

**EXPANSIVE EMPATHY: NORMATIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE CONSIDERATIONS  
FOR THE CULTIVATION OF EMPATHY**

by

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## **Abstract**

My aim is to understand what it means when we ask people to have more empathy. ‘More’ refers to an increment, but what this increment is has yet to be specified. To some people it may be sufficient to be more empathetic to their family and friends. To others, more empathy means connecting and understanding strangers or people who are different from ourselves.

Underpinning these tendencies are biases that draw us towards those individuals with whom we can easily identify or are part of the same in-group. This is something to consider when choosing instruments to measure empathy, most of which are self-reported measures. There are two new scales that seem to capture the role of identity and its relationship to empathy in different but important ways: The Moral Expansiveness Scale (Crimston et al., 2016) and the Empathy Gradient Questionnaire (Hollar, 2017). This is an emerging area of research that uses scales that systematize the closeness of an individual (target of empathy) to the empathizer. Importantly, these discussions of what is essentially empathy enhancement inevitably leads to normative questions such as: ‘What is an appropriate level of empathy?’ or more generally ‘What is an appropriate amount of moral concern?’ In response, I frame the normative side of the discussion within a virtue ethics perspective to shift the focus away from ‘how much’ empathy to the quality of empathy. The question of an ideal is at the heart of a virtue ethics approach: how to navigate one’s moral circle in the healthiest way that encourages flourishing for ourselves and the objects of our moral concern. Continuing to understand and promote empathy means we must also understand what it means to be more or less empathetic.

## **Lay Summary**

What do we mean when we ask people to have ‘more empathy’? Empathy is defined in everyday terms as ‘walking a mile in another person’s shoes’. However, this definition does not make clear if ‘more empathy’ means an increase in empathy towards loved ones or, instead, an expansion of empathy to people who are distant and perhaps very different from ourselves. I believe this lack of distinction is affecting the way we collect information with empathy questionnaires. The questionnaires should be specific and consistent when identifying the target of empathy. Additionally, this lack of specificity in the definition of empathy brings up important questions in regards to promoting empathy for moral or ethical reasons. It is better to assess empathy in terms of quality rather than amount.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original and unpublished work by the author, V. Hrincu.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

EGQ Empathy Gradient Questionnaire

MES Moral Expansiveness Scale

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Pour Arnaud. Merci, mon chou.

You saw the ox, but had not yet seen the sheep.

—Mencius, *The Mencius*

## 1 Introduction

There is much dissatisfaction with the placement of empathy as central to ethics and morality in regards to the expansion of the circle of moral regard (Kasperbauer, 2015; Bloom, 2017). In-groups are consistently prioritized over out-groups when given the opportunity to empathize with both (Brown, Bradley, & Lang, 2006). There are also different neural bases for empathy with in-groups and out-groups. The circle of moral regard, otherwise known as the “moral circle”, is the whole of entities we identify as worthy of our moral consideration. Empathy is regarded as an important process in which we may come to include outsiders within this circle. The call for ‘more empathy’ in modern discourse follows that such an increase will encourage people to be moral on a wider scale, and surely this must be good for everyone. The most popular instruments used for measuring empathy describe increases/decreases, which are not sensitive to the inclusion or exclusion of certain individuals in one’s moral circle. So, it is not clear what ‘more’ empathy means in this broad sense. In other words, such instruments do not systematically account for the identity of the recipient of empathy. The empirical study of empathy primarily consists of tools which by their very nature neglect the expansive properties of empathy on the basis of individual identity. I believe this method of measuring empathy reflects the way empathy is conceived as an amount that is subsequently increased or decreased, but with no specific strategy. This is counterproductive to our understanding of other factors that affect the quality of empathy, and permeates into normative mindsets of empathy enhancement. In this case, I define ‘enhancement’ as an improvement in some performance capacity ( $t_2$ , where  $t =$  time) relative to an earlier state ( $t_1$ ).

If we are to continue promoting empathy, then we must first understand what it means to be more or less empathetic. Recent utilitarian critiques counter popular ideas of empathy as morally good by advocating for *less* empathy, due to its reasonless nature and negative implications for resource allocation. So, which is it? Less or more? I believe these are the wrong questions to ask. Instead, I will orient the normative discussion beyond the less/more dichotomy by framing it within a virtue ethics approach, whereby the goals of the virtuous person are fulfilled by empathizing *well*. New instruments have emerged which are beginning to account for the discrepancies discussed. MY AIMS ARE to do the following: 1) re-orient empathy as no less

useful to moral decision-making than reason, 2) discuss the disconnect between popular measures of empathy and the inclusion of individuals in the circle of moral regard, 3) present an emerging set of tools that focus on the importance of identity when empathizing, 4) frame empathy enhancement within a virtue ethics approach, and 5) discuss what this means in a modern context.

## **2 Empathy and identity**

Empathy is commonly regarded as a moral force, if not the moral force which may aid overcoming prejudice and apathy towards the plight of the oppressed or vulnerable. However, at the heart of this association lies disturbing paradigmatic instances which expose the ways in which the morality of empathy appears considerably limited. For example, single victims remain more salient in one's mind than statistics or large numbers of individuals, and as a result resources are disproportionately allocated. There is also neural evidence of differences in in-group/out-group dynamics. For example, when exposed to other's pain, empathy for humankind was associated with affective processes, whereas enhanced empathy and altruism for one's racial in-group was associated with cognitive processes in African American participants (Mathur, Harada, Lipke, & Chiao, 2010). Neural responses were found in the MPFC area of the brain which predicts group member empathy (ibid). It is one of my assumptions that the greater good is something that all moral and ethical frameworks presuppose, in one form or another. Empathizing with certain individuals presented in a particular way has the potential to distract us from generalized notions of what society might call "the greater good". Thus, this complicates empathy's role in moral practice when its processes lead to results that counter idealistic moral intuitions, and further the divide between individuals whose struggles are perceived as close or far away from ourselves.

The need to expand one's moral circle depends on one's current level of empathy expansiveness. If one's moral circle is very shriveled, then it is foreseeable how expanding it may increase one's capacity for empathy. This is the easy first step. However, if one's moral circle is already quite expansive, the question becomes more complicated. It becomes a matter of appropriateness: what

is an appropriate level of moral concern? The word ‘moral’ is already concerned with normative standards (ie. being in the realm of rightness or wrongness). The word ‘appropriate’ is a further narrowing of what these normative standards are meant to represent. While normative standards indicate a kind of universalization, empathy is not a prescription so easily standardized. Even genuine, full-fledged instances of empathy cannot all be treated equally. Allow me to put forth an example of very different, but genuine instances of empathy. Consider the following three individuals: 1) a mother of three, 2) a woman without kids, and 3) a man. Now imagine that all three experience empathy upon seeing a very pregnant lady board a bus with groceries in both hands. Each of the three witnesses will experience empathy differently towards the pregnant lady. The mother is surely more aware of the challenges and discomfort of late-term pregnancy than a woman without kids, and certainly more than a man. The woman without kids, although never having been pregnant herself, knows that pregnancy is a possibility in her future, and envisions herself in the same position. The man may empathize by comparing the pregnant lady’s body language and facial expressions to feelings and experiences of discomfort he has personally experienced in the past. He may recall these experiences quite vividly and they may even be very recent. Or perhaps his wife was pregnant, and seeing this lady reminds him of the pain he witnessed firsthand. However, not only has the man never experienced pregnancy, it is a state of being which he can never conceivably or literally experience in his entire life. Such are the real-world challenges to empathy that may be difficult to overcome by an imaginative shift in perspective. Indeed, these limitations need not even exist in reality. One only needs to believe it impossible that they may ever have certain experiences. Does believing that one will never have experiences of others dull one’s sensibilities towards them? It is not a character fault that the man in this example will never truly understand what it is like to be pregnant, neither is his empathy in some way lesser than the other two women. But it is, in some way, different. One might say that the foundation for empathy in the mother is based on something much more affective or visceral, because of her past experiences. On the other end, the man may need to invoke empathy more heavily oriented in perspective-taking. Given this, an account of individual empathy seems intractable if kept separate from notions of self-identity.

As the aforementioned example illustrates, empathy is inherently an intersubjective process, how one self-identifies is relative to the other. And vice versa: our perception of the other is based on

how their traits reflect against our own. In order for myself to identify an in/out-group member, I must necessarily compare observations and knowledge about the other against salient or core ideas regarding my own identity. These boundaries may alter depending on the context. There is evidence that the identity of others may affect how and if we empathize with them. While investigating empathy expansiveness between different political ideologies, Waytz, Iyer, Young, and Graham (2016) adjusted the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983) into a friends or family oriented condition. They re-worded the empathic concern scale to include items that were directed to friends or family, respectively. For example: “I often have tender, concerned feelings for my friends who are less fortunate than me” (Waytz et al., 2016). They found that while liberals and conservatives do not differ significantly in their empathy towards family, liberalism was associated with greater empathy towards individuals outside the family (ie. friends). Waytz et al. (2016) also had participants complete the Schwartz Values Inventory, and found conservatism to be negatively correlated with universalism of values, such as equality for all. The specific identity of “the other” is associated with varying levels of empathy. The identity of an individual in combination with other perceived motivations may have even more subtle influences on triggers for empathy. Lee, Winterich, and Ross (2014) found that empathy depended on perceived responsibility of the target individual. Struggling individuals who were perceived to have low responsibility towards their situation were given more donations, whereas the opposite occurred towards individuals perceived to have high responsibility (ibid). Empathy seemed to mediate donations via moral identity when responsibility of the recipients was low, and justice seemed to mediate donations via moral identity when responsibility of the recipients was high (Lee et al., 2014).

There are certainly more fundamental criteria that we use to assess the moral standing of another entity. To have moral standing means that one can be morally wronged (Goodwin, 2015). Gray, Gray and Wegner (2007) identified two dimensions that affect our perceptions of other’s minds, and hence, their moral standing: 1) agency, and 2) psychological patiency, or one’s capacity for hedonic experience (ibid). The former is related to notions of morally relevant personal responsibility (ie. murder). The latter is associated with preventing harm to individuals with this capacity. Both of these dimensions have been supported by recent research on the moral standing of non-human entities (reviewed in Goodwin, 2015). A third dimension, harmfulness of the



entity, has also been linked to judgments of moral standing (Piazza, Landy, & Goodwin, 2014). Goodwin (2015) speculates as to whether or not this criterion is appropriately applied to non-human entities, and this is largely due to the question of moral responsibility.

One's personal moral identity may also play a role in very context-specific situations of empathy. Moral identity, also known as internalization, is defined as "the extent to which moral traits (e.g., fair, just, kind, compassionate) are experienced as a central part of one's overall self-concept" (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Central to the findings of Lee et al. (2014) is the interaction between moral identity and personal responsibility. Individuals who were perceived as having low responsibility for their plight received more donations from donors with a higher moral identity than those with lower moral identity (ibid). For individuals who were perceived as having high responsibility, donors with higher moral identity actually gave less. Interestingly, measures of personal responsibility no longer affected donation amount if the moral failings of the donor were made salient (Lee et al., 2014). This last finding highlights how the unique challenges in the lives of different people somehow lead to a common ground. We may see how feelings of empathy which are interrupted by principle may be reinstated by acknowledging one's own humanity.

In this sense, moral identity is also relevant to the expanse of empathy. If we may find common ground, then we may include a more seemingly diverse array of entities within our circle of moral regard. In a series of studies, Reed and Aquino (2003) measured the extent in which the strength of one's moral identity (high vs. low) was associated with the expansiveness of one's circle of moral regard. Using their own instrument of moral identity (the Self-Importance of Moral Identity Scale; Aquino & Reed, 2002) they found that a higher moral identity was associated with stronger concern for diverse out-groups, indicating a more expansive circle of moral regard compared to those with lower moral identity. Reed and Aquino (2003) also identified how different ways of framing the self in relation to others may create opposing forces in moral identity and salient group identity (ie. nationalism), where the former tends to encourage the inclusion of out-groups and the latter is associated with prioritizing one's in-group.

Situations or disorders where empathy is absent or limited in some specific way is also used to show the importance of empathy in encouraging moral behavior. In competitive situations, some authors discuss the rise of *schadenfreude*, an emotion that is often considered the opposite of empathy: taking pleasure at the expense of another. In competition, empathy is not employed, but this type of identity is arbitrary in nature based on sports team affiliation or the like.

