

# Empathy

*Philosophical and Psychological  
Perspectives*

EDITED BY

Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# 1

## Understanding Empathy:

### Its Features and Effects

Amy Coplan

The concept of empathy has received an enormous amount of attention in the past few decades, appearing in the popular press,<sup>1</sup> political campaigns,<sup>2</sup> and in the study of a wide range of topics, including autism spectrum disorders,<sup>3</sup> psychopathy,<sup>4</sup> political ideologies,<sup>5</sup> medical care,<sup>6</sup> ethics and moral development,<sup>7</sup> justice and the court,<sup>8</sup> gender differences,<sup>9</sup> engagement with art and the media,<sup>10</sup> therapeutic methods in

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. articles in the *New York Times* (Blakeslee, 2006), *Time* (Nash, 2007), *Scientific American* (Giacomo, Fogassi, and Gallese (2006)), and *Scientific American Mind* (Dobbs (2006)).

<sup>2</sup> Since he began campaigning for President, Barack Obama has invoked the concept of empathy in dozens of speeches on multiple topics. While speaking to Planned Parenthood on July 17, 2007, he famously remarked that he would use empathy as a criterion for his selection of Supreme Court Justices: 'in the overwhelming number of Supreme Court decisions, that's enough. Good intellect. You read the statute. You look at the case law, and most of the time the law is pretty clear—95% of the time . . . But it's those 5% of the cases that really count. And in those 5% of the cases what you got to look at it is: What is in the justice's heart? What's their broader vision of what America should be? You know, Justice Roberts said he saw himself just as an umpire. But the issues that come before the court are not sport. They're life and death. And we need somebody who's got the heart to recognize—the empathy to recognize what it's like to be a young, teenaged mom; the empathy to understand what it's like to be poor or African-American or gay or disabled or old. And that's the criteria by which I'm going to be selecting my judges' (quotation reported by Livingston and Murray, 2009 on [msnbc.com](http://msnbc.com)).

<sup>3</sup> Baron-Cohen (2003, 2009); Dapretto et al. (2005); Iacoboni & Dapretto (2006); Gallese (2006); Clark, Winkielman, & McIntosh (2008); Blair (2008a).

<sup>4</sup> Richell, Mitchell, et al. (2003); Blair, Mitchell, & Blair (2005); King, Blair et al. (2006); Decety & Moriguchi (2007); Blair (2006, 2008a); Shurtcliff et al. (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Lakoff (2002, 2004); Iacoboni (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Halpern (2001, 2007, 2009); Stepien & Baernstein (2006); Pedersen (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Hoffman (2000 and this collection); Eisenberg and Fabes, et al. (1994); Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad (2006); Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade (1987); Batson (1991); Batson, Lishner, et al. (2003); Slotte (2007); Einolf (2008).

<sup>8</sup> Hoffman (1987, 2000, and this collection).

<sup>9</sup> Baron-Cohen (2003); Schulte-Rüther et al. (2008); Klein & Hodges (2001); Strauss (2004); Graham & Ickes (1997); Ickes, Gesn, & Graham (2000).

<sup>10</sup> Feagin (1996); Walton (1990, 1997, 1999); Smith (1995); Currie & Ravenscroft (2002); Currie (2004); Coplan (2004, 2006, 2009); Kaplan (2005 and this collection); Carroll (2008 and this collection).

clinical psychology,<sup>11</sup> mirror neurons,<sup>12</sup> and theory of mind.<sup>13</sup> Given its central role in so many discussions and debates, it's safe to conclude that whatever empathy is, it's important.

So what is it? Depending on whom you ask, empathy can be understood as one or more of several loosely related processes or mental states.<sup>14</sup> Some of the most popular include the following:

- (A) Feeling what someone else feels
- (B) Caring about someone else
- (C) Being emotionally affected by someone else's emotions and experiences, though not necessarily experiencing the same emotions
- (D) Imagining oneself in another's situation
- (E) Imagining being another in that other's situation
- (F) Making inferences about another's mental states
- (G) Some combination of the processes described in (A)–(F)

The number of competing conceptualizations circulating the literature has created a serious problem with the study of empathy by making it difficult to keep track of which process or mental state the term is being used to refer to in any given discussion. Keeping track is important because the different conceptualizations refer to distinct psychological processes that vary, sometimes widely, in their function, phenomenology, mechanisms, and effects. Further confusing things is the fact that researchers approach the examination of empathy with differing, often incommensurable approaches, from a priori theorizing to the examination and analysis of patterns of neural activation through functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).

Rather than dismissing the concept of empathy altogether, a number of researchers have responded to the conceptual confusion by beginning their discussions of empathy with an acknowledgment of the varied uses of the term and then stipulating a particular definition for their discussion. This seems like a reasonable temporary solution, particularly for those interested in the role a particular process plays in a given experience or debate rather than in characterizing and analyzing the concept of empathy.

An alternative, rather ecumenical solution has been to include the multitude of diverse processes that get labeled empathy under a single broad disjunctive concept.

<sup>11</sup> Kohut (1977, 1984); Rogers (1957, 1961); Kahn & Rachman (2000); Orange (1995); Geist (2009); Clark (2007); Gladstein & Brennan (1987); and Bohart & Greenberg (1997).

<sup>12</sup> Iaconi (2008, 2009a); Keyser (2009); Gallese & Goldman (1998); Goldman (2006a and this collection); essays in Pineda (2009a).

<sup>13</sup> Goldman (1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 2006a); Goldman & Sripada (2005); Gordon (1986, 1995, 2009); Hurley (2008); Stueber (2006, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the history of the concept, see the introduction to this collection; Stueber (2006, 2008); Gladstein (1984); Gladstein & Brennan (1987); Wispé (1986, 1987, 1991); and Eisenberg & Strayer (1987). Useful surveys of research on empathy within particular disciplines and sub-disciplines can be found in Clark (2007), Verducci (2005), Sawicki (1997), Basch (1983), Bohart & Greenberg (1997), Throop (2008), Eisenberg (2000), and Coplan (2009).

