

## **Are Empathy and Morality Linked? Insights from Moral Psychology, Social and Decision Neuroscience, and Philosophy**

**Giuseppe Ugazio<sup>1,2</sup>, Jasminka Majdandžić<sup>1</sup>, and Claus Lamm<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>: Social, Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience Unit, Department of Basic Psychological Research and Research Methods, Faculty of Psychology, University of Vienna;

<sup>2</sup>: Laboratory for Social and Neural Systems Research, Department of Economics, University of Zurich

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### **Abstract**

Empathy and morality have an important yet very complex relationship. This complexity is partly due to the a) multifaceted nature of empathy and b) our insufficient knowledge about the nature of morality. In this chapter, we first discuss the philosophical debate and theoretical views considering morality to be either purely emotional or purely rational. After illustrating the shortcomings of both views, we will argue that the most plausible view is the one allowing morality to have elements from both emotion and reason. We then focus on empathy, using empirical data from social neuroscience and psychology to define it as belonging to the realm of emotions, and differentiating it from other social emotions such as sympathy or compassion. The first two sections allow us to construct a framework in which we will analyze the relationship between morality and empathy. Using this framework we review studies in moral psychology and decision neuroscience to make the case that empathy is but one constituent of morality. We argue that empathy, like other emotions, often motivates us to act in a certain way, although the moral appropriateness of the motivated behavior depends on the context. For instance, empathy may motivate a person to help others in need, but it may also result in unfair behavior that favors ingroup members. Thus, although empathy may affect morality in providing information about the emotional reactions of the people affected by an action and judgment, whether empathy motivates judgments that are in accordance with moral principles depends on the contextual circumstances in which an agent makes them.

## **Introduction**

Empathy is commonly viewed as a necessary condition for moral behavior in most of the treaties proposed in the history of moral philosophy (Aristotle/Roger, 2000; Hume, 1960/1777; Smith, 1853), which has resulted in the widespread belief that empathy and morality are intimately related. Defining the relationship between empathy and morality, however, has proven to be difficult for two main reasons. First, empathy has been defined in many different ways, which makes it hard to differentiate it from other socio-emotional states, such as compassion or sympathy (e.g., Batson, 2009, this volume). Second, evidence on the causal role of empathy, and of emotions in general, in morality is mixed. Some scholars indeed maintain that emotions play no role in morality (Hauser, 2006), while others claim that emotions play a dominant role in moral judgments (Prinz, 2004). Addressing these two issues will allow us to gain a clearer view of the relationship between empathy and morality.

In this chapter, we will therefore summarize the most important philosophical approaches to defining morality. We will then propose a definition of empathy that differentiates it from the emotional states with which it is often confused. Having laid a theoretical foundation in the first two sections, in the third section we will discuss, in light of the existing literature, what role emotions, and more specifically empathy, most likely play in morality. We will explain that empathy plays a very important role in morality in two respects. First, empathy allows humans to understand how others are emotionally affected by a given action, which can directly inform moral decisions and actions. In addition, by means of the link between empathy and compassion (or sympathy), empathy can motivate people to behave in accordance with moral principles—such as maximizing the well-being of as many people as possible (Bentham, 1996/1789) or not inflicting harm or using a person as a means to an end (Kant, 1965/1785). However, we will argue that, although empathy is an important source of information, the knowledge acquired via empathy does not directly translate into moral decisions as, under some circumstances, the morally appropriate option may be different from the option following from one's empathic response. For instance, previous

results have shown that empathic responses can reduce the frequency of utilitarian judgments, such as when one decides to refrain from sacrificing the life of an innocent person with whom one strongly empathizes in order to save a larger number of innocent people (Crockett et al., 2010; Gleichgerrcht & Young, 2013; Majdandžić et al., 2012). This might be viewed as at odds with the moral judgment prescribed by the utilitarian school (see Figure 1 below for a schematic illustration of this point). Furthermore, empathic responses can lead people to express contradictory judgments depending on whether their decisions regard ingroup or outgroup members (Cikara et al., 2010). Third, the knowledge acquired through empathy may sometimes be used to motivate immoral behavior, such as in the case of torture.