### **3 What empathy is(n't)**

It is tirelessly pointed out by many, and now myself, that empathy is a concept with numerous definitions and many different forms of “things called empathy”. Empathy’s etymological roots began from the German *Einfühlung* introduced by Robert Vischer in 1873 (reviewed in Duan & Hill, 1996). Tichener (1909) translated this into the word ‘empathy’, defined as an iterative process of projection and imitation. Colloquially, we refer to empathy as the capacity to walk in another’s shoes, to be affected by and experience in congruence the emotions of another. A formal version of our common understanding of empathy is the following: “emotional arousal that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another’s affective state; moreover, it is similar to, or congruent with, the feeling of other people” (Eisenberg, Shea, Carlo, & Knight, 1991).

Confusion surrounding empathy’s definition is compounded by its being mistaken as interchangeable with compassion or sympathy. Sympathy is an immediate “feeling with” or care for the suffering of someone else, and does not require emotional congruency whereas empathy does (Decety & Michalska, 2010). Empathy is also a more imaginative and effortful experience of the other’s emotions. Compassion is the feeling of concern for others, likely corresponding with a motivational pull to help (Keltner & Goetz, 2007). One can imagine feeling concern for someone without empathizing with them first, and similarly one may feel empathy without feeling concern (Goldie, 2002; Nussbaum, 2003). Because of this, some believe empathy is neither necessary nor sufficient for compassion. Neurally, the distinct effects of empathy and compassion training have been supported by monitoring the brain activity of individuals undergoing compassion or empathy training (Klimecki, Leiberg, Ricard, & Singer, 2014).

Empathy training increased negative affect and was associated with activation in brain areas such as the insula, aMCC, temporal gyrus, DLPFC, operculum and parts of the basal ganglia (ibid). Compassion training increased positive affect and was associated with brain activations in mOFC, pregenual ACC and striatum (Klimecki et al., 2014). However, it is worth noting that the compassion training followed the empathy training. Psychologically, there is evidence that empathy and concern seem to motivate different behaviors (Jordan, Amir, & Bloom, 2016).

There is also no consensus yet as to the degree in which the definition of empathy must be specified. We sometimes refer to empathy as a trait, other times an ability, or a state etc. Being a multidimensional construct, Batson (2009) has separated as many as eight distinct phenomena that we refer to as empathy. Conversely, someone like Coplan (2011) argues for a specific definition of empathy: as a complex imaginative process in which one simulates the other's perspective. Empathy is a concept that tracks natural phenomena that are psychological, physiological, phenomenological, developmental, and social. We are just as likely to describe some individuals as naturally more empathetic than others, and in the same sentence appeal to the exercise of one's 'empathic muscles'. So, what do we know about empathy? Although some conceptual differences exist in the architecture of empathy, three components consistently surface: 1) affective empathy, 2) cognitive empathy, and 3) regulatory processes (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004).

Affective empathy refers to the level of emotional arousal a person experiences upon exposure to another individual's emotional state. Generally speaking, it seems that the emotions of the target of empathy and the observer must be congruent (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). Mimicry and 'emotional contagion' are often compared to this affective component; these responses are automatic and subconsciously performed (Iacoboni, 2009). Considered a more primitive version of empathy, emotional contagion emerged from a developmental perspective: babies cry in response to the cries of other babies (Sagi & Hoffman, 1976), and this reaction does not diminish within the first 9 months (Geangu et al., 2010). Some suppose that empathy shares an underlying process with emotional contagion, perhaps in the vein of affective empathy (Preston & De Waal, 2002; Hatfield et al., 2011). However, its susceptibility to top-down processes have led others to draw a clearer distinction between emotional contagion and the full experience of empathy, as a

connection that is neither necessary nor sufficient (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Singer & Lamm, 2009). There is also evidence for separate neuroanatomical systems mediating the processes of emotional contagion and empathy (Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz, and Perry 2009). While these distinctions might not be incompatible, it does emphasize the importance of the interplay between the affective and cognitive aspects of empathy.

Cognitive empathy is the capacity to comprehend or accommodate another's subjective perspective. This component of empathy relies on higher cognitive processing (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Decety & Moriguchi, 2007). Such processes are said to involve perspective-taking, cognitive flexibility (Eslinger, 1998), theory of mind, and includes references to the intentional stance (Dennett, 1987; mentioned also in Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Preston & De Waal, 2002). Ontologically, it is more parsimonious to discuss empathy as a perspective type rather than another thing that exists in the world, and the ability to fantasize (about fictional characters) is a noted empathy-related measure (Davis, 1983). As a perspective, two other important aspects of empathy need apply: 1) that it is a necessarily social and communicative phenomenon, and 2) maintaining the self-other distinction. On the first point, the other-directedness of empathy implies the presentation of other agents from whom we may infer emotional and mental states. Secondly, the self-other distinction is what some consider as a key distinction between emotional contagion and empathy (Singer & Lamm, 2009).

Cognitive/affective is the main distinction that people use to create meaningful dimensions of empathic processes. Similar to the cognitive/affective dimension, Fuchs (2017) makes the distinction between primary and extended empathy. Primary empathy is the intercorporeal, spontaneous feelings that arise through embodied perception of another's behavior, whereas extended empathy is a higher form requiring effortful cognitive, inferential capacities of what it is like to be the other (ibid). Despite the discovery of so-called 'mirror neurons', empathy is usually not a literal mirroring of another's emotions. Debes (2010) explains that the concept of mirroring means that such emotions would remain unmediated by context; this does not lead to a meaningful understanding of the other. Mirroring is similar to what others refer to as emotional contagion (Coplan, 2011), but such comparisons remain unsubstantiated. Again, the relationship between emotional contagion and full-fledged empathy is strained at best, largely due to the

importance of its cognitive counterpart. I will continue to refer to empathy as a ‘moral emotion’ for brevity when referencing its affective nature, but note that the above illustrates that empathy is not reducible to an emotion.

While it is important to understand how empathy’s affective and cognitive “parts” occupy distinct roles in the process, I question the utility of focusing on the separation of these counterparts when the end goal of encouraging empathy is framed as facilitating moral motivation. If enhancing empathy is something that ought to be encouraged, then surely this inevitably relies on the process *as a whole* contributing something. Empathy’s connection to moral motivation will be cognitive and affective to some degree, but it must be both lest it manifest as a process that is something else entirely. The question is: is empathy’s contribution to moral motivation something of value?

Indeed, there is much evidence that empathy is morally compelling on the level of motivation. Daniel Batson’s work on the empathy-altruism hypothesis supports this relationship, where altruism is a motivational state to ultimately increase the welfare of another (as an end in itself). The empathy-altruism hypothesis states that empathy encourages altruistic behavior. When participants were told to actively place themselves in another person’s shoes (the high empathy condition) they were more likely to help others, even when escape was easy (Batson et al., 1981; Toi & Batson, 1982). Participants who were induced to feel empathy were less likely to defect in a Prisoner’s Dilemma situation, even when they knew their partner had already defected (Batson & Ahmad, 2001). There exist over thirty experiments in the same vein of manipulations that support the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson, 2010). Although limited, there is some evidence that the empathy-altruism hypothesis can be observed in more natural settings (Darley & Batson, 1973; Bethlehem et al., 2016).

Such experiments also highlight the boundaries of empathy’s role in moral motivation. First of all, the experiments specifically involved induced empathy. Unlike in experimental settings, empathy may not always lead to action in the real world (a situationist critique of empathic virtue). It also cannot make up for experiences unique to individuals. Consider the example with the pregnant lady again. All three witnesses are empathizing, but it cannot possibly be in the

same way. The woman with three kids, the woman with no kids, and the man cannot all be feeling the same emotions, because they are all connecting differently with the pregnant lady. The mother of three has a much more vivid and accurate picture of the lady's struggles, because she has already experienced them herself. The woman with no children can imagine herself (possibly in the future) in the same situation. On the other end, the man may try very hard to understand what it is like to have a very big belly with a child inside, and feel some emotions that facilitate this imaginative state. None of these three experiences will be the same affectively or cognitively. Additionally, acknowledging the different states of each person still does not provide a reason as to why anyone should be motivated to help the pregnant lady. There is a transition from acknowledging "I feel like this when I see this person struggle" (a descriptive fact) to "I ought to do this to alleviate their suffering" (a normative assessment). It seems empathy goes beyond the affective/cognitive dichotomy in some way, but somehow falls short of justifying moral decision-making.

Since the empathy literature is intimately linked to themes of moral theory and motivation, these themes bring with them a host of complications. Some argue that empathy is not appropriate for moral behavior, and actually distracts us from what is truly moral. I do not intend to provide a theory of moral behavior, as there is a profound level of uncertainty surrounding mechanism from emotion to action. Moral behavior may arise from other sources, such as social desirability, explicit rule-following, or self-preservation (ie. religious afterlife). When I use the word empathy, I do not intend to confuse it with these alternative explanations for moral behavior. Instead, it is my intention to focus on genuine instances of empathy as they exist, and how this may expand moral behavior. Or, as it has been said better elsewhere: "'empathize' is a success term", failing to see the perspective of the other is merely "trying to empathize" (Vanderhoek, 2016). I am to discuss empathy, not the process of trying to empathize.

Expanding the current discussion of empathy towards the unity of its parts is important for the following reasons: 1) to prevent the ruling out of empathy as a passive force, and 2) to maintain intellectual honesty about intuitive notions of empathy in both general and specific cases. Focusing too much on empathy's affective side makes empathy seem like an emotion that happens to us, rather than an experience in which we seek information. One may argue that

empathy is passive to a point, such as the type of intercorporeal/affective empathy, cognitive or extended empathy requires active consideration. Active may refer to a recognition of the other (in the Hegelian sense) as an intentional agent, but this too is not alone a cognitive achievement (Fuchs, 2017). There is evidence for the dynamic nature of empathy, supported by its connection to the learning process. Hein et al. (2016) found that in adult male participants, as little as two positive interactions with specific out-group members predicted an increase in empathy towards general members of the out-group, and this was associated with a neural learning signal (i.e. prediction error; Hein, Engelmann, Vollberg, & Tobler, 2016). We may use our exposure to out-group members to facilitate this learning. We are also more likely to exert more effort to empathize if we believe that empathy is malleable (Schumann, Zaki, & Dweck, 2014). Recognizing the nature of our perceived limitations to empathize, we are able to reflect upon and re-adjust how we empathize.

Just as it is important to work through the many definitions of empathy, it is also crucial to specify the way that empathy is presented as a moral force. When we are taught as children what empathy is, this is soon followed by a statement regarding that it is something we ought to do. I intend to shift the burden of proof away from empathy as the central player of morality, and instead as a player in a team sport.

In summary, empathy is difficult to define but generally acknowledged as cognitive and affective to some degree. There is evidence that induced empathy plays a role in moral motivation, but understanding this relationship requires more insight into the usefulness of the cognitive/affective dichotomy in moral enhancement (ie. to encourage moral behavior) .

#### **4 The case against empathy: How far can rationalism take us in the moral realm?**

It is my goal in this section to address current critiques of empathy's 'susceptibility' to bias, and whether this makes it less useful than other moral emotions for encouraging moral behavior. As I have said, empathy alone is not the central player in morality, and is not enough to guide moral behavior. This may lead to some speculation that pairing hot "moral emotions" with cold reason can overcome certain downsides to emotional arousal or salience of a narrow viewpoint (as

opposed to the bigger picture). Consider *Against Empathy*, a recent critique of empathy, where Paul Bloom insists that empathy's 'spotlight nature' enhances the biases we already have, subsequently decreasing our moral efficiency. This claim is considered somewhat controversial as it counters the empathy-altruism hypothesis, that empathy is a force promoting behavior many would consider morally good. The empathy-altruism hypothesis seems to also reflect common notions of empathy as a moral enhancing activity in folk psychological predictions of human behavior. I aim to provide a more nuanced account of the spotlight metaphor when discussing empathy and reason in relation to bias. Bloom suggests that we should use an alternative approach to moral behavior based on rational compassion. It is important to note that myself and others like Bloom rely on different definitions of empathy, as mostly everyone else does. I do not believe this difference in definition is problematic because my question surrounds whether the introduction of reason plays any role in overcoming the downsides of empathy's spotlight nature. Ultimately, this discussion moves beyond Bloom. Empathy is not as morally bankrupt as some might tout, and reason not as infallible to bias in moral decisions. The 'rational' part of rational compassion is presumably more capable of overcoming bias. I will focus this discussion on the rational component of this pairing (aka reason), weighing the significance of rationality or reason with empathy in the realm of biases.

