shortage of horrors to choose from, but think of the rape and murder of a young child, or active and enthusiastic participation in genocide. We have no sympathy for the perpetrators here, and while we often know reasonably well why they act as they do, we have a deep and troubling puzzlement about how they could do it. A murderous pedophile, for example, may have sex with children in order to satisfy desires that may be no more continuous with other things he wants than those of adults with less harmfully satisfied sexualities, and kills simply to cover up his crimes and the immense shame that their discovery would bring. But, we imagine,

were we to have his desires we would force chastity on ourselves with a rigor fuelled by horror of the alternative. We imagine these even while being distantly aware that there is something unrealistic and self-deceptive in what we are telling ourselves. Not that long ago, many people used to tell themselves similar stories beginning "if, God forbid, I had been homosexual." The fact is, that when we try to find anything like real empathy for people who commit real atrocities we come up against a barrier. We can describe the motives, and we can often even imagine some of what it might be like to do the acts, but there are deep obstacles to the kind of sympathetic identification required for empathy.

I am interested in the nature of this barrier. Here is a hypothesis about it. It is made of the same materials as the barriers against choosing dangerous, disgusting, or immoral actions whose effect on our imagination lead us to wonder how people could have chosen as they did. Empathy helps us grasp how these barriers operate, and so a higher-order empathy is possible, addressed to a higher-order puzzlement: how was this person able to empathize with this atrocious act? Consider some examples to make the hypothesis intelligible and perhaps plausible.

*A-assault* A has an unpredictable violent temper. His irritation at another person can grow to a point where he seizes on a small detail of that person's behavior, or an incidental fact about them, as a pretext for an assault. A is married to B, who wishes A were not so volatile and despairs of the trouble that surrounds their life. But very often she takes A's side, and even joins in. In a typical case, A is irked by the slow and meticulous way in which a co-worker, C, is performing a task. After half an hour's work C is near to finishing it, though A would have done a sloppier job in ten minutes. A fidgets impatiently, trying to urge speed on C with his body language, until he gets a whiff of C's after-shave and notices his freshly shaved face and nicely manicured hands. "You fucking pretty boys, you don't know how to do fucking anything" he shouts "if you wanted to take so long you should have started early at work instead of taking time to get pretty for your fag friends". And he grabs C's shoulder to push him into quicker motion. C resists and in a moment a brawl has begun. B arrives as this is all beginning, bringing lunch for both men, and hopes that A will not make trouble with his only remaining co-worker. She can see that C is irritatingly slow and needs to be hurried, but she can also see the bad consequences of yet another explosion. So she is taken aback by the verbal and physical assault. This is her man, though, and she has a lot of practice at tracking his point of view. She can easily recreate his reaction to C's fastidious appearance, and see how A links it to his meticulous style of work. So she soon understands what is moving A, and once the emotion is available as explanation it is also available as motive. She wades into the brawl, grabs C by his tie. "Mind your manners with my husband, you goddam fashion model": holding him so that A can get in a few good blows.

This is an imagined example, but it is easy to imagine. It shows how, at least in the way we imagine people in narration, we can find the process that can get a person past a barrier to empathy to carry them further, past the barrier to action. And this particular case also suggests a basic reason why are reluctant to overcome a barrier to empathy. Overcoming it may carry one along further than it should.

Imagining past a barrier does not always make the acts more available. Consider a case that is in some ways an opposite of the one I have just described.

*X-taxi* X devotes a lot of his time and energy to visiting criminals in prison, getting to a condition of mutual comprehension with them, and then providing support for them on their release. He is a deeply religious person, and his particular beliefs emphasise the sinfulness of all humanity, himself included. He often analyses his motives on occasions when he has strayed from duty or kindness. When he thinks about times he has been discourteous, misleading, or devious he finds similar attitudes to those he takes to have led his criminal acquaintances to murder, rape, or assault. At any rate this is the way he understands himself and them.

X has been visiting A in prison: A of the previous example, whose assault on B produced serious injuries, so that his parole for an earlier yet more serious assault was revoked. Although A is not by far the most hardened criminal A has dealt with, he finds his motivation particularly hard to grasp intuitively. He thinks about the assault on C and an analogy from his own experience strikes him. Not long ago he was taking a taxi to an airport, not having left quite enough time and so wanting the driver to hurry. When the driver stopped at a light that was just beginning to turn orange, X found himself glancing at the driver's identification plaque, noticing that the driver's home country was Somalia, and exclaiming "you know, some of us were raised with a concept of precise time". Later he berated himself for his racist reaction, and the way he had seized on an irrelevant attribute of the driver to hang his irritation on. Now, thinking about A, he sees the analogy. Both of them had used the emotional force of their reaction to an incidental feature of the other person as a vehicle for overcoming an obstacle to an action that would otherwise have been off-limits. One result of this link between him and A is that he begins to compare notes with A about all the little traits of people that annoy them. His aim is to help A to contain his reactions, before they facilitate disasters. X now feels he can empathize with A. He can summon a representation that allows him to grasp how A can have done what he did.