### 1. What “is” morality?

If we want to find out whether and, if so, how empathy informs morality, we first need to define “morality.” The roots of the English noun “morality” evolved from the Latin noun *moràlia* and lie in the Latin “mores,” which can be literally translated into “habits,” “customs,” or “traditions.” These are also the nouns that are closest in meaning to the Ancient Greek *èthos* from which the English “ethics” originated. Although these words can be considered synonyms, we should note that over the centuries “ethics” has been used to denote the study of the principles which should be used to establish the appropriate habits for a given community, social group, or professional activity; “morality,” instead, has been mostly used in its adjective form, that is, as a synonym of “ethical,” denoting the habits that are in accordance with the principles identified by ethics. In the context of the present chapter, we will refer to “morality” as the expression of judgments classifying behaviors into good/right and bad/wrong ones. Two perspectives can be taken when studying morality: a) a normative perspective that establishes the principles that should be used to decide which behaviors are good and which are bad and b) a descriptive point of view that studies how we decide whether a given behavior is good or bad.

Normative moral theories thus inform us about how we ought to behave and how we ought to decide which behaviors are right or wrong. More specifically, normative ethics provides us with the means to discriminate between right and wrong. However, singling out which behaviors are right and wrong is a task of practical ethics, a branch of ethics that we will not discuss in this chapter. From the numerous theories proposed in the normative moral philosophical literature, two have particular relevance in the contemporary moral debate: consequentialism and deontology (Tobler et al., 2008). These theories differ mainly in what

they focus on in order to identify the normative principles. While the principles proposed by consequentialism focus on the foreseeable *consequences* of behaviors, deontological principles specify the *requirements* that the behaviors need to meet.

More specifically, consequentialism holds that the outcomes (consequences) of our actions ought to be as good as possible (Scheffler, 1988; Singer, 1974). Consequentialist theories are further distinguished in act consequentialism and rule consequentialism. According to the former, the outcome of individual actions ought to be as good as possible. On the other hand, given that the consequences of individual actions are sometimes difficult to predict, the latter holds that the consequences of established action-guiding rules ought to be as good as possible. Actions are thus evaluated with respect to these rules (see also Heinzlmann et al., 2012). For example, one of the most relevant consequential theories is utilitarianism: One ought to do what maximizes the well-being of the greatest number of people (or minimizes their unhappiness).

Deontological theories assign a special role to duties (“deontology” refers to the study or science of duty, from the Ancient Greek *deon* = duty). Duties are actions that follow one or more principled rules. From this perspective, the rightness or wrongness of an action is not so much determined by the goodness or badness of its consequences, but rather by whether the action itself fulfills the established requirements. For instance, one of the most popular requirements can be found in Kant’s (1785/1795) moral theory, in which the author states that one may “never treat other human beings as a means to an end, but only as an end in themselves” (p. 30).

In contrast to normative moral theories, descriptive moral theories seek to elucidate how a person decides whether a given behavior is right or wrong. Following David Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature* (1785/1985), which is one of the most complete attempts to provide a scientific description of moral judgments, moral philosophers have diverged into two groups: those who believe that morality is driven solely by rational considerations (Clarke, 1738; Cudworth, 2006; Kant, 1785/1959) and those who propose that morality is of an emotional nature (Hume, 1785/1985; Hutcheson, 2002; Prinz, 2004; Shaftesbury/Cooper, 1999).

Briefly, those who consider morality to be of an emotional nature suggest that, in order to evaluate the moral appropriateness of an event, one must base one’s judgment on the “gut feeling” provoked by the event. If the gut feeling is a pleasant one, then the event is

morally appropriate, but if the gut feeling is unpleasant the event is morally inappropriate (Hume, 1785/1985). In other words, by paying attention to one's own feelings, a person can infer whether something is morally appropriate. In contrast, those who believe that morality is solely a matter of reasoning claim that evaluating the appropriateness of an event requires a deliberative reasoning process based on a moral principle that is purely based on practical reason, in other words, a principle that rational agents would all agree on (e.g., "never treat humans as means to an end"): If an event violates such a principle, it is morally inappropriate; if an event is in accordance with such a principle, it is morally appropriate—irrespective of the emotions accompanying the decision (Kant, 1785/1959).

It has recently become problematic to maintain that morality is solely of either an emotional or a cognitive nature. On the one hand, "while we normally think of moral judgments as beliefs, they are characteristically motivating, and as Hume notes, judgments of facts alone do not have the power to move us" (Schwartz, 2005, pp. 1-2). In other words, if morality were only of a cognitive nature, then moral judgments alone would lack the motivational aspect that induces a person to act according to his/her judgments. Prinz (2011) proposed an interesting thought example that captures such motivational aspects: Consider the following two rules that pupils are frequently taught at school: a) a conventional rule stating that pupils should raise their hand and wait for the teacher to call on them before speaking and b) a moral rule stating that pupils should not harm other pupils. If a schoolteacher told the pupils that they could speak whenever they wanted to and no longer needed to raise their hand and wait to be called on, most of them would conform to the new norm, speaking whenever they wanted to. However, if a teacher told the pupils that they could hurt each other, very few of them would actually do so as moral norms have intrinsic motivational power and do not need an external element (such as an authority) to be obeyed. Furthermore, a purely rational view of morality is inconsistent with the recent body of evidence that moral judgments typically involve strong immediate subjective feelings (Greene et al., 2001; Haidt et al., 2001; Moll et al., 2008; Ugazio et al., 2012).