In order to compare the efficiency of reason with empathy, we must look towards biases that may be relevantly associated with each respective phenomenon. Of course, there are many biases present in the human error repertoire, such as availability bias, default bias, base rate fallacy etc (Gigerenzer, 1991). Here I refer to bias as a tendency, which ultimately affects how we think or feel, sometimes in predictable ways. To note, not *all* biases create moral holes for empathy, neither are all specific to reason. One example is the identifiable victim effect, whereby an individual is more likely to empathize with a single identifiable victim (ie. blue eyes, blonde hair) than a statistic. When an individual is brought to our attention, our capacity for humanizing them elicits affect (Genevsky et al., 2013), possibly by mediating their character traits and physical attributes. This is more easily done for single or small numbers of individuals rather than thousands or millions. Another possible bias relevant to empathy is the in-group/out-group distinction, but is more specific to traits such as kin, race or nationality etc. In terms of reason, heuristics are mental shortcuts which increase our mentalizing efficiency for solving problems or



learning in good-enough ways, but can create mental blind spots less susceptible to secondary or higher-level oversight. These heuristics may subsequently lead to systematic errors in reasoning, also known as cognitive biases (or just ‘biases’ from now on). One classic example of a cognitive fallacy is the cost of the bat and the ball question (Kahneman and Frederick, 2002) from the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT). A bat and a ball cost \$1.10 total, but the bat costs one dollar more than the ball. How much is the bat? Try to figure it out. Most people will reply with one dollar. However, this means the bat will only be 90 cents more than the ball. The correct answer is actually \$1.05. This does not mean we are not able to overcome such blind spots or biases, only that we tend to not readily evaluate the more immediate and salient answers that heuristics provide.

What entails the relationship between empathy and bias? Perhaps in the case of the identifiable victim, empathy utilizes points of connection which make salient aspects of human experience, or alternatively an appreciation for the unique, but important experience of an agent different from ourselves. It may also highlight more general notions such as the innocence of children, or the vulnerability of impoverished persons. The problem with this relationship is that expanding such feelings outward to more people is an energetically improbable if not impossible task.

#### *4.1 Against empathy: The energetic costs*

Does ‘rational’ compassion maintain the upper hand on empathy in terms of energetic costs? Empathy is a rather inefficient process in regards to energy (Bloom, 2017). Empathy’s affective and cognitive components are draining in different, yet compounding ways. Cognitively, we exert effort to simulate an individual’s experience. Affectively, there is a further energetic toll: we respond to these simulations with emotional arousal. By empathizing with another individual we may feel a host of complex emotions, and particularly negative ones. Studies comparing empathy and compassion training suggest that individuals are more energized by the positive emotions of compassion, or at least, not as energetically drained (Singer and Klimecki, 2014).

How might the energetic demands of empathy encourage bias? Let us consider empathy in the context of the identifiable victim effect. The mediation of this bias might occur because exposure

to an individual's characteristics makes it easier to imagine or simulate that person's experience (Chambers and David, 2012). In other words, the more we know about someone, the more likely we are to see things from their perspective (ie. put ourselves into their shoes) and this increases our empathy. Thus, we are more likely to help that individual. There is an underlying assumption that still requires addressing: does empathy in this limited capacity hinder us from relating to a larger number of depersonalized individuals? Surely, if we can imagine the experience of one individual then it is simply a matter of extension in which we may expand to more individuals. Someone like Bloom would say 'no', and on this we can agree. As we engage our connection with one person, to ten people, to a hundred thousand people, to a million people, we find that our affect may increase, but not in a way that is proportional to the numbers. Engaging empathy with merely a single identifiable victim is already a highly energetically-draining state, leaving us with very little left to engage as complexity of the situations and the numbers of faceless, nameless people increase.

#### *Against reason: The energetic costs*

Although empathy is an energetically draining process, so too is reasoning. The demands on our attention that reason requires have been well-documented (Kahneman, 1973). In the bat and ball example, it takes a good moment to deliberate what the correct answer may be; this is true even after realizing your answer is incorrect. Working around our initial instincts in regards to numbers requires an extra level of care. The empirical evidence is clear as well: reason takes time. Sometimes it requires going back several times. Although the energetic costs associated with empathy are compelling, 'rational' compassion seems no further ahead in this regard.

#### *4.2 Number of biases related to each phenomenon*

The next point of comparison between reason and empathy might be to count the sheer number of biases associated with each of them. By this method, whichever one has more biases is worse off. But, this method is a disservice to critiques of empathy as a moral force. However, I feel that it is necessary to cross it off the list of potential reasons against empathy. At the very least this sections serves to write-off flippant, overgeneralized remarks referring to empathy as 'bias-ridden' or other such phrases which imply frequency. Rationality, much like empathy, is subject

to any number of biases. For example, the availability bias refers to our tendency to place greater emphasis on salient information, even counter to statistical data. I might choose to donate to a charity of a particular disease because I believe it must affect a large portion of the population. In reality, this disease could be quite rare. This disease might be salient to me because there were a lot of advertisements for a local run in its name, or I might coincidentally happen to know a couple people with the disease. But some biases do not neatly fall into the sphere of reason. It's easy to see how the availability bias might also be relevantly associated with empathy. For example, suppose I was assigned to volunteer at an old age home for community service credits. Being exposed to elderly people on a regular basis might have made the issues facing this population more salient in my mind. I might be more inclined to empathize with elderly people and relevant issues such as the general aging process, neurodegenerative diseases, allocation of social resources etc. I might even disproportionately empathize with the elderly on certain issues that also affect younger populations at similar (or even worse) rates. As per the availability bias, some biases are potentially detrimental to both processes. Therefore, it is not in the number of biases which is the metric of interest. Instead, There is something in empathy's 'nature' that makes it especially dangerous in its effectiveness (Bloom, 2017). A fruitful comparison of reason and empathy entails assessing the relationship to bias as it occurs in each of them. As we've established, both processes are energetically draining. What is so tragically compelling about the spotlight nature of empathy?

#### *4.3 Against empathy: The capacity to find a 'correct answer'*

Perhaps an important difference is that, unlike empathy, reason has the capacity to find a 'correct answer'. We can reason our way to an answer by following a series of logical steps. In the bat and the ball example, there is only one possible answer (\$1.05) in which the bat is exactly one dollar more than the ball and still has the total of \$1.10. This speaks to the differences in the processing of empathy and of reason. Finding the correct answer when reasoning occurs *in virtue of* its logical process. There are certain laws and rules which govern the reasoning process. Although biases may interfere with the process and produce incorrect answers, these do not occur because reasoning inevitably leads to incorrect answers, but because people reason incorrectly. More specifically, the bat and ball problem highlights what is known as the

difference between system 1 (fast, intuitive) and system 2 (slow, deliberate) processing (Kahneman, 1973). The initial, but incorrect, urge to say the bat costs only one dollar is a product of the fast system. System 1 uses heuristics in order to make quick responses (ibid). Biases resulting from heuristics create efficient, but sub-optimal answers which leads reason astray from its logical course. System 2 allows a person to go through each logical step to reveal the correct answer, albeit at a slower pace. Although the reasoning process is not perfect, the capacity for creating a correct response is traceable by following its discrete steps and reasons for justification.

In contrast, empathy has no ‘correct answer’, and no logical course of action to find one. The empathic process is mediated by affect (Erlandsson et al., 2015), something inherently illogical, if not, outside the realm of logic. This is not to say that the way in which we come to experience empathy is random. It is only that empathy is not governed by rules or laws towards a specific, deductive/abductive/inductive end. This is what makes empathy more prone to bias than reason; there is no objective end goal in sight. In this sense, empathy is less appealing to utilitarian calculus leanings.

*Against reason: The capacity to find a ‘correct answer’*

However, reason is not so easily separated from its fast, intuitive, and heuristic-loving counterpart. As most of our decision-making is heavily influenced by intuitions (Haidt, 2001), it is possible that our production of inferences is a result of intuition (Mercier and Sperber, 2011). If such shortcuts readily interfere or interact with the logical reasoning process, then this weakens the claim that reason has a greater capacity for producing a correct answer. Dan Sperber has famously characterized that the function of reason is not to find a correct answer (as it rarely does), but rather, to enhance social interactions with arguments (Mercier and Sperber, 2011). Once again, I will pushback on the focus on affect as empathy’s mediator. Empathy’s affective component is not readily separable from its cognitive one. Empathy is not only affect; it is also perspective-taking requiring a fairly sophisticated level of attention to detail and social intelligence. Although the process of empathy is a bit muddier on the details, it is nonetheless prone to systematic biases much like reason. I am not insinuating that empathy and reason are equally susceptible to bias. I merely aim to highlight that reason, much like empathy, is not

wholly composed of rational elements, and still very much susceptible to biases that are unique to its process. So although no ‘correct answer’ is readily identifiable in empathy, systematic biases are indicative of mechanisms with a degree of specificity. To enhance reason apart from its intuitive aspects and empathy away from its cognitive aspects is to create an artificial separation.

#### *4.4 Against empathy: The capacity to self-correct in the face of biases*

Although our capacity to reason is closely associated with intuitive, heuristic mechanisms that lead to systematic biases, reason is nevertheless more capable than empathy to self-correct these mistakes. Upon finding out that one has incorrectly answered the bat and the ball question, a person simply does math for another minute (or longer) to come to the correct solution. We use reason to correct failures in reason.

How does empathy overcome something like the Identifiable victim effect? Expanding one’s empathy counterintuitively requires us to make ourselves seem less important rather than increasing the importance of others. In order to connect with the masses more we might need to see ourselves as a small part of the masses. However, this correcting process does not seem to be empathy as much as a shift in perspective. In fact, it’s not clear what empathy’s solution to its failings might be. Reason may conceivably error-correct its failings, whereas empathy seems to not have this capacity.

Reason and empathy also do not fail in the same ways. While reason has correct and incorrect responses, there are only two ways in which we ‘incorrectly empathize’: 1) by being unable to expand our empathy, or 2) by misallocating resources in response to our empathic emotions. Of course, the first may be precisely empathy’s gravest sin, that our empathy is limited in scope. A limited scope means we do not generate a bigger picture of the needs of everyone else (the process of empathizing). We are tempted to focus our efforts and resources on the most salient causes without asking what the greater implications might be (our response to the information we gather from empathizing). However, these are evaluations of the limitations of empathy, and are

not necessarily indicative of errors in empathy's online processing. In other words, it is not so much that empathy is working incorrectly, but rather that it is not working well enough.

*Against reason: The capacity to self-correct in the face of biases*

Reason's robust system of self-correction may still ultimately fail, and I argue that when this happens it is no less harmful than faulty empathy. Failing to find the correct conclusion whilst reasoning may lead one to begin *rationalizing*. To be clear, I am distinguishing between rationalizing and reason. By definition, rationalizing is a justification or explanation that uses logic that seems sound, even if it isn't. Rationalizing does not take into account motives for one's attitude or behavior; it is done after the fact. It is an *attempt* to reach a rational conclusion, but it does not guarantee it will be successful. In the bat and the ball example, reasoning eventually leads one to the correct value of the bat (\$1.05). Rationalizing is something one would do to justify an incorrect answer, and is easier to do with more complicated or nuanced problems. For example, it seems so obvious that the bat is one dollar and the ball is ten cents, because these numbers add up to \$1.10. This type of rationalization is partially correct (one dollar plus ten cents is equal to \$1.10), but it reassures an incorrect answer by neglecting other important information (ie. one dollar minus ten cents is only ninety cents). Rationalizing can be used to defend beliefs and behaviors that are wrong. Or worse, we can use it to defend a black and white solution to situations that are nuanced and complex, of which many situations are. It is especially problematic because its purpose is to defend a point, and becomes virtually indistinguishable from proper reasoning. The explanations seem plausible. Misusing the rhetoric of reason is just as dangerous as the misuse of empathy. Since rationalizing operates within the realm of logic, there is an added level of authority by virtue of this association alone. Not only can it lead to negative consequences such as the misallocation of resources, or the neglect of other individuals, it seemingly justifies these actions. Is there anything more insidious than a method which delivers falsity under the illusion of rigor?

Even awareness of rationalizing is not a guarantee that one will not go on to exercise this very behavior. I myself am at risk of rationalizing ideas by cherry-picking sources and neglecting other sources which challenge them. Of course, I can employ strategies to counteract this, such

as: reading a variety of viewpoints on the topic, consider the merits of counterarguments, discuss my ideas with other people etc.