Stephanie  
processes i  
across dis  
among so  
sized to th  
cohered i  
taken.<sup>17</sup>

attended f  
to the obj

Preston

from bein  
(A)–(E) er

exist betw  
generality

mirror ne  
revealing

they are si

With th  
empathy i

in favor of  
my conce

process. Ir  
we stop ce

so much a  
researcher

to study ti  
tion; emp;

person's si  
To say th  
affective I

<sup>15</sup> Preston

<sup>16</sup> Ibid: 2

<sup>17</sup> Ibid: 4

<sup>18</sup> Ibid: 4

Age of Empa  
work he did  
what he call  
varieties, so  
high-level p  
I disagree.  
improving p  
emphasize  
I will go on  
strings.

Stephanie Preston and Frans de Waal claim that the empirical data on the various processes is consistent across studies on a variety of species and propose a 'unified story' across disciplines, situations, and species.<sup>15</sup> Though they acknowledge differences among some of the processes, they claim that the distinctions have been 'overemphasized to the point of distraction'<sup>16</sup> and insist that the different views of empathy can be cohered into a unified whole if a broad view of the Perception-Action Model is taken.<sup>17</sup> They therefore define empathy very broadly as 'any process where the attended perception of the object generates a state in the subject that is more applicable to the object's state or situation than to the subject's own prior state or situation.'<sup>18</sup>

Preston and de Waal's account and others like it take us in the wrong direction. Far from being 'emphasized to the point of distraction,' the differences among processes (A)-(E) enumerated above haven't been emphasized enough, particularly those that exist between some of the higher-level processes. We need more specificity, not more generality. New developments in cognitive neuroscience and philosophy of mind on mirror neurons, mirror systems, shared representations, simulation, and emotion are revealing more about the differences among the processes labeled empathy and why they are significant. We should strive to be as precise as possible.

With this in mind, my goal in this paper is to propose a narrow conceptualization of empathy informed by recent psychological and neuroscientific research. Although I am in favor of restricting the use of the term empathy to the high-level process I'll describe, my concern is less with terminology than with clarifying the essential features of the process. In other words, it is less important that we call this process empathy than that we stop conflating it with several related processes for it is the conflation that has led to so much ambiguity and confusion, making it difficult to analyze and evaluate empathy researchers' work and threatening to hamper both philosophical and empirical efforts to study the significance of all of these processes. Under my proposed conceptualization, empathy is a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation.<sup>X</sup> To say that empathy is 'complex' is to say that it is simultaneously a cognitive and affective process. To say that empathy is 'imaginative' is to say that it involves the

<sup>15</sup> Preston & de Waal (2002).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 4. Preston and de Waal's definition is based on Martin Hoffman's (2000). In his 2009 book *The Age of Empathy*, which is briefly discussed in the introduction to this collection, de Waal elaborates on the work he did with Preston and continues to argue for a broad conceptualization of empathy. He proposes what he calls the 'Russian Doll Model' of empathy, according to which empathy comes in many different varieties, some primitive and others highly sophisticated. De Waal objects to restricting the term empathy to high-level processes because, in his view, doing so denies how much empathy is a part of who we are. I disagree. We can be more precise in our conceptualizations without dismissing or devaluing low-level mirroring processes or ignoring the critical role they play in our lives. Preston and de Waal are right to emphasize their importance. However, they have their own unique characteristics and effects on our lives. As I will go on to argue, including them under the rubric of empathy does not elevate them; it simply confuses things.

representation of a target's states that are activated by, but not directly accessible through, the observer's perception.<sup>19</sup> And to say that empathy is a 'simulation' is to say that the observer replicates or reconstructs the target's experiences, while maintaining a clear sense of self–other differentiation.

Although my proposed conceptualization departs in some important respects from other recent conceptualizations offered by philosophers and social scientists, I hope to show that, in spite of this, it is conceptually cleaner, captures several of the key intuitive characteristics of the ordinary use of the term and, most importantly, that it dovetails with recent psychological and neuroscientific research. I take the view that philosophical theories should be constrained by empirical research whenever possible, and that while we as philosophers should never accept the conclusions of empirical scientists uncritically, to ignore them is to render our work less relevant, less credible, and, ultimately, less meaningful.

In the sections below, I describe what I take to be the three essential features of empathy: affective matching, other-oriented perspective-taking, and self–other differentiation. All of these features are necessary for empathy, but none is sufficient on its own. An observer affectively matches a target only if the observer's affective states are the same in kind as the target's, though they may vary in degree. In other-oriented perspective-taking, an observer imagines a target's situation, experiences, and characteristics as though he were the target. And an observer maintains self–other differentiation only if he continuously represents himself as distinct from the target, thereby avoiding confusion about their respective situations, experiences, and characteristics. Together these features make up empathy, a unique kind of understanding through which we can experience what it is like to be another person.

### 1.1 Affective Matching

Affect is a broad category encompassing multiple mental states, all typically thought to involve feelings and some degree of physiological arousal. Emotion and mood are paradigm cases of affect. Affective states are not necessarily directed at specific objects nor do they necessarily involve cognitive evaluations or appraisals. Although most researchers agree that empathy has an affective component, just how to characterize that component is a matter of some controversy. Under my proposal, affective matching occurs only if an observer's affective states are qualitatively identical to a target's, though they may vary in degree. The observer must therefore experience the same type of emotion (or affect) as the target. This is a stricter condition than<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> I am using imagination here to refer to a process through which one recreates or enacts some mental state. Some philosophers refer to this as recreative imagination. Alvin Goldman uses the term 'enactment' imagination, which he distinguishes from what he calls 'suppositional' imagination (2006a). As Goldman explains, when one imagines feeling X, it is not enough for one to *suppose* that one feels X; one must try to enact the feeling of X (2006a: 47–9). In other words, one must do more than entertain the idea or possibility of feeling X. One must recreate an experience of X.