### **Smith, Hume, and imagining the context**

I am trying to account for the barriers to empathising with an evil action. But on some accounts the issue is trivial. For example Adam Smith in his

*Theory of Moral Sentiments*, discussing "sympathy", which is closely related to what I and other contributors to this book call empathy<sup>1</sup>, says

When the original passions of the person principally concerned are in perfect concord with the sympathetic emotions of the spectator, they necessarily appear to this last just and proper, and suitable to their objects; and, on the contrary, when .... he finds that they do not coincide with what he feels, they necessarily appear to him unjust and improper, .... To approve of the passions of another, therefore, ... is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them; and not to approve of them as such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathize with them. (Smith 1790: Part 1, chapter 3.)

According to Smith, we sympathise with, *and approve of*, only the emotions that we feel, or which we would feel were we in the situation of the person concerned. In particular

There are some passions of which the expressions excite no sort of sympathy, but before we are acquainted with what gave occasion to them, serve rather to disgust and provoke us against them. The furious behaviour of an angry man is more likely to exasperate us against himself than against his enemies. (Part 1, chapter 1.)

The reason is that sympathy is derived from putting oneself imaginatively in someone's situation and then experiencing in a reduced form the resulting emotion.

... the spectator must, first of all, endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded. (Book 1, chapter 1)

If one can do this for the feelings that motivate an action, then one will approve of it as the person acting does. If not, not.

This is clearly much too simple. Leaving aside the difference between sharing a motivating emotion and approving of an action, which would lead us into controversial questions in meta-ethics, sympathy or empathy cannot simply be the result of imagining oneself into all the details of the other person's situation. There are unimaginably many details in any person's situation, relevant to any one of their acts or emotions. To grasp another's situation one ignores some of these, imagines some of them in a rudimentary not-very-vivid way, and imagines a few in a vivid way that

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<sup>1</sup> I think in fact that there are important differences that can be marked by distinguishing between sympathy and empathy, but that is a topic for another occasion.

incorporates the person's perspective. Moreover the person's situation includes their desires, beliefs, and even their emotions. These too have to be ignored or imagined with varying degrees of intensity. As a result, it can happen that although in the situation in which another finds herself one would in fact feel just as she does, when one tries hard to load enough relevant details into one's imagination one comes up with a different emotion, or none at all. Or, more to the point here, it can happen that when one imagines some of the details of someone's situation one simulates an emotion that one would not feel in their case, and does not feel contemplating their situation from one's own perspective. This is how one can at least partially empathise with acts that revolt one. The question of the accuracy or appropriateness of the resulting empathy then arises, as it does not given Smith's simplistic account. It is a real question, one that I wrestle with later in this chapter.

Adam Smith's friend David Hume also described limits to what we can imagine. Hume's point is not that we cannot sympathise with wrong-doers but that we have difficulty imagining that what is wrong is right. A work of fiction, in particular, may require us to imagine humans battling dinosaurs, or time travel, or a human turning into a beetle, and we manage to imagine all of these. But a fictional presupposition that rape is a noble action, or that one may eat babies on a whim, is practically impossible to comply with. As Hume puts it

Whatever speculative errors may be found in the polite writings of any age or country, they detract but little from the value of those compositions. There needs but a certain turn of thought or imagination to make us enter into all the opinions, which then prevailed, and relish the sentiments or conclusions derived from them. But a very violent effort is requisite to change our judgment of manners, and excite sentiments of approbation or blame, love or hatred, different from those to which the mind from long custom has been familiarized. And where a man is confident of the rectitude of that moral standard, by which he judges, he is justly jealous of it, and will not pervert the sentiments of his heart for a moment, in complaisance to any writer whatsoever. (Hume 1757)

There are many issues here, and recent writers have done a lot to disentangle them. (See Walton 2006, Gendler 2006.) The issue that is closest to the themes of this chapter concerns our attitude to fictional characters with awful motivation. We do identify with Macbeth or Raskolnikov, and experience something like empathy for them. If Hume is denying that, he seems clearly wrong. And the reasons why we can empathise with awful characters are closely related to the reasons that Adam Smith is over-stating his case: a skilful author will direct the imagination to aspects of the fictional situation, including aspects of the fictional character's motivation, that are similar to those of the reader, so

that one gets a partial imagination of the motivation of deeds that one would not consider doing oneself (at least in one's current circumstances, as discussed in a moment.) But a partial grasp of motivation is all one ever has: if there is any empathy at all it rests on partial imagination. So, to deny something Hume may not be asserting, we can empathize with the motives of repugnant characters in part because empathy can be selective in its choice of an imaginative basis.