Empathy is also used to defend beliefs and behaviors that are wrong, and that its emotional component is more manipulative than our ad hoc rationalizations. Referencing Sperber, our rationalizations may be weighed against the beliefs of others in social situations. These beliefs are likely to be quite diverse, and is an external method in which we may error-correct faulty reasoning. On the other hand, empathic situations spark almost universal emotional responses (ie. outrage to injustice). For example, consider the unilateral, negative online responses to police brutality. If most people emotionally respond in a similar way, then voices of dissent become a drop in the ocean. Reason allows more room for conflicting ideas, whereas empathy decreases the number of conflicting ideas relevant for error correction.

However, I think this last argument once again minimizes the many situations in which reason does fail. It regularly fails when we reason alone, and this is why the Argumentative Theory of Reasoning postulates that reason functions best in social contexts (Mercier and Sperber, 2011). People do not readily give up false beliefs in the face of conflicting data as a result of their biases. Arguing in a group may cancel out the biases present in each individual (Mercier and Sperber, 2011). If one remains in a community with homogeneous views, then discussion may be less likely to be successful. Of course, “success” here can mean many different things depending on the content of the discussion. One’s community may include one’s online community. As we are exposed to ads and google search results targeted to our behavioral patterns (ie. google searches), we are less likely to click on articles that expose us to different ideas. For example, consider the new phenomenon of “alternative facts” quickly rising in the United States amongst large groups of people. There are limitations to reason, and alternative facts are the real-life manifestation of it, and a robust example of confirmation bias. It also highlights a necessary component for successful group argumentation and discussion: being exposed to ideas that are different than your own. If anything, this last critique demonstrates the capacity for empathy to create a connection between different types of people, many of whom may be resistant to conflicting beliefs.

## **5 Descriptive and normative implications for tests and measures of empathy**

It is not difficult to imagine that people empathize with friends and family to a greater degree, and at a much higher frequency. As it happens, the most widely used measurements of empathy do not include sufficient parameters which account for individuals of different categories. For example, a mere seven of the forty relevant questions in Empathy Quotient scale specify if the individual in question is a friend, a stranger, an animal etc. (Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen, & David, 2004). One such question begins, “I can easily tell if someone else wants to enter a conversation” and another as “It doesn’t bother me too much if I am late meeting a friend.” Surely one would feel differently if one’s partner were to try and enter a conversation, or if running late meeting a business client. In the Basic Empathy Scale the proportion is a bit better with thirteen of the twenty items specifying the identity of the individual (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). The problem is that these variations in specific or general persons is pretty much random and difficult to analyse in its given form. In light of these inconsistencies, it becomes unclear what these global measures of empathy mean. Given what I have established thus far as the connection between identity and empathy, in this section I will review the topic of identity scale items of some of the most highly cited empathy scales. By doing so I hope to demonstrate a need for parameters which systematically account for individual identity in each of these scales.

Many empathy scales also include separate subscales for the cognitive and affective components. For the purposes of this thesis, empathy’s multidimensional nature makes it difficult to justify the isolation of either cognitive or affective elements. In the section before I attempted to compare critiques of ‘emotional’ empathy with comparable critiques of reason, ultimately unveiling weaknesses that are unique to each process. It may be useful to understand each of these components separately and how they differ, but they still contribute to an overall experience greater than either of these components alone. Within criticisms of empathy’s emotional salience lies the assumption that cognitive empathy is more closely aligned (in some way) with reason. To be clear, the cognitive element of empathy is not equivalent to reason, nor do I believe it to be aligned in a way that is separable from its affective counterpart.



### *5.1 Descriptive aspects of empathy: scales highly cited*

The evolution of empathy instruments began most notably with Hogan's Empathy scale (HES). This scale measured the following: social self-confidence, even-temperedness, sensitivity, and nonconformity (Hogan, 1969). Criticisms of the HES include: 1) its lack of structural validity, 2) that it was mostly a measure of social skills, and not empathy specifically, and 3) despite including items for cognitive and affective empathy, summates the totals of both into one figure (Davis, 1980). To build on these criticisms, Davis (1980) created the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) as a multidimensional, global measure of empathy. The goal of the IRI was to address two main issues with empathy scales at the time: 1) the conflation between the emotional and cognitive dimensions of empathy, and 2) the imprecise characterizations of empathy. The construction of the scale is broken up into four subscales which encompass distinct aspects of empathy: fantasy, perspective-taking, empathic concern, and personal distress (for an in-depth discussion, see Davis, 1983). However, the IRI fails to distinguish between sympathy and empathy, and includes items in the perspective-taking scale that are too broad to present as cognitive empathy (Batson, Early & Salvarani, 1997).

Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) created the Basic Empathy Scale (BES) to more carefully tease apart measures of cognitive and affective empathy from sympathy which are conflated in the IRI. They define empathy as an emotional resonance and understanding of another's state, while sympathy involves an "additional appraisal". This scale was intended for children and adolescents, but a version for adults (BES-A) has since been put forth with a three factor structure that expands beyond affective and cognitive components of empathy, namely: emotional contagion, emotional disconnection, and cognitive empathy (Carré et al., 2013).

Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2004) developed the empathy quotient which also centralizes on a two factor structure of affective and cognitive empathy. The items for the scale were assessed by a panel of experimental psychologists who work in the same field. Assessment was based on whether the item reflected the definition of empathy, which was "the drive or ability to attribute mental states to another person/animal, and entails an appropriate affective response in the observer to the other person's mental state" (pg. 168).

There has since been an emergence of new scales to broaden the conceptual aspects of empathy included in assessments. In response to meta-analytic findings that measures of empathy accounted only for 1% of variance in aggression (Vachon, Lynam, & Johnson, 2014), the authors concluded that popular empathy instruments are insufficient to capture the role of empathy (Vachon & Lynam, 2016). They developed the Affective and Cognitive measure of Empathy (ACME) to accommodate dissonant emotions in affective empathy. Similarly, Jordan, Amir, and Bloom (2016) developed the Empathy Index (EI) as a way to measure emotional and behavioral contagion, emphasizing the congruence of one's state with the other. Both the ACME and the EI were created to emphasize the concept of resonance (dissonant or congruent, respectively) in a systematic way.

I have included in Table 1 a list of scales and the number of items that are dedicated to identifying the recipient(s) of empathy. My exploration of these scales began with a search of "tests and measures" in the PsychInfo database and using the keyword "empathy" as a search item. Inclusion criteria for instruments was as follows: highly cited (>40 citations), contained both cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy (either implicitly or explicitly), created for adults (or at least, not specifically made for adolescents or children), and was a self-reported questionnaire format.

The justifications for my inclusion criteria are based on the multidimensional of empathy, and the virtue ethics approach that I will use to frame its normative implications. High citations indicate that the same types of empathy measures are repeatedly used, and thus other empathy-specific dimensions remain largely unaccounted for. This also means that new scales will likely be excluded. It was important to include scales that did not specifically focus on either cognitive or affective empathy because of the virtue ethics approach that I use to frame the normative discussion surrounding empathy. Virtue ethics stresses neither cognitive nor affective dimensions exclusively, but rather considers each in addition to a host of other relevant factors to make the best decision possible. Measures for children or adolescents were excluded because children do not yet have fully developed empathic capacities. While the development of empathy early in life is crucial, I am primarily interested in mature or full-fledged empathy which necessitates complete brain development. I also excluded tests that were specific to physicians or

health care providers, because the identity of the recipient is usually aimed at a patient strictly defined.

I excluded behavioral, physiological and non-self-reported measures of empathy. For example, there is the Multifaceted Empathy Test (MET) which shows 26 pictures of a context followed by individuals expressing emotions in a given context (Dziobek et al., 2008). The Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test also uses pictures followed by questions about the pictured person's mental state (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001).

Table 1. Highly cited measures of empathy which include both affective and cognitive dimensions

Scale name	Authors	# of items	Number of items that specify identity	# of identities specified (ie. friends, strangers)
Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)*	Davis (1980)	14	1	friend
Empathy Quotient	Baron-Cohen, S., & Wheelwright, S. (2004)	40**	7	friend, partner, worm, animal, stranger
Basic Empathy scale	Jolliffe, D., & Farrington, D. P. (2006)	20	13	friend, fictional character
Toronto Empathy questionnaire	Spreng, McKinnon, Mar, & Levine (2009)	16	2	“someone close”, friend
Empathy Assessment Index	Lietz et al. (2011)	17	1	friend

\*only including the empathic concern and perspective taking subscales

\*\*60 items total in which 40 are empathy-related, and 20 are filler/distractors

I examined each scale item for the identity of the target of empathy. I used general categories such as friend, family, animal etc. as labels for specified targets. If the target was not specified the item was categorized as ‘unspecified’. I excluded filler items from the total count of the scale items. In each scale, I counted the number of scale items that had specified targets of empathy (under ‘items that specify identity’).

None of the scales discussed above or listed in Table 1 included a method or a justification which determined the identity of the individual in each questionnaire item. Even when scales did vary the identity of the individuals in scale items, there was no method or justification explaining these variations. For example, in the Empathy Quotient, seven of the forty questions specify

identity but are not accompanied by an explanation as to why these particular items or why only seven items have such a specification. In the IRI, the fantasy scale specifically asks about fictional characters due to the nature of that subscale, but Davis (1980) does not discuss the process in which the identity of individuals mentioned in the other scale items were chosen (ie. friend, stranger etc.). Davis defines these different subscales as encompassing tendencies towards certain behaviors.

The above reflects a need in the empathy literature for greater use of an instrument which systematically accounts for variations in a person's identity and one's corresponding level of empathy. And since self-reported measures do not allow researchers to observe the mental image which is used to conceptualize empathy scale items, it is necessary to take this into account when constructing the scale. If we are to continue using self-reported measurements of empathy, then one way to collect more accurate sentiments might be to include a measurement in which these various individuals fall relative to one another.

How we refer to empathy is important because empathy is subject to framing effects and other biases. Approaching others with an exclusion criteria mindset, as opposed to inclusion criteria, increases one's circle for moral regard Laham (2009). Bastian et al. (2012) explored the framing effects of animal-to-human vs. human-to-animal comparisons, finding that the former produced a greater circle of moral concern which not only included animals but also human outgroup members. This is due to the effects of the referent (ourselves) as quite well-defined, which increases our tendency to focus on similarities, rather than differences, in outsider groups. By taking into account how these framing effects alter the inclusivity of our moral circle, we may improve our capacity for empathizing with a larger group of people. Something like a "generic overgeneralization", although not a framing effect, is another sort of cognitive trap that alters how we think of and empathize with outgroup members. A generic overgeneralization is something like "Tics have lyme disease", even though only a small percentage actually carry the disease. The essentialization of outgroup members is most often associated with negative traits that we observe in one or very few, but then go on to incorrectly generalize such traits to the entire group (for example, "Asians are bad drivers"). These sorts of attribution errors tend to asymmetrically associate positive traits to in-group members (ibid). A bias called the identifiable

victim effect also skews people's tendencies for helping a single, identifiable individual, rather than groups or larger numbers of people. By focussing on one individual, rather than providing a series of statistics, one may more easily persuade people to donate to a cause. While this is precisely the sort of nuance which is called upon when one exercises empathy towards another agent, it is also quite narrow in scope.

Herein lies the tension between specificity and generalization, and it is important to realize how both actually affect our capacity for empathy. If one is too specific, this risks parochialism and in-group exceptionalism. One may think that an empathy which is too generalized risks compromising the special obligations one holds towards one's community and family for 'undeserving' strangers. However, this is more of a theoretical worry. In reality, we do not see hoards of people neglecting their children to feed the homeless at their local shelter. No. When overgeneralization occurs in empathy, this *still* risks parochialism and in-group exceptionalism, because generalizing invokes stereotypes and ingroup/outgroup biases. It is clear that either extreme does us no good. Standard measures of empathy cannot account for this level of analysis, because they do not systematically specify the nature of the individual. Our capacity to empathize changes with the lens we use when interacting with other people, and it is worth identifying in what aspect this lens alters our empathic relations to other people. Conversely, the nature of our empathic relations to other people also changes the lens with which we use to view them and others relative to them.

### *5.2 What's reasonable to ask of people?*

It is necessary to distinguish between two kinds of framing effects relevant to the current discussion: 1) those which distort or enhance the empathizing process, versus 2) those present in a scale which alter responses in self-reported measures. The former refers to encounters one has in real life, where the presentation of a scenario either elicits or fails to elicit empathy, for example a Facebook post, a commercial by a charity, a news segment etc. These framing effects are present in the situation, are directly perceived, and ultimately affect our perceptions of the other's situation. The second type of framing effect refers to the presentation of questions in self-reported scales or questionnaires, for example, the order of the questions, the wording etc. These

questions are used to create a picture in the participant's mind and urge a response. This is different from being present in the moment. Indeed, one's answer to the question may be influenced by the various factors accounted for, or overlooked, in the construction of the scale.