propos  
similari  
empath  
compo  
from an  
affects.  
as a res  
examp.  
observ  
target l

Con  
because  
logical  
rate' is  
Althou  
human  
least so  
emotic  
list of e  
represe  
for rep  
involv  
represe  
reactiv  
reactiv  
To

empati  
those  
way, r  
be the  
lus.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> H  
<sup>21</sup> S  
<sup>22</sup> I  
misrep  
represe  
could b  
examp  
or sym  
stricter  
thanks  
<sup>23</sup> P  
(2008)

proposed by researchers who argue that affective congruence—that is, mere qualitative similarity or identical valence—is a sufficient condition for the affective component of empathy.<sup>20</sup> Others have proposed even more relaxed conditions for the affective component of empathy, including reactive affects—that is, affects that, while resulting from an observer's perception of a target, fail to match even the valence of the target's affects.<sup>21</sup> For example, if the target experiences fear, and the observer experiences pity as a result, these researchers might count it as a successful case of empathy. Another example sometimes given is so-called 'empathic anger,' which results when a subject observes a target being mistreated and becomes angry in response even though the target himself is not experiencing anger.

Congruent and reactive emotions do not qualify as empathetic in my account because they are not sufficiently accurate representations of a target's situated psychological states. To say that congruent and reactive emotions are not 'sufficiently accurate' is to say that they misrepresent the type of emotion experienced by the target. Although a certain amount of disagreement exists about the types of emotions that humans experience, there is nevertheless a growing consensus among scientists that at least some emotional types do exist cross-culturally, typically identified as 'basic' emotions. These usually include fear, anger, sadness, joy, and disgust. Whatever the list of emotional types turns out to be, countenancing emotional types at all entails that representations of those types can be either accurate or inaccurate, where the criterion for representational accuracy is type-identity. Under the assumption that empathy for representational accuracy is type-identity. Under the assumption that empathy involves the representation of a target's emotions, type-identity as the criterion for representational accuracy provides a rationale for the exclusion of congruent and reactive emotions from the category of empathetic experiences, since congruent and reactive emotions are not type-identical.<sup>22</sup>

To summarize, in order to qualify as the type of affective matching essential to empathy, an observer must experience affective states that are qualitatively the same as those of the target. As I will explain, this matching must come about in a particular way, namely through other-oriented perspective-taking. This means it cannot merely be the result of coincidence or of two people reacting identically to the same stimulus.<sup>23</sup> It also cannot be caused by emotional contagion.

<sup>20</sup> Hoffman (2000); Preston & de Waal (2002).

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g. Davis (1996).

<sup>22</sup> It must be pointed out that, in some cases, reactive or congruent emotions may not be representing or misrepresenting a target's emotions. Being triggered by the target's emotions doesn't entail that they are representing or misrepresenting at all. Moreover, depending on what is meant by 'representation,' a case could be made that reactive emotions sometimes serve as accurate representations of a target's emotion. For example, if a target individual experiences sorrow, an observer's pity may represent (in the sense of stand for or symbolize) that sorrow. As is implied by my discussion, I am using the term 'represent' in this context in a stricter sense such that accurately representing a target's emotions requires replicating those emotions. My thanks to an anonymous reader from Oxford University Press for making this point to me.

<sup>23</sup> For discussion of various cases of shared affect, see Goldie (1999, 2000), Goldman (2006a), Carroll (2008), and Feagin (this collection).

Psychologists Elaine Hatfield, John Cacioppo, and Richard Rapson define emotional contagion as 'the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person, and, consequently, to converge emotionally.'<sup>24</sup> In other words, emotion is transmitted from one person to another; it is as though one individual 'catches' the emotion of another. Max Scheler describes this process as 'emotional infection.' and Lauren Wispé writes that 'emotional contagion involves an involuntary spread of feelings without any conscious awareness of where the feelings began in the first place.'<sup>25</sup> In most cases of emotional contagion, the transfer of emotion is 'relatively automatic, unintentional, uncontrollable, and largely inaccessible to conversant awareness.'<sup>26</sup>

Stephen Davies refines the standard notion of emotional contagion by emphasizing that the emotion experienced by someone as a result of emotional contagion does not take the emotion of the target individual as its object: 'emotional contagion involves the arousal in B by A of an affect that corresponds to an affect felt and displayed by A... and B's affect does not take A's state, expressive character, or any other thing as its emotional object.'<sup>27</sup> This is true even in cases of attentional contagion, which Davies distinguishes from non-attentional contagion. In both the attentional and non-attentional cases, the transmission of emotion occurs via unconscious processes and is involuntary, but in the non-attentional case, the subject's attention is not on the source of the emotion. In the attentional case, the subject's attention is focused on the source of his emotion; nevertheless, he is unaware that contagion is occurring.<sup>28</sup>

The main processes involved in contagion are motor mimicry and the activation and feedback it generates.<sup>29</sup> Initiated by direct sensory perception, these processes do not involve the imagination, nor are they based on any cognitive evaluation or complex appraisal. Thus emotional contagion is a bottom-up process that operates much like a form of perception. We encounter another person, automatically react to the other's expressions of emotion through involuntary imitation, and end up experiencing the same emotion ourselves.

Due to its structure, contagion is probably more likely to yield affective matching than most attempts at empathy,<sup>30</sup> which may explain why it is so often conflated with or mistaken for empathy. Broad conceptualizations of empathy usually label emotional contagion as a sub-type since it involves an observer experiencing the same affective states as a target and is caused by the observer's perception of the target. Whatever labels one chooses, and in spite of these similarities, the process of emotional contagion

<sup>24</sup> Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson (1992: 153-4).

<sup>25</sup> Wispé (1987: 76-7).

<sup>26</sup> Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson (1994: 5).

<sup>27</sup> See Davies's essay in this collection.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> For an overview of the empirical work on emotional contagion, see Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson (1994).