Issues about the limits of imagination connect also with an enormous and important issue that I shall not discuss. One of the deepest and most troubling issues of modern times is the realisation that ordinary decent people willingly participate in atrocities. The point was first made by Hannah Arendt in *Arendt* (1963) and in other writings (see especially *Arendt* 1971.) It is a motivation for work in social psychology by Milgram and others (for a summary see Nisbett and Ross (1991) which shows that if placed in a suitable context just about anyone will acquiesce in acts that in other contexts they would find morally repugnant. These facts are a surprise to the people concerned, as they are to the whole culture, because we find it very hard to imagine taking part in such actions. And as a result we find it hard to empathize with people who are complicit in atrocities even when they are psychologically very similar to us. The reason for this, I think, is of a piece with what is going on with the claims by Smith and Hume: when we imagine an action we focus on a small number of relevant factors, holding others implicit. We usually keep out of focus factors concerning the general context of action, concentrating our limited imaginative resources on the thinking and motivation that a person experiences in that context. As a result we are not used to imagining actions performed in significantly different contexts to those in which we find ourselves. So given a repugnant action performed in different circumstances our simple efforts to imagine it, or gain empathy for the agent, fail.

This is too quick. It deserves a much fuller treatment, which I am not going to give here. The important point is just the link between issues about the limits of imagination and the incredulity we feel at the suggestion that we might act atrociously.

### **A choice of empathies**

Before touching on issues arising from Smith, Hume, and Arendt, we were discussing cases in which people do manage to have empathy for an evil act. I used an example of a person X who models the violent actions of another person, A, on his own failures to be courteous. There is something suspect about X's empathy. It is not particularly plausible that X is identifying anything close to the emotion that allowed A to commit his assaults. Which is not to say that he is obviously wrong, but he seems to be leaping from the assumption that if he can condemn himself and A under the same description he will have got onto A's moral-psychological wavelength. If we

had to choose between X's reactions and B's, we would be faced with an uncomfortable dilemma: complicity or delusion. Either in empathizing with an evil-doer we participate in something best avoided, or what we have may be pseudo-empathy, a sympathetic identification that misidentifies how the person was able to act. But there are more possibilities.

X did one thing right. He tried to empathize with an atrocious act by focussing on a venial one. He made two mistakes. One was thinking that all he had to do was to present to himself an emotion with somewhat similar functioning, and then crank up the moral seriousness. The other was to think that the emotion he chose, and its function, had to serve an immoral end, even if a less seriously immoral one. These may not seem like mistakes. After all empathy for an act one would not have performed oneself will have to be based on analogy rather than identity. And if empathy is to bring morally relevant understanding one might expect empathy for an evil act to link it to motivation that is at any rate wrong. I think the first of these points is right, but not the second. To see why, consider some alternative explanations of A's actions, with empathy-producing potential.

*smoking* S is a former nicotine addict who has weaned herself off cigarettes after a long and difficult struggle. One day, after she has been nicotine-free for six months, she is talking to a friend who is in despair over her stalled career and her failed marriage. The friend has also quit smoking but says that what she would find most comforting at the moment would be just a few puffs to calm her down while she talks. It is more important to be able to talk out one's troubles than to preserve nico-purety, S argues, and so she dashes into a shop and gets a pack of cigarettes. They both puff, and the conversation is comforting, but they finish the packet, and a month later both of them are still smoking. Looking back, S sees the impulse to comfort her friend with a cigarette as prompted by the whisper of her buried addiction, and regrets it.

*propositioning* T is a shy young man who while very attentive and relaxed with old friends has difficulty making new friends. He is fascinated by a woman he meets at a party, but cannot summon the nerve to contact her later. A month after the party he sees her on a bus and watches her unobtrusively. She gets off, leaving a book behind on her seat. T goes to the seat, picks up the book, realises that it is a library book, rushes to the front of the bus, persuades the driver to stop, gets off, and runs after her with the book. When he finally catches up with her, he is out of breath and, panting and holding on to a parking meter for support he hands her the book. She recognizes him from the party, says "I was hoping we'd meet again" and touches him on the arm. As he slowly regains the ability to speak he finds he is still in the adrenaline rush of his decision in the bus and his dash down the street. He deliberately uses it to make himself look and

speak directly at her and suggests that in that case they have a cup of coffee right away.