Our moral circle, the one in which we deem appropriate to extend our moral concern, has grown, but is this growth necessary for moral progress? And are we to believe that this is simply because humans have improved their capacity to frame the plight of the marginalized? Perhaps not. Buchanan and Powell (2016) argue that sometimes moral progress can result from the exclusion of entities from one's moral circle, such as non-sentient organisms or artifacts. They argue that greater inclusiveness risks the dilution of one's moral commitments to group members in real need. Additionally, there is moral progress that does not involve the expansion of one's moral circle: the "proper de-moralization" of acts such as premarital sex or masturbation, or conversely the moralization of acts such as torture (ibid). So it is clear that there are ways to improve morally without expanding the circle to more individuals. However, a greater circle of moral concern is still an essential part of moral progress. Buchanan and Powell argue that an inclusive moral society requires cultural innovation which promotes self-scrutiny and moral reasoning, and that rational accounts of morality (such as Peter Singer's) do not encompass the same level of sustainability.

In summary, current descriptive measures of empathy are bound by the same iterations of questions that have focussed on capturing the essence of this phenomenon. However, in this pursuit there remain blind spots in our understanding and operationalization of empathy which may have normative implications. Overcoming these blind spots requires transcending the dichotomy of affective and cognitive dimensions of empathy to processes that bring these (and many other) different aspects together.

### *5.3 The normative implications of tests and measures of empathy*

Empathy alone, because of the nature of its fallibility, is neither a sufficient nor appropriate model for normative ethics or morality. Paul Bloom discusses many of the failings of empathy, particularly its susceptibility to biases and parochialism. As I have discussed, current utilitarian

critiques focus on emotional empathy. The main argument is that empathy's susceptibility to bias distracts us from the long term consequences of our actions, and that it is not necessary for us to feel empathy to be moral. It is sufficient for us to use cognitive empathy to encourage moral actions.

However, I am not as eager to cast the emotional aspects of empathy aside. First of all, there is much empirical evidence that our moral decisions more consistently align with our unconscious intuitions rather than our conscious reasoning. Haidt (2001) gathered much of this empirical research to come to the following descriptive conclusion: the reasons we provide to justify our moral decisions are often post hoc constructions. If this is the case, this puts a damper on the argument that reasoning is the source of our moral evaluations. And unlike Bloom, Haidt does not separate cognitive and affective components of moral decision-making. This leads me to the next point: Bloom assumes that emotional empathy can be separated from cognitive empathy (in line with the "rational" portion of rational compassion) to encourage moral decisions. This sort of premise is dubious at best and misleading at worst. I'm not entirely sure how one would go about separating the different layers of a multidimensional concept such as empathy. It's also not clear to what the extent empathy is affective or cognitive, or how these two aspects interact with one another. Although the process of empathy is a bit muddier on the details, it is nonetheless prone to systematic biases much like reason. So although no 'correct answer' is readily identifiable in empathy, systematic biases are indicative of mechanisms with a degree of specificity. To enhance reason apart from its intuitive aspects and empathy away from its cognitive aspects is to create an artificial separation.

It is also very difficult to know if one's emotions have covertly influenced our decisions to begin with. Consider Zell Kravinsky, someone who utilitarians such as Peter Singer hold as a prime example of someone who has crunched the numbers: "Kravinsky is a brilliant man: he has one doctorate in education and another on the poetry of John Milton. . . . [H]e puts his altruism in mathematical terms. Quoting scientific studies that show the risk of dying as a result of making a kidney donation to be only 1 in 4,000, he says that not making the donation would have meant he valued his life at 4,000 times that of a stranger, a valuation he finds totally unjustified" (pg. 14, Singer, 2015). This example begs the question: how can you *know* that you're not being



influenced by your emotions? Singer and Bloom seem convinced that Zell is primarily motivated by “cold reasoning”, but as Haidt has made very clear, moral reasoning is often presupposed and predicted by moral intuitions which are beneath conscious awareness, and thus not the result of reasoning.

There is something normatively interesting about how we empathize that goes beyond the global measures to which we have become accustomed. There are descriptive elements of empathy that may influence (but not dictate) its normative dimension. While empathy is not necessarily more likely to have biases than other psychological phenomena, there are special concerns regarding empathy’s resilience to outside forces. The affective or emotional aspects of our moral intuitions are easier to manipulate, and this means that whatever normative aspects empathy has are likely to be affected by these outside influences. The limitations of one’s experiences of empathy to greater or lesser social circles (expansiveness) may alter how we think of where our moral obligations lie. If we are aware that empathy may affect us in such a way, then we risk becoming disconnected from our moral principles. As stated by Oxley (2011) “empathy is unsuitable as a criterion of morality because it is an experience, not a normative principle; empathy is neither tantamount to making a moral judgment, nor the sole state from which we ought to derive moral obligations” (pg. 69). Keeping this in mind, what role could empathy play in the normative dimension?

In order to understand the normative implications of empathy expansiveness, we must first identify the different ways in which empathy itself is normative. Empathy is normative in at least two ways: 1) being the *prima facie* approval of the target’s emotions, and 2) when questioning what one ought to do with the knowledge one has obtained via empathy. The first point occurs during the initial process of empathy, where the person empathizing finds the state of the target *intelligible*, something that Oxley (2011) summarizes from the work of Justin D’Arms, Nancy Sherman and Remy Debes. One can understand why the other feels, acts, or reacts as they do. Intelligibility means one approves of or accepts the other’s emotions *prima facie*. This is a normative claim. Debes (2010) would say that the narrative of the person’s circumstances provides reasons necessary for eliciting empathic understanding. Indeed, witnessing the emotions of another person provides reasons. One may not be initially aware of what these specific reasons

are, but one is aware that they are either connecting to this other person or not. My overarching question is ‘to what extent the identity of another individual affects how we empathize with them’. Inherent to this question is empathy expansiveness, because the identity of the target individual is entailed by a group (e.g. family, friends, strangers etc). In a more fine-grained way, reference to this prima facie approval of another’s emotional state indicates that one has accounted for the target of empathy by including them within one’s circle of moral regard. I will extend this thought to say that perhaps one of the minimum requirements of being included into one’s circle of moral regard is whether or not one finds intelligible the other’s emotional state.

The second way that empathy is normative has to do with how we ought to handle the information we gather from our empathic understanding of other individuals. Once we’ve approved of their state and undergone our own “transformative” experience of the other, we are left with information that to some may seem morally difficult to handle. We are not always moral when we empathize. Bloom used the example of giving money to a homeless person due to its “warm glow” effect, which is temporary and does not help that individual in the long run. The problem with empathy is the feeling of immediacy that sometimes accompanies it. Because of this, I believe that this normative aspect of empathy could benefit from a virtue ethics approach. Perhaps we as humans are naturally empathetic, but not everyone has the emotional intelligence or the practical wisdom to know how to interpret our feelings of empathy. Since empathy is insufficient for moral and ethical behavior, we must rely on moral principles that may utilize empathy’s strengths to become virtuous persons.

## **6 Standard approach to empathy does not encompass how we allocate it in practice**

At this point, I believe I have made it clear that merely demanding more empathy is insufficient as a means for moral enhancement. Given empathy’s many definitions, such demands are meaningless if the parameters for ‘more’ are not explicated. Empathy is also sensitive to certain biases, so it is important that enhancement refers to those aspects of empathy that encourage moral behavior that benefits the ‘greater good’. To a utilitarian, the greater good is a universal calculus benefitting the majority by the numbers. This approach is quite handy when deciding

how to allocate available resources. Utilitarian-oriented criticisms of empathy favor its cognitive component, but would also encourage eschewing empathy altogether for cold, moral reasoning. So, either everyone is special, or no one is special. A utilitarian approach in some ways puts us all on equal footing. However, the exchange of goods is not the whole of our existence. And we do not operate our day-to-day interactions with an ‘everyone (no one) is special’ attitude. Our empathic energy tends to favor certain individuals, particularly those we identify as in-group members.

Let me also consider our moral tendencies towards entities one might find in the "outer" portions of one's moral circle: animals. A self or in-group centered bias remains present even when considering the moral status of animals. Discussions of empathy towards animals implicate that empathy maintains a bias towards those animals phylogenetically similar to us (Allen et al. 2002). There is conflicting evidence over the difference in empathy towards animals between vegetarians and non-vegetarians. If empathy extends the moral circle outwards, then one may expect vegetarians to have more empathy than omnivores. However, Preylo and Arikawa (2008) found no difference in empathy between the two groups. Kasperbauer (2015) contrasts these findings with the differential activation of emotion-processing areas of the brain in vegetarians and vegans versus omnivores when viewing animal torture (Filippi et al., 2010). In a review of empathy and animal rights, Kasperbauer claims that other non-empathy related explanations, such as notions of disgust or strong moral convictions, can better account for vegetarianism. Although vegetarians and vegans have strong moral convictions or strong associations with disgust, this does not necessarily rely upon empathy. Empathy's role in the mediation of morally motivated dietary choices complicates the concept of an expanded circle of moral regard.

In summary, given the fickle patterning of moral intuitions when extending to outer portions of the moral circle, it becomes difficult to determine the role empathy does or ought to play. Instead of trying to figure this out, it might be better to begin accepting that empathy simply plays a role. If empathy is biased in such a way that constricts one's circle of moral regard, then how does one empathize well? This is a question from virtue ethics. I will frame the discussion in this section from a virtue ethics perspective to counter the utilitarian arguments.

### *6.1 Virtue ethics: Empathy as a team player in moral deliberation*

Although tests and measures of empathy are used to gather empirical data for reasons of scientific advancement and knowledge, the current discussion is meant to focus on the normative implications of such instruments.

The calls for “more” empathy in the population do not effectively align with the way empathy is largely understood as a phenomenon in the academic world. Often heralded as something capable of encouraging moral behavior, there have been numerous public calls for empathy by prominent individuals. The most widely held example of this is of President Barack Obama who stated that there was an “empathy deficit” in America. Words such as “deficit” and other related notions of quantity imply that empathy is something that can be measured like breakfast food: if one’s moral cereal is decidedly crunchy then one should pour out a little more empathy milk until palatable. Are these calls for more empathy of the affective or cognitive kind? Or both? Indeed, are we asking the right questions?

### *6.2 Quality or ‘maturity’ of empathy*

Expansiveness of empathy and its cultivation are notions that align with the principles of a virtue ethics framework. Unlike other ethical frameworks, a virtue ethics approach effectively reframes the discussion away from the amount of empathy to, instead, the *quality*. Anscombe (1958) reignited the modern discourse of principles of virtue ethics by highlighting the lack of discussion of character, human flourishing, and “the good”. While Anscombe’s criticisms extended to both deontological and utilitarian frameworks at the time, I will primarily make comparisons between utilitarian or consequentialist approaches and virtue ethics. This decision is mainly due to the relevant and recent critiques from the likes of Paul Bloom and the Effective Altruism movement. Virtue is a state which enables one to perform one’s function well. Virtue ethics takes into account the entirety of a human life, whereby the practice of virtuous acts modelled after a moral exemplar encourage the cultivation of phronesis or practical wisdom. Thus, rather than referring to empathy as an amount we can adjust, it would be more ethically fruitful from this perspective to ask ourselves how we can best empathize.

We are not asking the right questions. To ask for *more* empathy is akin to asking “for bigger blue” or “louder fur”. Indeed, one can imagine bigger blue to refer to an object, say a balloon, or something else with dimensions which can be adjusted in these specific terms. Or louder fur could be the sound of the hood of one’s jacket rubbing against the microphone during a call. On some level, and if you are very creative, these demands might be made intelligible. From any other perspective, the question is either useless or simply nonsensical. The same can very well be said about calls for more or less empathy. If we are to address any sort of ineffectiveness in our empathic practices, it would be useful to clarify the ways in which empathy is enhanced for the better. Of course, quality of empathy includes a range of factors. The reply to this last statement would be that tracking empathy is a useful endeavour as well. If we can track empathy, then we can understand the patterns ‘in which’ we do so, and ‘where’. So yes, it is useful as well, but it is not useful in and of itself, for we cannot then say *how* we empathize or *with whom*. It is in the latter that I place my interest. As for ‘why’: this is not an interesting question. Why we empathize is as hapless as nature itself. It is simply a fact *that* we empathize. As Nietzsche (1885) said of the Stoics: “You desire to LIVE ‘according to Nature’? ...what fraud of words! Imagine to yourselves a being like Nature, boundlessly extravagant, boundlessly indifferent, without purpose or consideration, without pity or justice...imagine to yourselves INDIFFERENCE as a power –how COULD you live in accordance with such indifference?” (pg. 6). And by this, Nietzsche, much like Hume before him, denounces the basis of normative claims with descriptive facts. It is not my goal to justify the ought with the is. Neither am I trying to delineate the precise nature of this is-ought relationship, which I believe to be more permeable than ordinarily described. It is only my intention to understand how these two elements may come together, however briefly, as we direct ourselves amongst one another so as to maintain social order. In brief, by emphasizing quality, we create a discourse that makes room for many different elements of empathy that are often overlooked or neglected. This is especially important if we are to repeatedly study empathy with the same instruments that inherently exclude these elements. As I have made very clear, the dimension I will emphasize given the current discussion is the treatment of entities within, and those outside, one’s empathic circle. This is an area with questions worth asking.

