Empathy and Fruitful Moral Theory

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Debates in moral philosophy and empirical moral psychology have often been framed as a contest between reason and emotion. Following Plato (375 BCE/2000) and Kant (1785/2012), most philosophers have tended to view reason as the primary guide to morality and the emotions as generally corrupting influences that we must steer clear of. Hume (1739) argued instead that emotion plays the primary role in moral cognition, challenging the dominant philosophical narrative. We see this contest framing playing out at various times in moral philosophy and also in the work of moral psychologists like Kohlberg (1973) and Haidt (2001) who argued, respectively, for more Kantian and more Humean positions on these issues.

More recently, empathy has taken on a role in moral psychological debates quite similar to that of emotion above, where critics have argued that empathy is biased, parochial, and incompatible with careful consideration of large-scale moral problems (Bloom, 2016; Prinz, 2011). On this basis, empathy skeptics have argued that empathy should be stricken from our moral judgments to the extent possible.

This chapter challenges this conclusion from a novel, practically-focused perspective. Moral and political concepts, in my view, are not only supposed to reflect truths about how we should live with one another but also actually help us to do so – that is why we have them in the first place. In other words, they are supposed to be "fruitful," helping us address practical problems that inevitably arise in collective and cooperative living (Lindauer, 2025). We must thus ask whether empathy might contribute to fruitful moral theorizing, in light of our best scientific evidence and theoretical considerations. I will argue that empathy is not only likely to aid moral theory in being fruitful but may already be embedded within influential exemplars of practically-impactful philosophy.

1. Empathy and the Focus on Perspective Taking

To begin, it will be helpful to discuss what I mean by the term "empathy" and describe the aspects of it that seem most conducive to playing a role in fruitful moral theory. Researchers working on empathy typically describe three related but distinguishable psychological capacities (Davis 1983; Decety & Cowell, 2014; Decety and Yoder 2016). The first is variously referred to as "emotional empathy," "affective contagion," or "affective sharing," and is the phenomenon of feeling emotions or other forms of affect in response to perceiving what we take to be the same type of affect in others. For example, we experience this form of empathy when we see someone who is sad and feel an immediate tinge of sadness as if theirs was our own, or when we see another person with an injury and feel a pain sensation on our own body in the place of the

injury. A second and distinct capacity is what is called "cognitive empathy" or "perspective taking," whereby we take another individual's point of view and consider what they are thinking or feeling. A third capacity is "empathic concern," where empathizing with another person motivates us to try to help or care for them in some way. With each of these capacities, it is noteworthy that the empathizing person understands that the mental states of others that they are responding to are not just their own mental states. This is the case even though empathy has been found to close the distance between our conception of ourselves and our conception of others (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000).

Notably, the distinction between affective contagion and perspective taking is both psychologically and philosophically important. The Scottish Enlightenment philosophers David Hume (1739) and Adam Smith (1759) were the main thinkers in the Western tradition to give sustained attention to empathy and their views emphasized these capacities differently. While both used the term "sympathy" in place of empathy, Hume's account of sympathy focused on affective contagion, while Smith gave a place to contagion in his moral theory but treated perspective taking as far more crucial to moral thought. For Smith, our evaluations of and interactions with one another regularly involve this sort of imaginative projection, attempting to put ourselves into one another's perspectives. Further, when we take up the perspective of an impartial outsider or "spectator" in evaluating others' sentiments and motives, those evaluations become moral. I will return to Smith's impartial spectator, but it is worth noting that even with Hume and Smith a distinction between these empathic capacities emerges.

With this working characterization of empathy before us, I will now turn to describe the fruitfulness perspective that I am bringing to bear on debates about empathy. It is worth noting here that I will also be arguing that empathy skeptics have sometimes been too quick to treat concerns with one aspect of empathy, affective contagion, as bearing on all of empathy. Perspective taking has been shown to carry distinctive prosocial benefits and, I will argue, has played a significant role in contributions to philosophy that aim to help us solve practical problems.

2. Fruitfulness in Moral Theory

The focus on whether moral and political philosophy can help us solve practical problems in the real world may seem at first like an odd turn of thought. After all, I'm primarily trained as a philosopher, not an organizer or politician. I have argued, however, in my recent book *The Fruitfulness of Normative Concepts* (Lindauer, 2025) that the normative concepts of moral and political philosophy are supposed to help us solve practical problems that inevitably arise in our interactions with one another. To see this point, take a concept like 'justice.' What would it mean to have a concept of justice best suited to angels, which I'll stipulatively describe as beings with no material needs, unlimited selfless intentions and attention to give to others, and no susceptibility to scarcity, envy, or any of the other features that give rise to morally problematic behavior in humans? To paraphrase James Madison (1788), if we were angels there would be no need for justice. If this is right, the core philosophical concept in contemporary political philosophy 'justice' is only worth having in our cognitive repertoire because we are imperfect beings facing practical problems that arise largely as a result of these imperfections. I see this as

an important clue that philosophers like Aristotle, Karl Marx, John Rawls, Margaret Urban Walker, Elizabeth Anderson, Amartya Sen, Charles Mills, and others have been right to regard at least part of the task of philosophy as a practical one – helping us figure out how to live in the best ways possible, both as individuals and members of collectives.

Notably, to examine whether philosophical concepts can succeed in helping us to solve practical problems, we need to employ the tools of the empirical social sciences. I am also trained as an empirical moral psychologist and co-direct a research lab at the CUNY Graduate Center (with psychologist Ana Gantman). I work closely with colleagues in psychology and adjacent fields to try to better understand which philosophical ideas have the best chance of improving how we respond to important practical problems that we face in the real world.