On the other hand, considering morality to be solely of an emotional nature would result in denying the ubiquitous emergence and consolidation of moral knowledge (i.e., sets of moral principles) in human societies (Schwartz, 2005). Indeed, in order for such moral regulations to emerge, it is necessary that a group of people reach an agreement on the moral appropriateness of a given behavior based on grounds that exceed the level of individual feelings. Founding moral criteria on formal rules of logic seems to constitute a more widely

accepted common ground than basing them on more erratic, individual emotions. Due to the conclusion that morality requires both emotional and rational components, scholars who argued that emotion and rationality mutually exclude each other in moral judgments ran into the logical impossibility of maintaining at the same time that moral knowledge exists and that morality is of a solely emotional nature (Campbell, 2005).

Thus, as Campbell (2005) proposes, morality is best considered to have elements of both reason (or belief) and emotion (and desire)—that is, it can be considered to be a *besire* (Altham, 1986). From this perspective, then, moral judgments are considered to be a combination of beliefs, emotions, and motivations, but sometimes they can also be solely rational or solely emotional responses to events. In sum, according to this moral descriptive view, the emotional component of morality is mainly associated with its motivational aspect, that is, the force that morality has to motivate a person to act in a certain way, while the rational component is linked to the capacity of acquiring “moral knowledge,” that is, a set of norms that guide our moral judgments (Campbell, 2005).

The dichotomy of philosophical views on morality, that is, whether it is of an emotional or rational nature, has also been reflected in the mixed results of scientific attempts to clarify the nature of morality. On the one hand, some scholars claim that, given the obtained data, morality is motivated by emotions: Schnall and colleagues (2008) found that induced disgust lead people to express more severe judgments of condemnation towards certain moral violations (such as incest) than people in a neutral emotional state; a similar disgust induction effect was found by Wheatley and Haidt (2006) on the same types of moral scenarios. On the other hand, other scholars who mostly analyzed the motivations for the moral considerations expressed by people claimed the opposite, that is, that morality is of a purely rational nature (Kohlberg, 1976; Piaget, 1932; Rest et al., 1999). As we have argued in previous work (Ugazio et al., 2012), it is likely that the origins of the many contradictory findings lie in the heterogeneity of experimental procedures that have been adopted. At present, the views that considered morality to be solely driven by emotional or rational forces are losing strength, as most scholars now agree that both reason and emotions play an important role in morality (Cushman et al., 2010; Moll et al., 2005, 2008; Ugazio et al., 2012). In line with Campbell’s (2005) dual view of morality, the evidence proposed by moral psychologists seems to support the theoretical view that moral judgments result, depending on the circumstances, from a combination of rational deliberation and emotional responses to an event.

In light of the literature discussed so far, we propose that emotions may play a crucial role in morality. Being a social emotion, therefore, empathy may serve as a crucial source of information for a person to judge which behaviors are morally right or wrong (Bartels, 2008; Haidt et al., 2001; Nichols, 2002; Ugazio et al., 2012). Through this role, empathy can then trigger associated emotional states, which have the potential to move people to act in accordance with morally prescribed behaviors. Since it is important to distinguish between empathy and other constructs that are also associated with emotional responses (such as emotional contagion, sympathy, or compassion), the next section focuses on defining empathy and related terms.

## **2. What “is” empathy?**

The Anglo linguistic roots of the word “empathy” lie in the Ancient Greek *empathēia* (passion), which is composed of *en* (in) and *pathos* (feeling). The term was originally coined by the German philosopher Theodor Lipps, who used the term *Einfühlung* (of which the English word “empathy” seems to be a direct translation) to describe the process of understanding works of art. At a basic phenomenological level, empathy denotes an affective response to the directly perceived, imagined, or inferred emotional state of another being. To our own understanding, empathy requires the affective sharing or resonating of an observer with another person’s (the target) affect in an isomorphic manner. In addition, the observer has to be aware at any point in time that the source of his or her feelings is the target. This stresses the central importance of the capacity for self/other distinction, which is the ability to distinguish between mental and bodily representations related to the self and to the other (de Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Decety & Lamm, 2006; Singer & Lamm, 2009). Empathy can therefore be described as a mechanism enabling a (usually impartial) “copy” (“feeling with”) of the target’s emotional state by the observer, with full awareness of which parts are “copied” and which parts originate in the observer him- or herself.