In regards to equal treatment amongst individuals, Anscombe acknowledged that even traditional Aristotelian virtue theory is insufficient for contemporary ethics. One main critique was Aristotle's rather impoverished view of which entities may be relevantly included in one's circle of moral regard (just one group: Greek men). Vallor (2016) consolidated how this circle differs amongst what she deemed virtue ethical principles in Western (Aristotelian) and Eastern (Buddhist, Confucian) moral philosophies (ibid). In Confucism, one's circle encompasses the family and relative importance of political involvement. Buddhism, on the other hand, expands to every living creature. So amongst these ethical frameworks, there is a divergence as to the emphasis of the recipient of one's ethical and moral practices.

Dealing with this divergence in recipient treatment requires a starting point in which we may scaffold our normative exploration of empathy. Vallor offers a list of seven principles that summarize essential concepts that resonate, but are not formally found, between all three approaches (Aristotelian, Buddhist, Confucian):

1. Moral Habituation
2. Relational Understanding
3. Reflective Self-Examination
4. Intentional Self-Direction of Moral Development
5. Perceptual Attention to Moral Salience
6. Prudential Judgment
7. Appropriate Extension of Moral Concern

I will primarily focus on the virtue ethical-like principles that have become recurring themes in moral practice: 1) moral habituation, and 7) appropriate extension of moral concern.

Moral habituation is relevant to the popular stress on reasoning when making moral decisions. Moral habituation refers to the cultivation of habits that are done for motivating reasons, are seen as normatively positive, and continually shapes one's cognitive and emotional states in a broader practice (ibid). Virtue ethics unifies both the cognitive and affective components of empathy by advocating for a balance. Recall earlier criticisms of reason-heavy utilitarian approaches which

fail to distinguish between justifications *in virtue of* the reasoning process or justifications from rationalizing *after the fact*. Haidt draws parallels between his moral intuitionist model to virtues which are learned inductively (to a large extent as children, but so too as adults), and that such skills or habits are constantly evolving (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). Such a process may require the use of reasoning, but this is not considered the basic psychological activity of morality by the moral intuitionist model, nor from a virtue ethics approach (ibid).

Appropriate extension of moral concern is relevant to the idea of empathy expansiveness, and primarily addresses concerns raised about current tests and measures of empathy in regards to nuances surrounding the identity of the empathy recipient. Appropriate extension of moral concern refers to “the ability to expand one’s basic attitude(s) of moral concern (whether in the form of fairness, love, respect, or compassion) to the right beings, at the right time, to the right degree, and in the right manner.” (Vallor, 2016). The most widely used tests and measure of empathy do not include a systematic expansion of one’s attitude to certain beings. I think this aspect of testing has remained relatively under-explored, because empathy is seen as an inherently expansive psychological and social phenomenon. The very nature of empathy’s everyday conceptualization is that it is the tool to overcoming bias and prejudice. As we now know, this is not always the case. To what extent we exercise or are capable of exercising our empathy to overcome barriers relevant to the other’s identity (relative to one’s own) has been taken for granted.

### *6.3 Further empirical evidence for situationist critiques of Virtue Ethics*

Situationist critiques of virtue ethics have questioned its empirical ‘discontinuity’ regarding how people actually behave in a given setting (for example, Doris 1998, Harmon, 1999). People’s behavior seems to align more closely to situational factors, rather than virtue, when there are hindrances to potential altruistic behavior. For example, people in a hurry are less likely to help someone who appears in need on the side of the road (Darley & Batson, 1973), or consider the famous Milgram experiments where participants continued to ‘shock’ a confederate even after ‘losing consciousness’. These critiques rely on their definitions of character traits as global, to be in accordance with Aristotle: “firm and unchangeable” and have “reliable behavioral

manifestations” (pg 506, Doris, 1998). Empirical evidence has failed to show connections between these character traits and behavior in the past. Since virtue ethics is normative (which situationists acknowledge), empirical evidence cannot refute it on this level. However, the central claim is that if virtue ethics does not align with the way people actually behave in practice, then it is questionable whether it is a realistic framework in which to guide human moral behavior (Doris, 1998). To summarize, broad character traits consistently fail to predict behavior in social psychological studies.

There have been robust responses to situationist critiques regarding the relevance of virtues. Virtue ethicists highlight that there are very few moral exemplars who are capable of aligning their actions with their virtues at a skillful level. Vallor (2016) explains “robust moral virtue is by definition exemplary rather than typical; indeed, the experiments most often used as evidence against the existence of virtue consistently reveal substantial minorities of subjects who respond with exemplary moral resistance to situational pressure—exactly what virtue ethics predicts” (pg 28). This may be why the majority of people might not help someone in need when they are in a hurry, which does not preclude the existence or utility of virtues. Additionally, virtue ethicists accuse situationists of using behaviorist logic, where character traits are reduced to stimulus and response, no longer regarding changes in mental states (Webber, 2007). As aforementioned, these situationist critiques rely on a strict interpretation of Aristotelian character traits, which I have outlined are notably insufficient by the needs of today’s society and standards (e.g. Anscombe, 1958). Much like Vallor, Slingerland (2011) explains how Eastern philosophies like Early Confucianism are capable of navigating the “high bar” Aristotelian virtues with their educational model of virtue (Slingerland, 2011). Unlike the character traits measured in social psychological experiments “early Confucianism is that whatever positive traits we may possess “naturally” at the beginning of the process of self-cultivation are relatively weak and require long-term, intensive training in order to become genuinely reliable—that is, in order to become true virtues” (Slingerland, 2011). In other words, maintaining virtues requires intense and intentional cultivation and practice.

At the beginning of this thesis, I quoted a line from an interlocution between Mencius, a Confucian second only perhaps to Confucius, and the oppressive King Xuan of Qi, who was not



himself Confucian nor did he respect such practices (fourth century BCE). In an effort to encourage compassion, Mencius tells the King a story he heard from one of his retainers (exchange summarized from Slingerland, 2011):

The King was sitting up upon his elevated throne in the Great Hall when an ox was led past him. The King saw it and asked, “Where is that ox being taken?” The reply was, “It is being taken to be ritually slaughtered so that its blood can be used to consecrate a newly-forged bell.” The King said, “Let it go! I cannot bear its look of terror, like that of an innocent man being led to the execution ground.” “Should we then abandon the consecration ritual?” “How could we abandon the ritual? Substitute a sheep in its place.”

Mencius informs the King that his subjects attributed the switch to the frugality of the King’s expenditures, rather than his mercy. The King vehemently protests such nonsense, saying his true motivation for this decision was the genuine reaction he had to the ox’s terror. The rest of the exchange went as such:

“The King should not be surprised that the common people took him to be cheap,” Mencius replied. “You exchanged a small animal for a large one, what were they to make of it? If the King were truly pained by the expression like that of an innocent man headed to the execution ground, then why spare the ox and sacrifice the sheep?”

The King smiled uncomfortably, saying, “What, indeed, was my feeling at that moment? I certainly was not worried about the expense, and yet I did put the sheep in the ox’s place. It is no wonder that the people think me cheap.”

Mencius replied, “There is no harm in this—in fact, it is precisely the feeling that you had that is the method of benevolence. You saw the ox, but had not yet seen the sheep. The gentleman’s attitude toward animals is thus: having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them killed; having heard their cries, he cannot bear to eat their flesh. This is why the gentleman keeps his distance from the kitchen.”

This exchange highlights important ways in which our empathy is inherently parochial, but also how lack of exposure may perpetuate limited behavioral tendencies. We have difficulty connecting with those whom we do not immediately encounter or to situations which are so far removed from our everyday reality. Not only is this made apparent by the King in this example, but by evidence in social psychology. This difficulty may be something selected for in our DNA as an inherited bias. It may also be the case that part of this inherited bias is that we avoid situations that we anticipate may require additional effort. On this latter part there is hope, because it means that we may have some element of control: we can premeditate to shape our behavior so as to favor putting in additional effort. Slingerland (2011) points to Nancy Snow's empirically grounded response to situationist critiques that our negative and positive traits may be, if desired and through effortful practice, inhibited and extended, respectively (Snow, 2010). In other words, the nature of one's biases, however innate or ingrained, is nevertheless dynamic and pliable.

Tests and measures of empathy so far retain a narrow focus on the same iterations of its various multidimensional components. By addressing the need for a balance or maturity in our conception of empathy, and reflecting this need in tests and measures, this could provide further empirical support for virtue ethics. Some emerging tests and measures are now beginning to encompass (in different ways) how we allocate empathy according to the identity of the recipient. Whatever these empirical findings may show remains to be seen, and I do not intend to speculate them here. Of course, understanding more about how people empathize does not then dictate how we ought to empathize. What I do intend to do is discuss what we gain or lose with these measurements, and that refocusing the discussion towards empathy expansiveness benefits most from a virtue ethics approach.

#### *6.4 The pregnant lady: How virtue ethics and the empirical study of empathy meet*

I propose measuring moral wisdom in the context of identity as an effective alternative measure of empathy enhancement, rather than the earlier aforementioned 'increases or decreases'. To generalize one's moral wisdom means that one can identify what an appropriate extension of moral concern looks like in different contexts or with different individuals as the targets of

empathy. In my example, the target of empathy was a pregnant lady struggling with her groceries. Ideally, one's moral circle blossoms to include a diverse array of individuals whose connections to one another lie on fundamental criteria that extend universally. I asked earlier how we can know what an 'increase' or 'decrease' in empathy really means in some of the most highly cited tests and measures. As I believe I have demonstrated clearly with the central example, 'empathizing well' reflects a diversity of identities in the targets of empathy. Delineating to what extent our empathy is cognitive or affective becomes a secondary measure in this regard. Skillful or mature empathy requires an understanding of both cognitive and affective empathy together. This idea opens the door to normative assessment in the vein of virtue ethics. Diversity of identities in our targets of empathy, and in particular those individuals most different from ourselves, is a clearer way to track how our empathy is becoming more wise, skillful, or mature.

To better understand the relationship between the cultivation of virtue and the object of empathy in empirical studies, I will illustrate these principles within the context of the pregnant lady example. When the mother of three empathizes with the pregnant lady, it does not require much work on her behalf, relatively speaking. Her past experiences as a mother-to-be many times over have since become a part of who she is. It is not my intention to diminish the difficulty of late-stage pregnancy, but I would go so far as to say that such an experience is something that *happens to you*. The mother of three did not have to seek out what these experiences 'might be like'; she knows what they are without cultivation or perhaps much effort. In slight contrast, the woman with no children needs to seek out this experience with her imagination. When possible realities for our own lives are presented to us, it may be tempting to humor their existence, especially for those experiences which are primal (ie. related to biology). Being pregnant is a possible reality for the woman with no children. Those issues affecting the group (and only that group) in which one identifies may not necessarily demand a lifelong practice. I am referring to some sort of an embodied knowledge or understanding, or at the very least, a kind of group bond. This is very vague indeed, but analogously so too is the conception of, for example, the ethereal. 'Ethereal' is defined as something along the lines of: 'something that lies on another plane of existence from which we perceive it'. This too is a broad definition. Yet, when I use the word 'ethereal' we have a general and ready understanding when such an experience presents itself.

So, while the lady with no children may not know what pregnancy actually feels like, she has access to some kind of an understanding, mainly because it is something that intimately affects the group she belongs in.