<sup>30</sup> See Goldman (2006a) and his essay in this collection on the reliability of low-level processes.

differs  
oriente  
may so  
emotic  
anothe  
minim  
the em  
line.'  
inhibit  
contag  
monit

One o:  
gion is  
since i  
process  
simulat  
discuss  
there a  
oriente  
person  
imagin  
shoes p  
he call

Mar  
betwee  
like to  
feel if  
quasi-e  
overlar  
fairly u  
to ima  
very si  
situati  
circur

31 G  
zation o  
the targ  
collecti

differs substantially from the process that generates affective matching through other-oriented perspective-taking. Emotional contagion may be related to this process and may sometimes precipitate it, but when we 'catch' the emotions of the other through emotional contagion, the emotions are not experienced imaginatively or in relation to another; we experience them as our own. This is a crucial point that is too often minimized or ignored. Even though it originates in another person outside of the self, the emotion resulting from emotional contagion is not vicarious and, as such, is not 'off line.' This means that emotional contagion will not in and of itself involve any inhibition of behavior. If I contract fear from another individual through emotional contagion, I will act on the basis of that fear, as long as nothing else causes me to monitor and modulate my experience.

## 1.2 Self-Oriented Perspective-Taking

One of the key differences between emotional contagion and empathy is that contagion is a direct, automatic, unmediated process. Empathy is never fully unmediated since it requires perspective-taking. Roughly, perspective-taking is an imaginative process through which one constructs another person's subjective experience by simulating the experience of being in the other's situation. Although many researchers discuss only a single form of perspective-taking, which can be more or less successful, there are at least two appreciably different forms. One is self-oriented and one is other-oriented. In self-oriented perspective-taking, a person represents herself in another person's situation. Thus if I engage in self-oriented perspective-taking with you, I imagine what it's like for me to be in your situation. Peter Goldie refers to this as 'in his shoes perspective shifting,' which he distinguishes from what I'm calling empathy and he calls 'empathetic perspective shifting.'

Many conceptualize empathy in terms of perspective-taking yet fail to distinguish between the self- and other-oriented varieties. We are told to treat others as *we* would like to be treated and that we are empathetic when we try to imagine how *we* would feel if in the other's situation. Although self-oriented perspective-taking can lead to quasi-empathic experiences, this happens only in cases where there is a great deal of overlap between self and other or where the situation is the type that would lead to a fairly universal response. For example, if Dick is being chased by a lion and Jane decides to imagine that she is being chased by a lion, Jane is likely to end up with the same or very similar experiences. However, as Peter Goldie has argued, many, if not most, situations are more complex than this, and one individual's response to a set of circumstances is rarely a reliable indicator of what another's will be.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Goldie argues that in most cases, in order to adopt another's perspective, one must bring a characterization of the target individual to bear on her imaginative process, a characterization encompassing facts about the target's character, emotions, moods, dispositional tendencies, and life experiences (1999, 2000, and this collection).



X In other-oriented perspective-taking, a person represents the other's situation from the other person's point of view and thus attempts to simulate the target's individual's experiences as though she were the target individual. Thus I imagine that I am you in your situation, which is to say I attempt to simulate your experiences from your point of view. Making this distinction may strike some as splitting hairs, but other-oriented perspective-taking is a different type of process than self-oriented perspective-taking, and the difference is not purely conceptual.<sup>32</sup> Empirical studies have shown that other-oriented perspective-taking requires greater mental flexibility and emotional regulation and often has different effects than self-oriented perspective-taking.<sup>33</sup> In addition, recent developments in cognitive neuroscience indicate that the neural implementation of other-oriented perspective-taking differs from that of self-oriented perspective-taking.<sup>34</sup>

Our default mode of mentalizing (i.e. attempting to understand and predict others' mental states) is self-oriented perspective-taking.<sup>35</sup> Thus, in anticipating another's psychological states or behavior, we typically imagine *ourselves* in the other's circumstances. Our engagement with the other, in this case, focuses on the other's external situation, yet we are the ones in the situation.

I propose that we conceptualize empathy so as to exclude processes that involve self-oriented perspective-taking, unless it is combined with other-oriented perspective-taking.<sup>36</sup> There are a number of reasons for this, not least of which is that self-oriented perspective-taking is associated with a number of psychological phenomena that are precisely the kinds of phenomena that should be distinguished from genuine empathy, including errors in prediction, misattributions, and personal distress.<sup>37</sup>

Our natural tendency is to assume greater similarity between self and other than typically exists, especially when we attempt to imagine how the other is feeling or what she is thinking; we are naturally subject to egocentric bias. For example, people often reason and behave as though others have the same knowledge that they themselves

<sup>32</sup> In his essay in this collection, Peter Goldie highlights the differences between self- and other-oriented perspective-taking at the conceptual level, and ultimately concludes that empathy conceived of in terms of other-oriented perspective-taking is conceptually problematic. Although I do not share his conclusion regarding the impossibility of other-oriented perspective-taking, his discussion of the differences between these two modes of perspective-taking both here and elsewhere (2000) shows why and how we must distinguish between them.

<sup>33</sup> Batson, Sager, et al. (1997); Batson, Lishner, et al. (2003); Decety & Sommerville (2003); Decety (2006b).

<sup>34</sup> Ruby & Decety (2001, 2004); Jackson, Brunet, et al. (2006).

<sup>35</sup> Keysar, Linn, & Barr (2003); Royzman, Cassidy, & Baron (2003); Jackson, Meltzoff, & Decety (2006b); Goldman (2006a).

<sup>36</sup> I suspect that in some cases, we go back and forth between self- and other-oriented perspective-taking. The trick is not to get stuck for long in the self-oriented phase, lest we fall into focusing solely on ourselves and our own experiences.