This definition, which stresses the role of empathy in gaining information about the internal affective representations of others, deviates from the predominant folk psychological definition, namely, that empathy is an other-oriented or even “moral” social emotion. In order to avoid confusion with such definitions, some conceptual clarifications are needed (see also Batson, 2009). At least five key concepts are related to empathy, ranging from motor mimicry to prosocial or altruistic behavior.

Motor mimicry describes our tendency to automatically synchronize our movements with those of another person. For instance, considerable evidence suggests that perceiving a target's affective facial expressions activates the corresponding facial muscles in the observer (for a review, see Dimberg & Oehman, 1996), and the strength of such mimicry responses correlates with self-report questionnaire measures of empathic skills (Sonny-Borgstrom, 2002). Notably, though, this correlation is rather weak, indicating that such bottom-up resonance mechanisms are only one aspect of empathy. In addition, recent accounts contest the automaticity of human mimicry and propose that it acts as a social signal (Hess & Fischer, 2013). We propose that motor mimicry might subserve both resonant and signal functions and support a virtuous circle sustaining smooth social interactions (Heyes, forthcoming).

Emotional contagion is another phenomenon that is strongly relevant to yet clearly distinct from empathy (Hatfield et al., 1994). It denotes the tendency to “catch” other people's emotions and has also been labeled “primitive empathy” (Hatfield et al., 2008) or “affective empathy” (de Waal, 2008). Notably, a few days after birth, human newborns already start crying in response to the distress calls of other babies. To turn this contagious response into a full-blown empathic response requires the development of a sense of self, however, since experiencing empathy requires the awareness that the source of the feeling state is the other, not the self. This sense emerges around the age of about 12 months (Hoffman, 2000). Taken together, motor mimicry and emotional contagion may in many instances be important antecedents of empathy, but in general should neither be regarded as necessary nor as sufficient processes for the experience of empathy.

With respect to the consequences of vicarious emotional responses, empathy as defined here needs to be separated from sympathy, empathic concern, and compassion. While all four terms include affective changes in an observer in response to the affective state of another person, only the experience of empathy entails vicarious responses that are not modified by the observer (in the sense of the “copied state” or “feeling with” referred to above). In contrast, sympathy, empathic concern, and compassion carry additional “feeling for” processes attributed to the observer. For example, in the case of empathy, observing the sadness of another person is associated with a partial feeling of sadness in the observer. Sympathy, empathic concern, and compassion, however, are characterized by additional feelings, such as concern about the target's welfare or the wish to alleviate his or her suffering. These processes are the outcome of the interaction between observer and target, but

go beyond what the target is actually feeling. The main distinction between empathy and phenomena like sympathy, empathic concern, and compassion is therefore whether the observer's emotions are inherently other-oriented ("feeling for"; compassion, sympathy, empathic concern) or whether they reflect affective sharing in the sense of "feeling with" (empathy) the other person.

Finally, many accounts of empathy, broadly defined, (Batson, 1991; de Waal, 2008) relate its occurrence to prosocial, other-oriented motivations (i.e., a motivation to increase the other person's well-being or welfare or to forego selfish, self-related benefits for the benefit of others). This is not necessarily the case when empathy is defined as "feeling with" another person. Empathy as understood this way simply enables us to feel as accurately as possible what others are feeling, without any sort of valuation attached to these feelings. Whether this then has prosocial, antisocial, or neutral consequences is the result of other variables, including other social emotions (such as envy or guilt), as well as acquired behavioral tendencies, moral values, or the personal relationship between observer and target (which if competitive can even result in counter-empathy; e.g., Lanzetta & Englis, 1989; Yamada et al., 2011). Notably, while consistent evidence for the link between "feeling for" (empathic concern, compassion) and prosocial behavior exists (e.g., Batson, 1991; Eisenberg, 2000; Eisenberg et al., 1989), a clear-cut empirical demonstration of a link between empathy as "feeling with" and prosocial or moral decisions making is still missing.

In terms of the neural foundations, which have received increased attention in the last few years, the definition of empathy as a shared feeling state has received widespread support. For example, two recent meta-analyses of functional neuroimaging studies unequivocally demonstrated that witnessing others suffering engages a neural network indicating that the observer is in an emotional state him- or herself (Fan et al., 2011; Lamm et al., 2011). This network includes the anterior insular cortex and the medial cingulate cortex (MCC), two brain areas which constitute an intrinsically linked network involved in emotional awareness and the homeostatic regulation of physiological bodily responses associated with emotional responses (Lamm et al., 2010). Of note for the present discussion, by means of its connections to "output" centers of the brain, the MCC in particular is able to provide a rather direct link between emotional and behavioral responses, which enables the organism to maintain homeostasis.