*dog poop* U is very proud of her shiba inu. She has never owned a dog before, and this is not an easy breed, but U and the dog get on well and the dog is obedient and affectionate. And well cared for, with one exception. On their walks U does not pick up after the dog. She has a loathing of excrement, and cannot bear to touch it even through a plastic bag. This failure is creating tension with her neighbours, and disapproval from other dog owners who think she is undermining the acceptability of urban dogs. One day U is sitting in the park with her dog, enjoying a picnic with her partner, when she notices a lump of the chocolate cake she was eating has fallen onto her partner's dress. She takes a paper napkin and stealthily removes the lump, depositing it into the garbage bag they have brought. Then, picking up her cake again, she realises that the slice is intact, and what had dropped on the dress could not have been cake. But scooping it and depositing it had been easy, as long as she did not think of it as shit. From then on, when her dog defecates she imagines the lump as wayward cake, and the grass or sidewalk as a dress to be saved from a stain. With this mental trick, the task is easy.

Any of these stories might throw the right kind of light on A's assaults. That is, if one was the protagonist in one of them, or intuitively close enough to the protagonist, one could apply them as analogies to get a feel for A's motivation, for how he managed to act in ways that would come less readily to most of us. But one couldn't apply all of them: if one of them is a good fit then the others are not. The main differences between them lie along three dimensions. First there is the aspect of the kind of barrier to be overcome: in the examples resolution, timidity, and disgust. Then there is the aspect of the person's considered attitude to overcoming it. In *smoking* S regrets having taken the forbidden puff, even though she may think that the immediate result was helpful to her friend. In *propositioning* and *dog poop* the protagonists are glad that they got to the other side of the obstacle. In *propositioning* it may be a one-time-only trip: he can't run a hundred yards every time he wants to make friends. In *dog poop* it is a permanently-available device, which she will access several times a day, and eventually become unconscious of using. The third aspect is that of the nature of the emotion or motivation that facilitates the process. In *smoking* it is sympathy, operating against the person's will in the service of a suppressed desire. In *propositioning* it is general physiological arousal, deliberately used in the service of an acknowledged desire. In *dog poop* it is a deliberate reconceptualization, a controlled seeing-as, used as a device for removing an unwanted obstacle.

There are obviously more possibilities than these. Very few of them are mutually compatible, in the sense that the motives and emotions in most of them exclude those of others. None of them require that the act be

wrong. The resemblance to a morally repugnant act lies in the repugnance, rather than the immorality. In each case a barrier is overcome, in a specific way, and in each case the way it happened could be very similar to that in which a barrier to atrocity is overcome. But there are many barriers to atrocity, and they operate in many different ways. A connection with an evil action that preserves moral character at the price of describing the wrong kind of barrier makes pseudo-empathy, an empathetic feeling that is not accompanied by understanding. A connection with a non-evil action that yields some insight into the nature of the barrier and the way it is overcome is a much more powerful thing. It allows an empathy that brings some insight.

Return to X's empathy for A's action. (The prison visitor and the rage-prone assailant.) In X's encounter with the taxi driver the barrier was one against incivility, and it was overcome by the force of X's fear of not getting to the airport on time. It was a once-only event and X remained his usually considerate self. It resulted in a state that X regretted getting to. There are some similarities and also important dissimilarities with A's assault on C. There too the transition was facilitated by an irrelevant triviality, and there too the outcome was something that was not part of the person's plan. On the other hand the transition was habitual in A's case. He could use the same path to facilitate rage on just about any occasion. In this respect it is like *dog poop*. And it led to a state that A did not regret as part of his personality, though on many particular occasions he could see it as inconvenient. In this respect it is like *propositioning*. Moreover the motive that was satisfied once the barrier was overcome was one that was constantly in the background, exerting a pressure on the person's general response to situations. In this respect it is more like *smoking*.

So which of these analogies, *X-taxi*, *smoking*, *propositioning*, *dog-poop*, is the best basis for empathy for A's actions? Are any of them acceptable? Any could be, though some are more likely than others. The *X-taxi* case is one of the less likely, I suspect. That is, if we choose at random a real human case that fits the outline description I gave of *A-assault*, and a real human case that fits the equally schematic description of *X-taxi*, then the chances are that the real human protagonist of the situation with the *A-assault* outline will have too little retrospective regret, and too much connection with a continuing motivational force, for the protagonist of the case fitting the *X-taxi* outline to find that imagining the other person through their own experience gave them an accurate empathetic grasp. That is, the empathising person (the X-role) is unlikely to find that they can anticipate the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the target person (the A-role) better as a result.