<sup>37</sup> For a useful discussion of the empirical literature on egocentric bias and prediction error and a theoretical explanation in relation to re-enactive empathy and high level simulation (or mindreading), see Goldman (2006a).

have ev  
similari  
think t  
Psychol  
commo  
Hodges  
perspect  
given sit  
our own  
difficulty  
simulatio  
in a fine

Consi  
people a  
rejuvena  
period o  
anxiety.

Suppo  
that she's  
been like  
and calm.  
upset, and

Suppos  
processes  
unhappy .  
felt great,  
works as a  
a week, ar  
combined  
thrilled to  
and wondr

Since this  
first mispr  
simplistic,  
that differe  
preferences

"Rational  
different fro

have even when they know that a given other is very different.<sup>38</sup> The assumption of similarity leads people to conclude that others will feel the same way that they feel, think the same way that they think, and want the same things that they want. Psychologists refer to such conclusions as false consensus effects and explain that they commonly lead to prediction errors regarding others' mental states and behavior. Sara Hodges and Daniel Wegner argue that this occurs due to a failure to suppress one's self-perspective.<sup>39</sup> In anticipating and imagining what another's experience will be in a given situation, many of us are unable to move beyond own perspective and so rely on our own imagined experiences to formulate conclusions about the other. We have difficulty not allowing our own beliefs, values, and occurrent states to influence our simulation, which is why we regularly fail to understand others or to understand them in a fine-grained way.<sup>40</sup>

Consider the following simple example. Generally speaking, we can say that most people are either introverted or extroverted. Introverts thrive on solitude and find it rejuvenating. Extroverts, on the other hand, dislike being alone for more than a short period of time. For them, solitude generates boredom, loneliness, and sometimes anxiety.

Suppose that I'm an introvert and my sister Bettie is an extrovert. If Bettie tells me that she's been spending lots of time alone lately and I attempt to imagine what this has been like *for her* by imagining what it would be like *for me*, I'll imagine feeling relaxed and calm. But Bettie won't have been feeling these things. She will have been anxious, upset, and longing for company.

Suppose as we're talking, it becomes clear to me (perhaps through bottom-up processes such as emotional contagion, which I then reflect upon) that Bettie is unhappy and on edge. As I was imagining how I would feel in Bettie's situation, I felt great, so now I'm confused. Normally Bettie is around people all the time. She works as a clinical professor four days a week, practices as a physician's assistant one day a week, and lives with a husband, three kids, three Labradors, and a cat. My simulation, combined with my reflections upon on it, makes me unable to figure out why she isn't thrilled to have the down time. I start to get worried that maybe something is wrong and wonder why she won't tell me. All that is wrong is that she dislikes being alone. Since this is not something I dislike, my self-oriented perspective-taking leads me to first mispredict and then misunderstand her experience. Although this example is simplistic, increasing its complexity to make it more realistic will only further prove that differences between Bettie's and my respective personality characteristics and preferences have important effects on the ways we each respond to various situations.

Rationally and theoretically, most of us understand that most people are very different from us, and yet we make these mistakes all the time. We don't just fail to

<sup>38</sup> Keysar, Lin, & Barr (2003).

<sup>39</sup> Hodges & Wegner (1997).

<sup>40</sup> Dunning, Griffin, Milojkovic, & Ross (1990). See also, Goldman (2006a).

understand others' subjective experiences; we often assume that we do understand them, which leads to a new set of problems. I contend that self-oriented perspective-taking leads to a type of pseudo-empathy since people often mistakenly believe that it provides them with access to the other's point of view when it does not. Most of us have had the experience of disclosing something to a friend, having her respond, 'I know just how you're feeling,' and then realizing within moments that she does not. It's not that she hasn't been perspective-taking; she has. But the perspective has been *her own*; only the circumstances are *ours*. Thus our friend's perspective-taking has focused on her, not on us. While this can be useful for many reasons, it does not yield empathy. One of the benefits of drawing attention to the distinction between self-oriented and other-oriented perspective-taking is that perhaps some of us will begin to stop assuming that we 'get' the other's experience, when we do not. Regardless of whether or not one accepts the conceptualization of empathy I'm proposing, it is critical to appreciate the differences between these two types of perspective-taking.

Another important distinguishing feature of self-oriented perspective-taking is its relationship to personal distress. Personal distress—also sometimes referred to as emotional distress or contagious distress—occurs when one observes another person in distress and reacts by becoming distressed himself. In cases of empathetic distress, the observer's experience of negatively valenced affective arousal is vicarious; that is, it is represented as a simulation. Therefore, in spite of feeling distressed, the empathizer's focus stays on the other. In cases of personal distress, however, the observer's focus is on his own distress and how to alleviate it. Psychologists characterize this response as a type of over-arousal since the observer's distress becomes overwhelming and aversive.<sup>41</sup> Individuals who experience personal distress typically engage in self-directed behaviors designed to alleviate their own discomfort. For example, an individual experiencing personal distress will often try to escape from the situation that triggered his distress regardless of what this will mean for the target individual whose distress initially caused the observer's distress. In some contexts, a person experiencing personal distress will display pro-social behavior but generally only when there is no alternative method of eliminating his discomfort.<sup>42</sup>

Conceptually, it makes sense that self-oriented perspective-taking is more likely to lead to personal distress. Imagining what it would be like *for me* to be in the awful situation you're experiencing makes it harder for me to modulate my emotions. I lose track of the fact that the experiences are actually yours and not mine and end up feeling so upset that I become completely focused on my own pain and what I can do to alleviate it. My emotional responses to imagined scenarios involving me *as me* lead to greater emotional arousal in general. These effects are decreased in other-oriented

<sup>41</sup> Eisenberg & Strayer (1987); Eisenberg (2000); Hoffman (2000); Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade (1987).