In addition, it is important to point out the distinction between self- and other-related emotional responses resulting from the observation of distress in others (e.g., Batson et al., 1997; Lamm et al., 2007). Witnessing negative emotions in others can result in empathic concern, which is an other-related vicarious response. This might in turn increase altruistic motivation towards the person empathized with and thus motivate prosocial behavior (Batson et al., 1995). In contrast, harm to others might also evoke personal distress, which is a self- rather than other-focused vicarious emotion. Rather than motivating a prosocial act, personal distress might increase one's tendency to escape the distressful situation. Alternatively, if a prosocial act is performed, it might result from essentially "selfish" motives, that is, be an attempt to reduce one's own distress by eliminating the source of the distress (i.e., the other person's suffering; e.g., Cialdini et al., 2002; Maner et al., 2002). Hence, decisions to help others that are motivated by vicarious responding can stem from other-related or from self-related motives. Whether such decisions can be considered moral decisions strongly depends on the relevance one assigns to the motives for the decision: On the one hand, if motives are not among the primary determinants of whether a decision is moral or not (e.g., if we only care about the consequences of a decision), then decisions motivated by self-related motives can also be considered moral. However, if motives or intentions play a central role in determining whether a decision is moral or not (e.g., as for Kant, 1965/1785), then selfish motives can never be moral motives. Hence, decisions motivated by self-related motives would not be considered moral. From Kant's perspective, decisions resulting from selfish motives should not be considered moral as the given motives cannot be universalized and ultimately come to constitute a moral principle (Kant, 1965/1785). For example, imagine a bystander who decides to risk his life to save a drowning person because he could not bear the distress of witnessing the death of a person (or, due to a more trivial selfish motive, such as because the drowning person owed him a large sum of money). From the two perspectives discussed previously, if we only care about consequences, this decision has to be considered a moral decision; from the second point of view, however, this decision can be considered a good one, but not a moral one.

### **3. Morality and Empathy**

In the previous two sections, we discussed our definitions of morality and empathy. Within this theoretical framework, we will now analyze the relationship between empathy and morality. Since, in the process of defining morality, we differentiated between the normative and descriptive parts of morality, it is necessary to elaborate on the relationship between

empathy and each of these aspects of morality. However, we will mainly focus on the relationship between descriptive morality and empathy rather than on the relationship between normative morality and empathy.

From a normative point of view, scholars might debate on issues such as: Should an individual's empathic capacities be cultivated and promoted? Should empathy be included among the elements used to establish the principles that govern our decisions? For instance, Kant (1785) proposed that emotions should not be involved in the deliberative process leading to the establishment of moral principles, while Hume (1777) placed empathy at the core of morality.

Such normative issues can be understood best if a solid grasp of the relationship between descriptive morality and empathy is acquired. To help the reader understand the following discussion, we have illustrated some of the ways in which empathy may play a role in morality (see Figure 1).

– Insert Figure 1 about here –

In the following, we will discuss this relationship, addressing three main questions: 1) Is empathy necessary for morality? 2) What role does empathy play in morality? and 3) Can empathy also result in judgments that are incompatible with moral principles and hence contribute to morally wrong behaviors?

#### *1. Is empathy necessary for morality?*

The short answer is: No, empathy is not necessary for all aspects of morality. By definition, the capacity to “feel with” another person implies that empathy is only involved in morality when the object of morality is another human being. However, moral norms also regulate how people should behave towards nature, for example, by prescribing that we not litter, destroy forests, etc., or towards cultural institutions, such as by prescribing that we not evade taxes. It is hard to see how empathy would be necessary for morality in these contexts. Besides, even when moral judgments regulate interactions with other human beings, there are circumstances in which empathy is not necessary (see also Figure 1). First, several studies (see Koenigs et al., 2007; Ugazio et al., 2012) have suggested that certain types of moral judgments do not involve emotions (including empathy). For instance, Koenigs and colleagues' study compared the moral judgments of patients with bilateral damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), a brain area associated with affective valuation

processes (Damasio et al., 2000), to the moral judgments of healthy individuals. The authors found that lesion patients only made more utilitarian judgments than healthy controls in *personal* moral dilemmas (i.e., when the action to be judged involved physical interaction between the people in the scenario, see Greene et al., 2001). In contrast, in *impersonal* moral dilemmas (i.e., those in which the action to be judged does not involve personal interactions, see Greene et al., 2001), the judgments of the two groups of individuals did not differ, suggesting that emotions are not involved in this second type of moral judgments.