This is an intuition, a guess. I am not claiming to have shown that X's empathy is inadequate. The important point is that the explanatory depth or adequacy of the empathy depends on the psychological facts in particular

cases; it cannot be read off schematic descriptions such as those I have been giving. The use of such examples is rather to reveal the variety of connections between one person's life and another that can be the basis for empathy, and the reasons that such a connection might or might not give real understanding of the other person.

### **conclusion: worrying continuity**

One basic function of empathy is to transfer understanding from the familiar to the unfamiliar. You see what someone is going through – what is going through someone – leading to acts that you find puzzling or repulsive, is continuous with what you yourself have gone through on some occasion. (And sometimes it is your own puzzling or repulsive action that you can link with some less problematic earlier occasion, though we do not usually call this empathy.) I argued earlier that when this understanding is empathetic it often gives a grasp of how, rather than why, a person could do what they did.

The continuities have to be real ones, though. If "empathy" describes simply a feeling of common motivation between people there can be empathy that is completely hollow in terms of the understanding of one person that it gives to another. The empathy that I am discussing is a form of understanding that is relevant to the moral assessment of another person. This does not mean judging the other, but assessing their potentialities for important interactions. In giving one person a sense of how another could do something, it gives valuable information about when to trust, what projects to share in what ways, and what appeals to make. In Goldilocks terms, some people are bad news – they too easily find themselves doing things they should not have more than considered – some people are no addition to your own efforts – their barriers to action are too rigid or too orthodox – and a few are perfect complements to your own initiatives – they consider things you would not have but should and they hesitate where you do not and should. One function of empathy is to fill out the finer structure of these assessments, often in terms that one cannot explicitly describe. (I have discussed the accuracy of imagination in Morton (2004), with particular attention to capturing the perspective of the person imagined.)

An important test of continuity comes with increased seriousness. Suppose that S, the person in the *smoking* case, later takes part in an atrocity. Perhaps one like A's assault. Would a person who had had the attitude to her given by my description of *smoking* think, retrospectively, that they had seen the signs in advance, and perhaps feel that they should have anticipated the atrocity? In fact it takes more than a single pair of cases to set up such a continuity, so we would need a series of *smoking*-like incidents, leading to increasingly worrying actions. Would that set up retrospective concern? It would depend on the details of the cases, as they

are imagined by the concerned person, but some series of cases are better candidates than others. The important point is that only when the empathy for the person concerned is taken to represent the person's actual psychology rather than a convenient metaphorical description – when it is not what I have called pseudo-empathy – that such retrospective continuity makes sense. But when it can be made we take there to be a deep similarity between the joined cases. We think that attitudes towards one can be applied, perhaps in attenuated form, to the others.

This is where the blinkering effect of decency enters. Since we need to know how people are able to do what they can – what other things they are also capable of – we need a general intuitive sense of their barrier-overcoming profiles. We need to know if they are more like the people in the *A-assault*, *X-taxi*, *smoking*, *propositioning*, *dog poop*, or other similar cases. So we need to explore continuities between the barrier-hopping potentialities in a variety of cases. But when we do this we find too many. We find that many ordinary actions are continuous with many atrocious ones. As indeed they are, though the chains of continuity are long and we cannot be sure of the psychological accuracy of our intuitions to crucial cases. But we need empathy in everyday cases with everyday acceptable acts, in order to have a sense of one another as cooperators. Yet we do not want constant and telling comparisons with evil-doers. So we have a dilemma: we want to take empathy as easy, to ease everyday interaction, and we want to take it as difficult, to keep a distance between us and those we despise.

We react in two ways. We exaggerate the ease with which we can get accurate, non-pseudo, empathy in ordinary cases. We take it that any fellow-feeling that does not actually interfere with shared activity can be taken to represent real and significant psychological factors. And we minimise the ease with which we can make continuities with atrocious acts.

The result is that we do not think of ourselves as capable of empathy with the performers of atrocious acts, and we do think of ourselves as understanding acts where all we have is a warm empathetic feeling. We mis-distribute our estimates of what we can intuitively understand. If we did not do this then we would have a deeper understanding, and a more solid empathy, for some very ordinary actions. We would see them in a brighter light that brought into relief their sinister potentialities. But we would also be forced to admit puzzlement about how in many very ordinary cases someone we know well could do what they did.

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