Perhaps it is crude to reduce such an affinity to a mere possible reality. What about women who are incapable of having children themselves, or perhaps never wish to have them, or cannot possibly fathom pregnancy in any regard, physically or otherwise? Of course, I agree there are limitations to the imagination. The lady with no children need not be as literal as pregnancy in order to imagine a more general physical burdening or exertion. But, whether general or specific, such an imagining would still ultimately lead to the same conclusion: the lady with no children must cultivate an understanding with greater effort than the mother of three in order to empathize with the pregnant lady, and this is true in virtue of the experiences that define their identities.

But, what of the man? He must arguably exert the greatest effort of all three individuals to understand the trials and tribulations of pregnancy. Again, his identity is relevant to his understanding of the state of the pregnant lady. Pregnancy as a first-hand state is not in his past, so he must exert greater effort than the mother of three. However, pregnancy is also not in his future, for he is not a member of the group ‘humans who can bear children’. Because of this, whatever level of understanding the man has of the pregnant lady, it is also not the same as the lady with no children. His ability to empathize with a situation so far removed from his sense of identity may become easier when it is cultivated over time. Perhaps he will have a wife who becomes pregnant and can observe the struggles she goes through. Or, he may try harder to envision what it means for a human body, which is different in kind but not altogether unlike his own, to carry another tiny human body inside itself. Maybe there is a perfect string of words that someone will utter which simply ‘clicks’ and he will realize a plateau of understanding previously unexplored.

Whatever the change might be, it is imperative to never stop revisiting these new levels of perspective-taking in others. This is the importance of moral habituation: to nurture over time those actions and emotions in line with our virtues so that we may form habits that are normatively positive and contribute to an overall practice. The man must continue to remind

himself of the struggles that individuals different from himself experience. is true also of the mother of three and the lady with no children. Inevitably, we forget. We forget pain and pleasure. We forget images. Sometimes this happens in a dramatic sense. Other times it is a diminishing salience from our daily lives, 'life-changing' experiences whose effects erode over the years. However, continuing to reflect upon these experiences may eventually lead to a type of wisdom that may be generalized. In other words, we might build a life whose habits are molded and immortalized by our continuing effortful and mindful practice of them, despite their ever-receding fade into memorable obscurity.

## **7 The moral circle**

Our moral circle has undoubtedly expanded over the course of human history (Singer, 1981). Our moral circle is the group of entities in which we identify as worthy of our moral consideration. For example, recall that at it was once acceptable to have slaves, or that animals were not considered to be conscious entities capable of pain or emotions. While there is still much variability around the globe, generally speaking, these beliefs are no longer considered acceptable in the developed world.

Consider how general notions of civility towards animals have changed over time, and the existing hierarchical nuances of human-animal coexistence. It is generally accepted that animals should be free from abuse or unnecessary suffering, and more animals are recognized as having and displaying complex emotions. However, many people would still place humans 'above' animals in terms of status. If given the choice between saving a dog or a baby from drowning, most people choose the baby (Levin, Arluke, & Irvine, 2017). As this last statement is relatively uncontroversial, it is still quite likely that there are people who place certain other human individuals beneath their own pets. As no discussion of morality can ever truly escape Godwin's Law, Hitler was quite fond of his dogs and the Third Reich enacted laws against the inhumane treatment of animals (Sax, 2000). I think this example highlights two things: 1) the inherent contradictory and inconsistent nature of human morality, and 2) the importance of identity (again) when determining the placement of individuals in the circle of moral regard. I do not

refer here to historical explanations, as Hitler is known to value the obedience of his dogs first and foremost. It is only that sometimes a subset of individuals from the closer group (ie. human) can be demoted below a further group (ie. animals). People report feeling greater emotional distress for puppies or adult dogs than for adult humans (Levin, Arluke, & Irvine, 2017). Therefore, the generalizability and gradations of moral emotions becomes more complicated as themes of vulnerability or innocence are introduced (ibid). Surely, this is indicative of some fundamental moral criteria.

Since morality is too broad, this calls for a measure of empathy expansiveness. In other words, when assessing one's allocation of moral entities, it becomes important to situate the participant within, or to present to the participant a context that is specific to understanding empathy. While discussing the moral circle, Pizarro, Detweiler-Bedell, and Bloom (2006) describe the concept of a moral circle as oversimplified, for two reasons: 1) the circle is likely graded, and 2) there is likely to be more than one circle (ibid). For example, there may be a circle for "beings that one should not kill" and another circle for those who fall under our protective wing etc. (pg. 82, Pizarro et al., 2006). Empathy expansiveness refers to the circle of entities that are eligible for expending one's empathic resources. Working on the understanding of this circle not only captures different dimensions of empathy previously neglected, but also refines the concept of one's circle of moral regard. This circle would also have a range of fundamental notions relevant to empathy, such as psychological patiency (ie. hedonic experience), similarity to ourselves etc. It's also possible that a potential solution to one of the downfalls I mentioned earlier about using a measure like the MES, which is that there is no way to distinguish between affective and cognitive empathy. Instead of thinking of a single circle of empathy, one could possibly use two circles of empathy for each respective component. In the context of justice, it seems there might be some evidence for the separation of affective and cognitive empathy. Consider the case when empathy and justice coincide. In a dictator game, Edele et al. (2013) found that affective empathy and justice sensitivity play a role in altruistic sharing. Cognitive empathy did not. Conversely, Decety and Yoder (2015) found that cognitive empathy and empathic concern were the most highly associated with justice sensitivity, rather than emotional (or affective) empathy. For this last study, they defined 'empathic concern' as the motivation to care for another individual's welfare (ibid). However, other than the paradigm examples of autistic or

psychopathic individuals, it's not as clear to what extent these two aspects of empathy dissociate in neurotypical individuals, or if a scale akin to the MES is the appropriate way to analyze them separately.

### 7.1 The moral expansiveness scale (and related scales)

Since the time that I began to work on this thesis, three papers have emerged which are particularly relevant to the topic of measuring empathy expansiveness. The first was by Waytz et al. (2016). Two other related, but different types of empathy instruments also address the same topic –the Moral Expansiveness Scale (MES) and the Empathy Gradient Questionnaire (EGQ). Structurally, I can summarize the approaches into two methods that encompass identity within the concept of empathy expansiveness, or what the EGQ terms as “social distance”:

1. Circles -a high level view of concentric groups of entities placed relative to one another into graded circles giving a score of expansiveness. See Figure 1.
2. Questionnaire -traditional format, with a relatively lesser selection of entities, in which scale items are systematically demarcated (e.g. subscales) into specific types of entities, and compare the relative amount of empathy for each group.

Two scales fall under the first category of circles. The Moral Expansiveness scale proposed by Crimston et al. (2016) does something along these lines, with concentric, graded circles of moral concern (inner, outer, fringe, outside) and an “entity” list (e.g. family, friends, criminals, animals) which they assign to these respective circles. Waytz et al. (2016) also conducted a series of empathy expansive experiments for different political ideologies, one of which involved the modification of Davis’ Interpersonal Reactivity Index subscale for empathic concern. The final experiment involved the allocation of what Waytz et al. referred to as “moral units” , similar to the entity list from Crimston et al. onto “moral rings”. This type of scale can assess the narrowness of one’s capacity for empathy. Rather than ignoring the specificity of the individuals in the questions, these scales re-frame the conflict between specificity and generalization by comparing how responses change when a general person is replaced by a specific person. The nature of this form of measurement is essentially normative in nature, as participants are ranking

entities based on moral evaluations. See Figure 1 below for an illustration of the scale. Accompanied with the scale (not pictured) is an extensive list of entities ranging from family and friends, to refugees and cows etc.

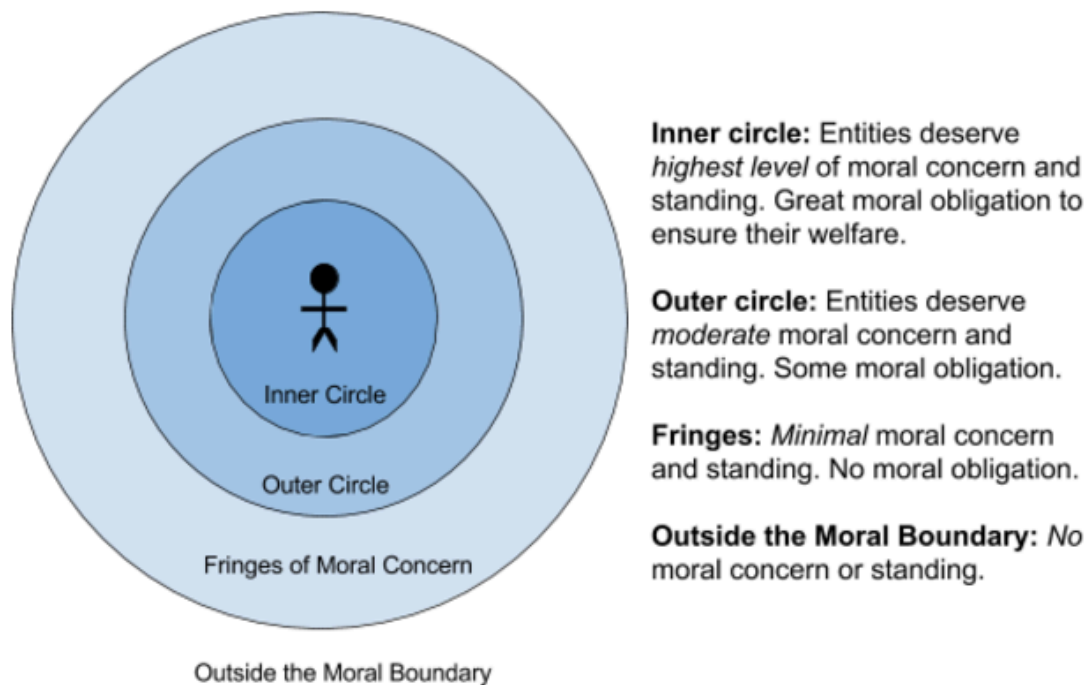


Figure 1. The Moral Expansiveness Scale (MES; adapted from Crimston et al., 2016)

However, it is important to note that the MES as it is would not be a comprehensive measure of empathy. It does not distinguish between measures of affective and cognitive empathy, which some may consider a downside. Additionally, the MES encompasses a range of “moral abilities” which includes empathy, but also others such as compassion and fairness (ibid). So while it becomes easier to measure how we react to specific groups of individuals relative to others, it becomes more difficult to identify other aspects of empathy. Since morality is too broad, this



calls for a measure of empathy expansiveness. In other words, when assessing one's allocation of moral entities, it becomes important to situate the participant within, or to present to the participant a context that is specific to empathy.

Another scale known as the Empathy Gradient Questionnaire (EGQ) falls under the second category. This scale assesses empathy using subscales based on identity (Hollar, 2017). The subscales are as follows: family, friend, peer, distant-other, and species (see Table 2 below). As a psychometric instrument, this scale was designed to measure the “psycho-spatial distance” between the participant and their tendency to empathize with people from identifiable groups (ibid). Tested on a population of 161 individuals, the authors noted an empathy gradient from friend (highest) to species (lowest). However, these results were not significant. The study also did not include a procedure for measuring predictive validity of the scale. Like the MES, the EGQ does not include an affective/cognitive empathy distinction, and contains fewer categories of entities. Unlike the MES, the EGQ is a descriptive measure of empathy which asks about tendencies of the participants in past behavior.