Second, the moral capacities of people suffering from psychopathologies associated with an impaired capacity for empathy (see Blair, 1995) do not differ from those of controls (Cima et al., 2010).

## 2. *What role does empathy play in morality?*

The notion that empathy is not necessary for morality does not mean that empathy might not play an important role in some types of morality, however. As stated in the previous sections, we believe that one of the most important roles of empathy in morality is an epistemological one: As a mechanism for the observer to experience the affective state of the observed person, empathy provides direct feedback to the observer about how the consequences of an event are affecting or will affect the observed person. For instance, if the consequences of an agent's action harm another person, the agent can learn by means of empathy that his actions are causing pain in the other person. Following Hume's (1777/1960) reasoning (see above), empathy, by eliciting feelings of approbation or disapprobation, can be used to decide whether an action should be considered morally right or wrong: If the vicarious feeling we experience from observing the other person is a pleasant one, then the action may be right, and if the feeling is negative, the action may be wrong. Furthermore, by making a person aware of the emotional state of others, empathy can motivate people to judge and eventually act accordingly. For instance, if someone is in a negative emotional state as a result of another person's actions, for example, feels pain after being hit by another person, empathy may motivate an observer to judge that hitting others is morally wrong and, by extension, may motivate him to help the victim. However, as we illustrate below, an empathy-driven judgment does not automatically correspond to a morally appropriate judgment/action: Whether the judgment motivated by empathy is morally right or wrong depends on the circumstances (see also Figure 1).

There is some support for the above-mentioned role of empathy in morality, although the direct link between empathy and morality remains rather unclear and requires further investigation. A large body of evidence has shown that certain types of moral judgments involve strong emotions (e.g., Greene et al., 2001; Haidt, 2001; Majdandžić et al., 2012; Ugazio et al., 2012). In line with this, it has been shown that vmPFC lesions, which typically result in deficits in the ability to judge the moral appropriateness of actions, are consistently associated with affective impairment (Anderson et al., 1999; Ciaramelli et al., 2007). These emotions can be either self-related or other-related, however, so the decisive role of empathy is not clear-cut.

There is also more closely related, albeit not very specific evidence on the link between morality and empathy, as defined here. The lack in specificity stems from the fact that there are hardly any specific behavioral or self-report measures of empathy in the sense of a shared or copied state. Therefore, previous research has mainly used questionnaires or self-reports that are more akin to measures of empathic concern, sympathy, or compassion. For instance, it has been shown that empathic concern is positively related to the tendency towards harm aversion in moral judgments (Crockett et al., 2010). Similarly, Gleichgerrecht and Young (2013) found that utilitarian moral decisions in moral dilemmas similar to the trolley dilemma were negatively correlated with the level of empathic concern (i.e., the lower the level of empathic concern, the more utilitarian judgments were made). Interestingly, these authors found that empathic concern was predictive of utilitarian judgments irrespective of other emotional states often associated with empathy such as personal distress or perspective taking. Moreover, our own recent work (Majdandžić et al., 2012) has shown that moral decision making involving people who are perceived as being “more human” than others is associated with neural and behavioral responses indicating increased “feelings with” (in the sense of empathy) as well as “feelings towards” (in the sense of sympathy) them. Furthermore, moral judgments involving people perceived as being “more human” were less utilitarian.

Although the evidence suggesting that empathy is related to harm aversion is rather convincing, the way in which an increased sensitivity to harm aversion influences moral judgments is somewhat controversial. While the evidence cited in the previous paragraph suggests that empathy increases the aversion to harm to the one person in the trolley dilemma, another study (Choe & Min, 2011) reports that empathy might lead the moral decision maker to help the larger group. In this study, the authors found that if the emotion

people reported as being the strongest emotion they felt when making moral decisions was empathy, this was predictive of a utilitarian decision in the moral dilemma situations discussed above.

Furthermore, even if the predominant view of the relationship between empathy and morality focuses on a directional role of empathy on moral decision making, we also need to consider how moral decisions affect empathy. In other words, since our aesthetic judgment is affected by the moral character of the object of aesthetic judgment (Kieran, 2006), a person's moral decisions might influence the extent to which we empathize with this person: If a person's moral decisions are congruent with ours, we will be more likely to empathize with this person, and vice versa. For example, Pillay (2011) found that people's empathic responses towards a police supervisor who hires a police officer who acted in a controversial way, that is, ejected a paraplegic from his wheelchair because he had broken the law, were affected by the moral judgment they expressed about such a controversial action.