<sup>42</sup> Batson, Early, & Salvarini (1997); Batson, Duncan, et al. (1981); Batson (1991); Batson, Sager, et al. (1997); Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade (1987); Decety & Lamm (2009).

perspect  
me to ac

To su:  
ings of t  
imagine  
predictio  
makes us  
solely on  
perspecti  
someone  
in many:  
in purely  
desire to  
be the p  
Neverthe  
one cent  
both our

1.1

Other-or.  
It therefo  
on egocer  
and chara  
and chara  
target's pe  
rather tha

To stay  
tive-takin,  
our level  
at least so  
Fulfilling  
different fi  
reconstruc  
one's fam  
empathize  
important

<sup>43</sup> Decety  
Lamm, Mel  
<sup>44</sup> Goldie

perspective-taking, because I suppress my self-perspective, which makes it possible for me to accurately represent the distressing emotions *as the other's*.

To summarize, personal distress, false consensus effects, and general misunderstandings of the other are all associated with self-oriented perspective-taking. When we imagine ourselves in another person's situation, it frequently results in inaccurate predictions and failed simulations of the other's thoughts, feelings, and desires. It also makes us more likely to become emotionally over-aroused and, consequently, focused solely on our own experiences. To be clear, I do not wish to suggest that self-oriented perspective-taking is a bad thing or that it never improves our understanding of someone, neither of which is true. Experiencing the other as a version of ourselves in many situations is a good thing, and it's usually far better than experiencing the other in purely instrumental terms. Very often it's motivated by a concern for the other and a desire to understand his experiences, both of which tend to be good things. It may also be the path by which we learn to engage in other oriented perspective-taking. Nevertheless, it is a significantly different mode of intersubjective engagement than one centered on other-oriented perspective-taking. We must recognize this and alter both our descriptive and normative theories accordingly.

### 1.3 Other-Oriented Perspective-Taking

Other-oriented perspective-taking is, as the name suggests, oriented toward the other. It therefore avoids false consensus effects, personal distress, and prediction errors based on egocentric biases. We stay focused within our simulation on the other's experiences and characteristics rather than reverting to imagining based on our own experiences and characteristics. In other-oriented perspective-taking, when I successfully adopt the target's perspective, I imagine being the target undergoing the target's experiences rather than imagining being myself undergoing the target's experiences.

To stay focused on the other and move us beyond our own experiences, perspective-taking requires mental flexibility and relies on regulatory mechanisms to modulate our level of affective arousal and suppress our own perspective.<sup>43</sup> It also often requires at least some knowledge of the target, though how much depends on the context.<sup>44</sup> Fulfilling these conditions is not easy, particularly when the other is someone very different from ourselves, since the more unlike a target we are, the more difficult it is to reconstruct her subjective experiences. As a result, empathy is subject to biases based on one's familiarity and identification with a target individual; we are more likely to empathize with those we know well and whom we judge to be like ourselves in some important respect. Not surprisingly, we're also more likely to succeed in our attempts

<sup>43</sup> Decety & Sommerville (2003); Decety & Jackson (2004); Decety & Hodges (2006); Goldman (2006a); Lamm, Meltzoff, & Decety (2009); and Decety & Meltzoff (this collection).

<sup>44</sup> Goldie (1999, 2000, and this collection).

to adopt their perspectives.<sup>45</sup> In order to represent the situation and experiences of those we know less well and with whom we fail to identify, we must work harder, and even then, we will often be unable to simulate their situated psychological states.<sup>46</sup>

The effort and regulation involved in other-oriented perspective-taking suggests that empathy is a motivated and controlled process, which is neither automatic nor involuntary and demands that the observer attend to relevant differences between self and other.<sup>47</sup> This makes it a top-down process, that is, one that must be initiated by the agent and generated from within, though it is likely that bottom-up processes such as emotional contagion may interact with this process, providing influential feedback that alters it in important ways.<sup>48</sup>

The differences between perspective-taking oriented toward the self and that oriented toward the other have received too little attention in philosophical discussions of empathy and of intersubjective engagement more generally;<sup>49</sup> however, recent developments in cognitive neuroscience and philosophy of mind are drawing attention to the existence and significance of these differences.<sup>50</sup> Jean Decety and his collaborators have conducted several experiments using *fMRI* to examine the brain activity associated with various perspective-taking tasks and have found that the neurological underpinning of other-oriented perspective-taking differs from that of self-oriented perspective-taking.<sup>51</sup> In one such study, Decety and Jessica Sommerville found specific activation of the frontopolar cortex, which is chiefly involved with inhibitory and regulating processes, when subjects were asked to adopt the subjective perspective of another individual when contrasted with taking a self-perspective in the same tasks.<sup>52</sup> Related experiments revealed that when subjects were asked to adopt another person's

<sup>45</sup> Hoffman (2000); Eisenberg (2000); Batson, Duncan et al. (1981).

<sup>46</sup> Decety & Jackson (2004); Lamm, Meltzoff, & Decety (2008).

<sup>47</sup> Goldie (1999, 2000, and this collection); Goldman (2006a, and this collection); Batson, Lishner, et al. (2003); Decety & Lamm (2009); Decety & Meltzoff (this collection); Hodges & Wegner (1997).

<sup>48</sup> Questions remain about the exact relationship between bottom-up processes such as emotional contagion and mirroring and top-down processes such as other-oriented perspective-taking. There is evidence to suggest a correlation between empathy scores and mirror activity (Pfeifer, Iacoboni, et al., (2008); Gazzola et al., (2006)). Other evidence, however, suggests that those highly susceptible to emotional contagion are less capable of empathy. It seems likely that bottom-up processes may help to activate an empathy response and may provide important experiential information about a target's affective state, generating a feedback loop, but at this point it is not entirely clear how these processes interact. In addition, recent research on mirroring and the mirror system has led some to conclude that mirror neurons are more complex and more widely distributed than was initially believed and that some mirror responses involve high-level processes (Iacoboni 2008, and this collection). Needless to say, the story regarding mirroring is far from complete.

<sup>49</sup> Discussions of intersubjectivity within Continental philosophy are typically more careful about the differences between self and others, but the concept of empathy does not figure as prominently in such discussions.