Table 2. The Empathy Gradient Questionnaire (EGQ; Hollar, 2017)

Empathy Subscale	Items
Family	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I become upset when a relative is sick or hurt.</li> <li>2. I constantly worry about my parents or children.</li> <li>3. I often think about my siblings and cousins.</li> <li>4. When I hear that a relative is in trouble, I get upset.</li> </ol>
Friend	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I become very upset when a friend is sick or hurt.</li> <li>2. I worry about what happens to my friends.</li> <li>3. I often think about my friends.</li> <li>4. I become distressed when a friend is in trouble.</li> </ol>
Peer	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I become upset when I see someone hurt, even when I do not know the person very well.</li> <li>2. I worry about what happens to all of my co-workers.</li> <li>3. I often think about what happens to each of my fellow employees.</li> <li>4. I become distressed when a colleague is in trouble.</li> </ol>
Distant Other	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I become upset when I see televised coverage of wars.</li> <li>2. I worry about people living in poverty overseas.</li> <li>3. I often think about oppressed people around the world.</li> <li>4. I often think about inmates in prisons.</li> <li>5. I worry about the homeless people in this country.</li> <li>6. Pictures of refugees upset me.</li> </ol>
Species	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I become upset when I see a dog outside in the cold.</li> <li>2. I worry about the destruction of tropical rainforests.</li> <li>3. I often think about the squirrels and birds outside.</li> <li>4. When I see a dead animal on the highway, I become upset.</li> <li>5. I am concerned about the plight of endangered species.</li> </ol>

I believe the MES and EGQ are scales with approaches that aim in the right direction, but in slightly different ways. There are certain advantages to using an instrument like the EGQ over the MES. Theoretically, the EGQ was created specifically for measuring empathy. At first glance, this is reflected by the nature of the scale items. There are ways that the EGQ can be improved in subsequent versions. Hollar admits there is not yet a measure of predictive validity for the EGQ, and the gradient of empathy was not significant between the different subscales. I think this weak association may be due to the way empathy is represented in the scale items themselves. It is not clear upon closer examination if the scale items are refined in their

characterization of empathy. For example, item number two in the family subscale goes as such “I constantly worry about my parents or children.” This item does not seem to be communicating empathy, but rather worry, or some other form of personal distress which is completely self-directed, as opposed to other-directed. Then there are scale items such as “I often think about my friends” or “I often think about inmates in prison”. I do not think that it is surprising that most people think about their friends more than prison inmates, nor do I find this an interesting or accurate representation of empathy. Although the MES also creates patterns that are a bit unsurprising and conflate empathy with other moral abilities, we are still able to learn more about the role empathy plays when including diverse entities within our moral circle. This is somehow less crude and more relevant than scale items about the amount of “thinking” one does about one’s friends or prison inmates in the EGQ. Of course, the ideal solution would be to create items in the EGQ which explicate empathy in greater precision. By tightening up these aspects of the instrument, I think the EGQ will greatly improve in its capacity to more specifically measure empathy.

In summary, the MES and EGQ are two instruments in what seems to be an emerging and exciting new approach to measuring empathy. By including assessments of empathy that systematically account for identity, researchers can understand changes in empathy in a new way. Ultimately this may trickle down into societal understanding of empathy, which has profound implications for empathy education and practice.

## **8 What does it mean to empathize well?**

Discussing the measurement of expanding empathy amongst different entities eventually leads to the following question: what does it mean to empathize well?

I imagine that a process as complex as empathy begins as simply as any other: as a choice to engage or not to engage. A decision carries with it a sense of urgency if paired with a desired goal or virtue to cultivate: for now, it is expanding one’s empathy to a larger range of individuals/entities. In some cases, empathizing will be easy for all the regular reasons (ie. you

have time, the person is identifiable etc.). At other times, it will be much more difficult. There is evidence that if empathy is believed to be malleable, individuals expend greater effort to try and empathize (Schumann, Zaki, & Dweck, 2014). This is the first stage where virtue ethics may contribute to one's moral growth. Rather than accepting a mindset in which empathy is limited, one must place emphasis on virtues that encourage a connection with a wider circle of entities. By making this one's goal, one may invoke the process of empathy to understand difficult intersubjective situations. Diana Meyers' (1994) feminist approach refers to empathy as "a way of generating proposals" when confronting interpersonal moral issues. Her version of empathy is more accurately defined as empathic moral deliberation, whereby "dissident speech" can be used to "dislodge culturally normative prejudice" (Oxley, 2011). There is a familiar theme in feminist literature whereby a "pedagogy of discomfort" is encouraged to challenge the comfortable or the familiar (Boler & Zembylas, 2003). If this is done over and over again, one might imagine that empathizing in challenging situations will eventually become habitual and skilled.

There may be some people who do not value expanding empathy. They may value bestowing their love and generosity exclusively to those with whom they are close. This may be a character deficit, but it is not necessarily something one may attribute especially to empathy (e.g. Bloom, 2017). Earlier I discussed criticisms of empathy, such as parochialism and innumeracy. However, Cameron, Inzlicht, and Cunningham (2017) argue that empathy is not at odds with reason, but rather, is itself a rational decision. They use cybernetic models to demonstrate that limitations often associated with empathy extend to domain-general features of goal pursuit (ibid). Such an approach is blind to the cognitive/affective dichotomy, and is further encouragement for the reorientation of empathy away from artificial rivalries. For example, consider the evidence in racial pain bias studies. Pro-White pain treatment was reduced in induced empathy groups by 55% (compared to controls) when instructed to imagine how the lives of patients are affected by pain (Drwecki, Moore, Ward, & Prkachin, 2011). Controls were simply instructed to "provide patients with the best care" (ibid). The authors concluded that although empathy might be a source of bias towards racial outgroup members, it may also be a means for reducing bias. Once again, this is suggestive of an appropriate amount of moral concern in a given context. Given this insight, it seems that we should be placing greater emphasis on features of empathy that reflect the nature and quality of our goals or virtues. It is

not solely a matter of logic or emotion in various amounts, but rather fundamental traits of human experience which may overcome superficial differences in pluralistic moral manifestations.

Why might people be resistant to the idea of expanding empathy? While our empathy is not as limited as we may think, this does not change the fact that other aspects of our world are. This may be a result of the boundaries of one's values. Perhaps in some cultures empathy is not meant to be expansive, but to create stronger bonds amongst those with whom we most frequently affiliate, or with whom we have particular obligations. Dworkin (2011) attributes disagreement in moral reasoning as a result of differing conceptual interpretations. In this sense, suppose the differences in the placement of empathy amongst our moral priorities is merely an interpretive issue? This is an argument with hope for amelioration. As Dworkin states: "it is not implausible—on the contrary—to suppose that there are no conflicts but only mutual support in that realm... that any conflicts we find intractable show not disunity but a more fundamental unity of value that produces these conflicts as substantive results" (pg. 11). What this calls for is not an increase/decrease of empathy itself, which I have established is a meaningless cry. Instead, this calls for greater understanding of concepts that are specified in detail and ways peculiar to our own mentalizing and feeling. It is upon discovery of points of clarity, and only then, that we may expect a resonance of the kind we refer to as 'empathy'. I believe the same kind of process can occur on a smaller (and much simpler) level for instances of interpretive disagreement between individuals. In other cases, there may be more practical constraints, such as a limited access to resources or time. Survival instincts have the possibility to override almost any value or norm instilled in us. In this case, I can only point out that the allocation of basic and necessary human resources is almost always political in nature. If there is to be a solution to this, then I suspect it would only follow after an exploration of those interpretive moral disagreements and engagement with the knowledge we obtain thus.

Once we make the decision to engage, the epistemic dimension of empathy begs the normative question: what ought we to do with the information we've acquired via empathy? Even if we become quite good at empathizing with a diverse array of individuals, this does not inform us how we must proceed afterwards. Empathy is not a moral framework. We may only use it as a

means to cultivate certain virtues. This is the second stage which one can frame within virtue ethics. Pedagogical approaches to empathy have stressed that it is not only the presence in which we may learn about the other, but the lack of empathy in which we may learn about ourselves (Kukar, 2016). It may be the case that no action is necessary, that the process of understanding the experience of the other is a valuable task in itself. Much like the King and Mencius, we must ask ourselves why we care more about the ox instead of the sheep.

The current popular discourse of empathy ‘enhancement’ is not properly oriented, and includes terms which are vague. Obama’s statement in 2006: “The biggest deficit that we have in our society and in the world right now is an empathy deficit,” does not give one any indication how empathy is lacking. Obama’s statement illustrates the misalignment between what is known by academics as *empathy* loosely defined, its many modulating factors, and the public understanding of empathy as a moral force.

Empathy can’t be expanded the same way to all agents, because the level of epistemic access we have to the states of different entities varies greatly. What does “the same way” mean in this case? I refer to a level of affective and cognitive effort extended towards strangers, family members etc. that is indistinguishable based on the other’s identity. This is highly improbable, because the foundation of our assessment (ie. the accuracy of the information we gather) is not equal amongst different entities. We are far more likely to accurately assess the state of those closer or familiar to us than those further away, because we simply know them better. For example, I know that when my mother furrows her brows in a particular way that she is most likely problem-solving, while other people might perceive her as angry. If our assessment of someone close to us is wrong, we have access to them and can personally ask them for further clarification. We do not have immediate access to people on the other side of the world, or strangers with whom we have no form of contact. One can experience empathy without accurately assessing the state of the other person. But, I am arguing that the type of empathy based on less accurate information is different from empathy based on more accurate information. To clarify, I am referring to the refinement of input we gather before we empathize, since arguably the full experience of empathy is one in which we also learn new information.

Another advantage to using a virtue ethics approach as an ethical framework for this discussion is that the utilitarian point-of-view does not take into account individual hardship. Those of us who don't have a reason to have empathic concern for a certain other need to develop some skill in order to do so. In the example with the pregnant lady, the man needs to develop his skill of empathic concern more so than the lady with no children, and considerably more so than the mother of three. Amongst the three individuals there is an uneven distribution of skills. Generally speaking this is true for everyone being as we are all more or less likely to empathize with certain individuals. I am not suggesting that acts of basic human decency are feats worthy of considerable praise. On the contrary, it is that we need to be as understanding (dare I say, compassionate?) about the shortcomings of other's empathic limits as we are with our own.

Such limitations are difficult to navigate, but impossibility of an experience, imagined or otherwise, does not diminish the full experience of empathy. I do not deny that we may empathize with, let's say, the plight for food of even the most obscure, hideous deep sea fish if we tried hard enough. I do not consider empathy to be a mirror of the other person's emotions, nor do I think it necessary that our mental states represent the other's situation with perfect accuracy. It is sufficient that there is a certain level of affective congruency with the other's state, and a cognitive awareness of the facts which represents the other's situation in a way that is *good enough*. Even amongst the genuine experiences of empathy, different people will experience states that are congruent with the other to a greater or lesser degree.

## **9 Conclusion**

The wider implications of my arguments thus far may be relevant in current Western discourse. The public still very much believes we need more empathy for the oppressed in the realm of social justice (ie. race relations, gender inequality, LGBTQ+ etc.). I agree. However, I foresee problems with the effectiveness of the current approaches, which radicalizes both sides of conflicts. The message sometimes includes statements along the lines of, for example, "No, White People Will Never Understand the Black Experience" (Wilke, 2015). Indeed, one cannot truly understand the struggles of another person different from themselves. In the pregnant lady example, the man cannot truly understand what it is like to be pregnant. However, using

statements such as “will never understand” focuses on the limitations of the other’s empathy. This may potentially de-incentivize or discourage the other from even trying to understand, which is counter to the aims of these advocacy groups. Again, this is a call for empathy with potentially detrimental effects towards the phenomenon it is meant to foster. Instead, we should remember the following: as our ability to empathize is necessarily informed in part by our identity, we are all limited in our ability to empathize in a skillful way with others of different identities. Therefore, it might be more effective to, for example, have conversations that are educational and non-judgmental in nature. Unlike many other conveniences in our current society, empathy for a distant other is not always one click away. Sometimes it is ten clicks away or one hundred or ten thousand. If possible, it is zero and we need to talk to one another more face to face. In other words, it takes work to empathize and this needs to be communicated alongside calls for more. Additionally, further research needs to investigate how relations are improved between individuals when empathy is explicated in more precise terms. For example, one could compare the effectiveness of calls for “needing more empathy” versus a message such as the “need to understand the situation of this group that is different from you”.

In terms of tests and measures, more studies should incorporate scales such as the MES and the EGQ to compare the salience of identity relative to the identity of the other (amongst different groups). Similar to the way current measures of empathy are used, there can be a before/after manipulation comparison of empathy expansion. Empathy expansion means different things depending on the scale one uses. If it is the MES, then the distribution of entities in the the circle may differ. If it is the EGQ then the number for each identity subscale may differ. It is worth exploring these types of measurements to empirically investigate aspects of empathy that have long been known but have not been documented as rigorously.

The aim of this thesis was a normative exploration of tests and measures of empathy, and to what extent they reflected the identity of the recipient of empathy. I presented an emerging area of research which introduces empathy instruments incorporating this aspect of identity; this is a departure from the cognitive/affective subscale dimension popular in the literature. As I have discussed, this departure is not a divorce, but rather an integration which will allow for greater empirical understanding of the role of identity in empathy. Some scales, such as the MES, are



inherently normative in nature and integrate various moral elements, including empathy, but also moral identity and others. Integration implies balance, which is a notion ideal for a virtue ethics framework. If empathy is to be used as a moral force, then it is imperative that we understand its place within an ethical framework. Before empathizing with someone very different or distant from ourselves, we must first decide to engage with them. Then we must understand what to do with the information we've acquired post empathic experience. What it means to be more or less empathetic and how to practice it appropriately are problems that one must cultivate throughout one's life.

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