In sum, there are preliminary although not very specific indications that empathy guides moral decisions, thus allowing us to factor the emotional reactions of a person affected by an event into our moral judgments. The inconsistent results discussed, however, reveal that the empirical evidence describing the relationship between morality and empathy is quite weak. Thus, a much deeper and more thorough investigation of this relationship is required in order to achieve a more satisfactory understanding of how empathy and morality are interrelated. Some of the many possible explanations for the heterogeneity in the findings are: a) the object towards which empathy is directed – which in previous studies was either a larger group of people or a single person (Choe & Min, 2011; Gleichgerrcht & Young, 2013); b) whether the people described in the moral scenarios are perceived as ingroup or outgroup members (Cickara et al., 2010; Majdandžić et al., 2012); c) the methods used to measure the levels of empathy, empathic concern, or other aspects of empathy. For instance, while Crockett et al. (2010) and Gleichgerrcht and Young (2013) used the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI, Davis 1980), Pillay (2011) used the Basic Empathy Scale (BES, Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006), and Choe and Min (2011) as well as Majdandžić et al. (2012) asked people which emotion they felt while making decisions; d) interindividual and/or cross-cultural differences in the samples investigated.

Although decisive evidence for a causal role of empathy in moral judgments is still lacking, we will now briefly discuss a possible mechanism through which empathy might

influence moral decisions. Briefly, empathy is an emotional process (according to the definition provided above) and, considering that emotions have motivational tendencies, these motivational tendencies can represent a plausible mechanism through which empathy influences moral decisions. As stated above, scholars from both philosophy and psychology claim that morality can have an emotional valuation component as it steers people to express their moral judgments in a certain way (i.e., in line with moral prescriptions). The motivational importance of emotions for moral judgments was recently captured by studies revealing that, by taking into account the motivational tendencies of emotions, it is possible to predict how certain emotions will affect moral judgments (Harlé & Sanfey, 2010; Ugazio et al., 2012). For instance, we (Ugazio et al., 2012) showed that when a person judges a moral scenario, emotional states influence her choices in opposite ways depending on the motivational tendencies of the emotion induced. People who were induced to feel anger—an approach emotion—were more likely to judge a moral action in a permissive way as compared to people in a neutral emotional state, and people induced to feel disgust—a withdrawal emotion—were more likely to judge the same actions in a less permissive way. Having a solid understanding of the motivational tendencies linked to empathy, as we define it here, may yield a better understanding of how empathy motivates morality. Indeed, most of the existing studies have investigated the importance of empathic concern (Batson, 1991; Eisenberg, 2000; Eisenberg et al., 1989) or compassion (Leiberg et al., 2011), which are other-related emotional responses that motivate prosocial behavior.

### *3. Can empathy also result in judgments that are incompatible with moral principles?*

Although empathy and related emotional states such as empathic concern, sympathy, or compassion have been implicated in motivating prosocial behavior, a critical reader could ask whether the behavior motivated by these elements is actually morally right or simply appears to be so. In many situations, it is not possible to claim that the judgment motivated by empathy is actually morally good, or morally better than judgments not motivated by empathy. For instance, consider a study in which the participants are asked to allocate food (a scarce resource) to two groups of children in Africa (Hsu et al., 2008). One of the two options would be to distribute the food equally but inefficiently (i.e., the total amount is not maximized) among a group of children. The other option would be to distribute the food efficiently but unequally among the other group of children. Which of the two allocation strategies is better can only be determined by referring to a moral principle: If the accepted moral principle is that equality should be maximized, then the first strategy is the morally

preferable one; if the accepted moral principle is that efficiency should be maximized, then the second strategy is the morally preferable one. In this study, Hsu and colleagues (2008) found that emotion-related neural networks seem to be involved in motivating individuals to prefer an inefficient equity-based distribution of scarce resources to a more efficient, but unequal distribution. Based on these findings, one could speculate that the empathy-driven moral judgment in this situation would be to choose the equal but inefficient allocation strategy. Whether this strategy is the morally appropriate one or not, however, depends on the normative moral principle one is relying on in order to make the decision.

Similarly, in the trolley dilemma type of moral situation, in which one has to decide whether sacrificing one person to prevent the death of more people is the morally appropriate decision, the moral appropriateness of the decision strategy is determined by the moral principle one adheres to. A utilitarian would judge it to be morally obligatory to sacrifice one person in order to save more even if to do so required the use of a person as a means to the end, while a non-consequentialist would judge it to be morally forbidden to sacrifice one person to save many if the rights of the one person were violated in the act. Thus, the role of empathy in motivating an agent to avoid harming a single person (Crockett et al., 2010) should be considered morally neutral. Depending on the moral principle one chooses to adopt, the motivated decision will be morally appropriate or not.