<sup>50</sup> Decety (2007); Decety & Chaminade (2003); Decety & Grèzes (2006); Decety & Hodges (2006); Decety & Jackson (2006); Decety & Sommerville (2003); Iacoboni (2008); Goldie (1999, 2000, and this collection); Goldman (2006a, and this collection); Hoffman (2000).

<sup>51</sup> Decety & Hodges (2006); Decety & Grèzes (2006); Decety & Jackson (2006); Ruby & Decety (2001, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Decety & Sommerville (2003).

perspective to e  
their own persp

It is believed  
oriented persp  
tine our own  
modulation of  
perspective-tak  
self-oriented pe

As scientists  
modes of inters  
sentations, imit  
understanding  
which will imp  
level. Although  
that the differe  
important.

#### 1.4 Se

So far I have di  
of the three p  
Affective match  
thy. It also req  
oriented perspe  
for empathy.

It is possible  
perspective-taking  
self-other diffe  
others. One ca  
same affects as  
case of self-ori  
feelings, and c  
desires, feeling  
that the other  
ends up experi  
discussed outs  
importance of

<sup>53</sup> Ruby & De  
Decety & Meltzo

<sup>54</sup> Decety & H

<sup>55</sup> Batson (199

perspective to evaluate the other's beliefs or imagine the other's feelings as compared to their own perspective, the right inferior parietal cortex was involved.<sup>53</sup>

It is believed that the inhibitory and regulatory mechanisms that subserve other-oriented perspective-taking enable us to suppress our self-perspective and thus quarantine our own preferences, values, and beliefs.<sup>54</sup> They are also associated with the modulation of affective arousal, which provides an explanation for why other-oriented perspective-taking is much less likely to cause aversive arousal and personal distress than self-oriented perspective-taking.<sup>55</sup>

As scientists continue to investigate the neurophysiological substrates of various modes of intersubjective engagement and the neural implementation of shared representations, imitation, and mirroring behaviors, we will be able to increase further our understanding of how empathy and related processes work at the sub-personal level, which will improve our concepts and theorizing about these processes at the personal level. Although we have much to learn, the empirical evidence already makes it clear that the differences between various forms of perspective-taking are measurable and important.

#### 1.4 Self-Other Differentiation

So far I have discussed affective matching and other-oriented perspective-taking—two of the three primary features of empathy under my proposed conceptualization. Affective matching and other-oriented perspective-taking are not sufficient for empathy. It also requires clear self-other differentiation, which is usually present in other-oriented perspective-taking but not always. Clear self-other differentiation is essential for empathy.

It is possible to experience affective matching and succeed in other-oriented perspective-taking and still not be empathizing. This happens when there is insufficient self-other differentiation due to a breakdown of the boundaries between the self and others. One can successfully represent a target's situation and experiences and have the same affects as the target while failing to preserve a separate sense of self. Unlike in the case of self-oriented perspective-taking, where one projects one's own thoughts, feelings, and desires onto the other, in this case the observer introjects the other's desires, feelings, and thoughts, substituting them for his own. The observer recognizes that the other is a different person and successfully adopts the other's perspective but winds up experiencing the other's perspective as his own. These sorts of cases are rarely discussed outside of clinical psychology but are not uncommon and point to the importance of self-other differentiation, not only to prevent ourselves from losing

<sup>53</sup> Ruby & Decety (2001, 2004); Jackson, Meltzoff, & Decety (2005, 2006); Lamm, Batson, et al. (2007); Decety & Meltzoff (this collection).

<sup>54</sup> Decety & Hodges (2006); Decety & Jackson (2006); Goldman (2006a, and this collection).

<sup>55</sup> Batson (1991); Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade (1987); Batson, Lishner, et al. (2003).

sight of the other as an other, but also to prevent us from losing our awareness of our own selves as separate agents.

When we lack this awareness, we lack clear self-other differentiation, which in this case results in a kind of fusion or enmeshment. As Michael Stocker and Elizabeth Hegeman explain, when individuals are enmeshed, 'boundaries between them are too porous or nonexistent, each is too caught up in the life of the other, too involved and overly concerned with that person.'<sup>56</sup>

In cases of psychological engagement with clear self-other differentiation, one keeps separate one's awareness of oneself and one's own experiences from one's representations of the other and the other's experiences—in both directions. One thus remains aware of the fact that the other is a separate person and that the other has his own unique thoughts, feelings, desires, and characteristics. This enables deep engagement with the other while preventing one from losing sight of where the self ends and the other begins and where the other ends and the self begins. Without clear self-other differentiation, we are almost certain to fail in our attempts to empathize. We either lose our sense of self and become enmeshed or, more often, we let our imaginative process become contaminated by our self-perspective and thus end up engaged in a simulation that fails to replicate the experience of the other. Self-other differentiation allows for the optimal level of distance from the other for successful empathy. We are neither fused nor detached. We relate to the other as an other but share in the other's experience in a way that bridges but does not eliminate the gap between our experiences.<sup>57</sup>

Martin Hoffman argues that all mature empathizers possess clear self-other differentiation, which means that they have, 'a cognitive sense of themselves as separate physical entities with independent internal states, personal identities, and lives beyond the situation and can distinguish what happens to others from what happens to themselves.'<sup>58</sup> Hoffman makes self-other differentiation a defining element of the highest stage of empathic arousal in his broad model of empathy. Although he conceptualizes empathy more broadly than I do, he argues that self-other differentiation makes a critical difference to the quality of engagement and that the highest and most sophisticated level of empathy differs from the others in its effects because it involves clear self-other differentiation.

<sup>56</sup> Stocker & Hegeman (1996: 116).

