

Do We Need Empathy for Moral Motivation?

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It is an old worry that moral principles or propositions do not motivate merely in virtue of someone holding them to be true. There are various ways to try to solve this problem, the most recent one being to claim that core moral principles evoke empathy or concern. Martin Hoffman (2000) and Shaun Nichols (2004) argue that in development, moral norms become linked either with empathy (Hoffman) or concern (Nichols), with the result that people are motivated to act on the core moral norms they hold. For Hoffman, empathy is necessary for moral motivation, and for Nichols concern seems necessary for some moral motivation. Core moral principles and propositions are those that are at the center of morality, they are usually concerned with others' welfare, and with justice and rights. You empathize with someone's emotion if you feel the same sort of emotion *because* you believe that they feel it (Sober & Wilson, 1998). Concern is a negative emotional reaction to a range of negative emotions felt by others – including sadness, distress, hurt, and pain (Nichols, 2004). This is a promising approach as the literature on empathy provides abundant evidence that people who feel for others in need are more likely to help or assist them (Batson, 1991). It is one of the more attractive solutions to the problem coming from a largely sentimentalist side. It has the advantage of locating the source of moral motivation in altruistic emotions, which does something to assuage worries about interest-relative moral norms (Foot, 1978).

Despite all the advantages, the idea that the ability to feel empathy or concern is necessary to be motivated by core moral norms is problematic. This becomes clear when we consider the norm prohibiting lying. The consequence of motivationally backing this prohibition by empathy or concern is unacceptable. It forces us to accept that it is impossible for an agent to be motivated to do what she thinks is morally right all the time, even in principle. The reason is that both empathy and concern are emotions that are responsive, not to the circumstances that others are in, but to the emotions that you believe them to have. If you believe that a person is fine, you cannot feel empathically sad for them or feel concern for them. There may be many situations where people want you to lie to them, because they will find the truth too upsetting. In these cases, you cannot muster empathy or concern for them to motivate you not to lie to them, even if you think that lying to them is wrong. Consequently, if this view is right you cannot always be motivated to act

morally, which is surely unacceptable. The same line of argument can be used for other norms too, e.g. norms of equality.

The norm against harming others might be the best candidate for the necessity of empathy and concern for moral motivation. It is popular to use evidence from psychopathy here. Psychopaths lack empathy or concern and they have no compunction about harming others. It is tempting to conclude that they are not motivated not to harm others because they lack empathy or concern (Mei-Tal, 2004; Nichols, 2004). The problem is that there are people who are not able to empathize with others or feel concern for them (Kaszniak et al., 1999) – people with frontal lobe damage – who do not generally harm others. It appears that they can be motivated not to harm others even though they are as lacking in empathy or concern as psychopaths. Consequently, it is possible to be motivated not to harm others even if one cannot feel for them. It seems plausible that this alternative source of motivation is also a source of *moral* motivation. If so, the ability to empathize with others or feel concern for them is not necessary to be morally motivated.

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