Furthermore, due to the properties of our empathic responses (see above, and Prinz et al., 2004), one can identify several situations in which the decisions motivated by empathy are actually morally wrong, which may ultimately promote immoral behaviors. This is particularly well-illustrated by the fact that empathy is shown to be prone to ingroup bias. For instance, Batson's (1995) social psychology study revealed that priming an empathic response towards a person ("Sheri") induced people to change the priority order of a hospital waiting list privileging Sheri at the expense of other patients who had even been depicted as needing the hospital treatment more than she did. Thus, empathy can lead to immoral behavior. In a similar fashion, an empathic response triggered by the perceived cuteness of a person can lead to more lenient moral condemnations of despicable acts or, even worse, to some sort of worship of the perpetrator of those actions, as for instance revealed by the recent public debate following the Boston Marathon bombers. Some people were reportedly feeling sorry for and some teenage girls even reported being in love with the younger attacker (Bloom, 2013a). In addition, several recent social neuroscience experiments demonstrated that neural responses to others' pain are stronger if the other person is a member of one's own

ethnic group (“racial empathy bias,” Avenanti et al., 2010) or one’s social group. For instance, higher activity in the neural network associated with empathy was found when participants saw fans of their own favorite football team in pain compared to when they saw members of the rivaling team in pain (Hein et al., 2010). In addition, some of these responses were predictive of an ingroup bias towards one’s fellow fans in prosocial behavior. Furthermore, Cikara et al. (2010) provided evidence that people change their judgments of an action such as sacrificing one life in order to save numerous other lives (as an example of a utilitarian moral decision) depending on whether the person to be sacrificed is an ingroup or outgroup member. Given that empathy has been shown to be stronger for ingroups compared to others, it is quite possible that the difference in moral considerations identified in this study resulted from a biased empathic response. Indeed, as previously mentioned, in a previous study (Majdandžić et al., 2012), we showed that moral judgments involving people who are perceived as “more human” are less utilitarian. Thus, in this situation as well, one can claim that empathy results in morally dubious decisions and ultimately motivates morally dubious behavior by causing a person to show partiality towards the (“more human”) peers of his ingroup.

Another instance of empathy being related to morally wrong decisions is its tendency to trigger emotional responses that cause study participants to prefer immediate over long-term effects. This can become problematic in situations in which one knows that an action may have immediate negative consequences but would have much better outcomes in the long run. A very concrete example is given by the policy adopted by many governments (e.g., the US government) to never negotiate with terrorists. Imagine that a group of people has been kidnapped by a terrorist organization, which is asking for a ransom in order to free them. If the state/family does not pay, they will kill all the hostages. In this case, the empathic response would most certainly focus on the immediate negative consequence of the death of the kidnapped people, and the resulting judgment would probably be that the ransom should be paid and that the hostages should be freed unharmed as soon as possible. However, in the long run, refusing to negotiate with terrorists may better protect the safety of everybody as terrorists lose the incentive to kidnap people.

Furthermore, our empathic capacity to understand the emotional states of others can be exploited. In some situations, people might use empathy to develop behavioral strategies that will benefit them by allowing them to take advantage of the negative affective states generated in others. For instance, football players might have an overly aggressive attitude at

the beginning of a game in order to induce fear in their opponents and diminish their football skills. In more dramatic situations, empathy can be used in torture, as it enables the torturer to know whether and, if so, how his methods are inflicting pain on another person, and in war, when guerrillas repeatedly strike civilian targets to generate confusion and panic and overcome their stronger opponents. Other crude situations in which empathy might motivate immoral behavior include those in which warlords commit atrocities to increase the humanitarian aid flowing into their country which they can subsequently tax or to force other countries to accommodate their requests, or those in which parents cripple their children so that they become more “productive” beggars (Bloom, 2013b).

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have tried to shed light on the relationship between empathy and morality. In the first two sections, we defined and contextualized morality and empathy, respectively, in order to identify some of the potential connections between the two. In the resulting theoretical framework, we identified an epistemological and a motivational role of empathy in morality, but also pointed out that empathy cannot be considered a necessary condition for morality. Neither the epistemological nor the motivational aspects of empathy align themselves specifically with judgments or motivations that are morally right. We propose that empathy contributes to moral judgments by providing information about the emotional reactions of people affected by an action and by motivating a person to act in a certain way. Whether these decisions are in accordance with moral principles depends on the contextual circumstances in which an agent finds himself. In sum, these views point to a much more complex link between empathy and morality than the one suggested by the widely held “folk belief” that empathy is closely and directly linked to all aspects of morality.

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**Figure caption:**

**Figure 1.** Schematic representation of the relationship between empathy and morality

Figure

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