<sup>57</sup> Peter Goldie (2000, 2002a) argues that it is possible to engage the other as an other, attending to her status as a subject from a third-person perspective without doing so impersonally, which provides an alternative to empathy based on other-oriented perspective-taking, or what he labels 'perspective-shifting.' In his essay in this collection, Goldie argues that empathy understood as perspective shifting 'is conceptually unable to operate with the appropriately *full-blooded notion of first-personal agency* that is involved in deliberation.' While I acknowledge that empathy is difficult in many cases, I consider the obstacles to it to be contingent and believe that there is something valuable in attempting to empathize in this way, even if the attempt falls short.

<sup>58</sup> Hoffman (2000: 63).

I maintain that clear self-other differentiation is that understanding its role in the process of empathy. It is from related psychological processes that we understand another's affect in the absence of direct experience. It is without clear self-other differentiation that we understand other-oriented perspective-taking, which provides a different perspective on experience and leads to personal growth.

For those wishing to maintain clear self-other differentiation, the process of self-other differentiation provides a well-labeled taxonomy of empathy. Emphasizing the difference in taxonomy that can be used to describe empathy that use different labels, this section of this essay.

## 1.5 Empathy as

Now that I have explained the three necessary features, I will describe a form of experiential understanding of other-oriented perspective-taking. It is for this process I've described in my

What does it mean to say that it is a 'form of understanding of another person' (though need not) subsequent actions of the observer. To say that it is an experience for the observer of a target; and (though need not) actions of causes and effects.

It differentiates it from most scientific, mechanistic, functional, dynamic, or explicitly, a representation of experiences. While it is not, in the empathetic process

<sup>59</sup> Alvin Goldman's book *Simulacra* plays a role in how we understand others' minds. He shows the concept of empathy as an understanding of other minds, notably those within the philosophy of mind. We cannot do without it if we have participated in several lives.

I maintain that clear self–other differentiation is crucial for successful empathy and that understanding its role in empathy is the key to understanding how empathy differs from related psychological processes that should be distinguished from it. Sharing another’s affect in the absence of self–other differentiation provides minimal connection to or understanding of the other or his experience. Taking up one’s perspective without clear self–other differentiation can result in enmeshment or in self-oriented perspective-taking, which prevents one from successfully representing the other’s experience and leads to personal distress, false consensus effects, and prediction errors.

For those wishing to maintain a broad conceptualization of empathy, clear self–other differentiation provides a way to distinguish among the various processes that get labeled empathy. Emphasizing its role may be the first step toward a systematic taxonomy that can be used to organize and operationalize different accounts of empathy that use different labels to refer to the processes enumerated in the opening section of this essay.

### 1.5 Empathy as Experiential Understanding

Now that I have explained my conceptualization of empathy and what I take to be its three necessary features, I would like to move on to briefly consider its importance as a form of experiential understanding. Only empathy that combines affective matching, other-oriented perspective-taking, and self–other differentiation provides experiential understanding. It is for this reason that I propose restricting the term empathy to the process I’ve described in my essay.

What does it mean to say that empathy is a form of experiential understanding? To say that it is a ‘form of understanding’ is to say that it provides an observer with knowledge of another person’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior—knowledge that may (though need not) subsequently figure into the explanations, predictions, and even the actions of the observer. To say that empathy is ‘experiential’ is to say (1) that it is itself an experience for the observer; (2) that it is a representation of, among other things, the experience of a target; and (3) that it involves representations that are not representations of causes and effects. This last sense in which empathy is ‘experiential’ differentiates it from most scientific explanations. Whether a scientific explanation is mechanistic, functional, dynamical, teleological, or genetic, it is very often, implicitly or explicitly, a representation of causes and effects. Empathy, in contrast, is a representation of experiences. While those experiences may very well be causes or effects, they are not, in the empathetic process, represented as such.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Alvin Goldman’s book *Simulating Minds* (2006a) argues that re-enactive empathy plays a fundamental role in how we understand others’ mental states. Karsten Stueber’s book *Rediscovering Empathy* (2006) explores how the concept of empathy as an epistemological tool has been viewed in a series of historical debates (most notably those within the philosophy of social science and hermeneutics) and argues that if we are to understand other minds, we cannot do without it. Moreover Goldman and Stueber are only two among many thinkers who have participated in several longstanding debates within philosophy and psychology about the extent to



Another way of approaching the same idea is to point out that, while all scientific theories involve representations from a third-person point of view, empathy involves representations from a first-person point of view. Through empathy, we represent the other's experience by replicating that experience. Rather than attempt to apprehend the other's experience from an objective perspective, we attempt to share the other's perspective. It is tempting to conclude from this that, while the scientific study of empathy is no less third-person than the study of any other scientific topic, empathy itself has no place within the methods of science, even broadly construed. I would like to recommend that we resist this conclusion, and regard empathy as one source of data among many. Admittedly, it may not be a very reliable source. But it may provide what no third-person form of scientific understanding can: understanding of another person from the 'inside.' As Gilbert Ryle explained, the longstanding view in Western thought has been that, 'the mind is its own place and in his inner life each of us lives the life of a ghostly Robinson Crusoe.'<sup>60</sup> I submit that, by providing us with an experiential understanding of other people, however imperfect, empathy promises to rescue us from the island of such a ghostly existence.<sup>61</sup>

which empathy is or provides understanding. Some of these are discussed in the introduction to this collection. Although these debates about different modes of understanding are relevant to my point here, they are beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>60</sup> Ryle (1949).

<sup>61</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the College of the Holy Cross at the conference 'Understanding Other Minds and Moral Agency,' Cal State Fullerton at 'Empathy: An International Interdisciplinary Conference,' and in my Spring 2008 seminar on film and emotion. I would like to thank the audience members and conference participants who attended these presentations and my seminar students for very helpful comments and discussion. I am also grateful for feedback I received from Heather Battaly, Bryon Cunningham, Jean Decety, Toby De Marco, Marco Iacoboni, Brian Leslie, Rudolf Makkreel, Bertram Malle, Maura Priest, Jonevin Sabado, Michael Stolze, Karsten Stueber, two anonymous readers from Oxford University Press, and especially Peter Goldie and Ryan Nichols.