The theory that I develop in *The Fruitfulness of Normative Concepts* provides a multidimensional framework for examining the ways that different concepts can be more and less conducive to practical problem solving. Moral and political concepts (like 'justice,' 'solidarity,' and others) are fruitful to the extent that they motivate the right kinds of behavior when internalized, prevent the wrong kinds of behavior, help us fight back against problematic social phenomena like bias and prejudice, give rise to consensus among people from diverse perspectives, and provide helpful action guidance on how to solve practical problems. We must consult and sometimes conduct new empirical research to evaluate normative concepts along these lines, assessing the extent to which different concepts can help individuals and collectives solve practical problems they face in particular contexts and at particular points in time. Hence, the approach that I argue for gives an important role to empirical research in moral and political theory, and offers a new justification for philosophers in these areas conducting empirical research on these topics. The fruitfulness approach builds on rather than replacing traditional philosophical theorizing, by asking us to examine the extent to which philosophical ideas that are already well-supported on purely theoretical grounds meet these additional practical desiderata.

3. Empathy and Fruitfulness

From the standpoint of fruitfulness, then, we ask whether moral concepts and the principles, theories, norms, and arguments that utilize them are more or less likely to be fruitful if they make use of empathy. To assess whether empathy can play a role in fruitful moral theory, it is important to ask how far the considerations offered by critics of empathy go, and whether positive support for empathy's role in fruitfulness can be found.

The first major type of criticism put forward by empathy skeptics is that empathy is subject to "here and now" biases that undermine appropriate and impartial moral thinking. Prinz (2011) and Bloom (2016) argue that empathy tends to focus our attention on individuals who are close to us or perceived to be like us in ways that are incompatible with an impartial moral stance.

For Prinz (2011), factors influencing empathy include whether the object of concern is cute, salient to us, physically near to us, and other similarity-based factors such as whether they share our race, ethnicity, or other forms of likeness. There is some evidence that we tend to experience more empathy for members of our ingroups, whereas we tend to experience pain at

the good fortune and happiness at the misfortune of outgroups (Cikara et al., 2014), and that empathy decreases with perceived social distance (Bruneau et al., 2017).

Relatedly, Bloom (2016) emphasizes empathy's susceptibility to the "identifiable victim effect" whereby we focus on one person in need rather than many. There is considerable evidence in moral psychology that we experience "psychic numbing" in response to the suffering of groups of people (Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Lifton, 1967; Slovic, 2007), and Bloom sees empathy as facilitating this because it is like a "spotlight," directing our attention narrowly at individuals. Jordan et al. (2016) provide evidence that they take to show that concern, rather than empathy, motivates altruism. Bloom also argues that for large scale moral problems, a psychological process like empathy that focuses heavily on individuals may not be up to the task of motivating careful thought or action.

What should we make of these concerns from the perspective of fruitfulness? If empathy really gives rise to morally problematic forms of partiality and leads us to ignore important moral problems in favor of less important causes and issues, it may seem that empathy should not play a role in fruitful moral theorizing, which aims to help solve important practical problems. However, we should first note that the first-order ethical questions about what forms of partiality may be morally acceptable, or even morally obligatory, are unavoidable for the critic making this charge. While morality may aim to increase our impartial concern, it is not at all obvious that we are morally required or even permitted to be perfectly impartial. A life without any partiality towards one's life partner, one's children, or others we participate in special relationships with is not obviously morally preferable to a life of complete impartiality. Of course, some forms of partiality are clearly wrongful, and evidence that empathy contributes to them would be a serious strike against it. But we cannot put the cart before the horse, concluding too quickly that any form of partiality is necessarily wrong.

Second, recent research actually suggests that empathy and impartiality often go hand in hand rather than working at cross purposes. This is relevant to the question of fruitfulness because if empathy undermines impartial thought and action, as empathy skeptics claim, this should show up in empirical research on people who exhibit high levels of impartiality, but that is not the pattern the evidence bears out. While Bloom (2016) cites earlier research suggesting that "extraordinary altruists," people who perform extremely altruistic acts like donating a kidney to a stranger, don't score higher on standard empathy tests than the general population (Marsh et al., 2014), recent evidence suggests that they do experience and report higher levels of empathy (Marsh, 2019; Law et al., 2026). Further, "effective altruists" who are part of a movement to give as impartially as they can to the most effective charities working on global poverty and other serious moral problems do not display lower empathy than the general public (Law et al., 2026). Law and colleagues also find that, in the general public, greater reasoning ability gives rise to prioritization of impartial effectiveness only when empathy is high, and empathy has a positive effect on impartial effectiveness only when reasoning ability is high. This research suggests that both empathy and reasoning play important roles in impartial and impactful moral behavior. Notably, impartial moral beliefs and actions do not seem to lead to negative effects on close relationships – there is evidence of "value homophily" between impartial altruists and their close others, who also tend to embrace and hence approve of impartial altruism as a value orientation (Amormino 2024).

A further point worth noting is that Prinz (2011) and Bloom (2016) focus almost exclusively on affective contagion in their critiques. This is striking given that perspective taking has been found to have important prosocial effects. Decety and Yoder (2016) find important evidence that perspective taking has a significant impact on our sensitivity to justice and injustice done to others that we do not have preexisting ties to. Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000) find evidence that perspective taking can decrease stereotyping and in-group favoritism, reducing the perceived distinctness of the self and others. If we do not treat perspective taking as part of what we are considering when we talk about empathy, empathy will not be credited with these benefits.

This can also get in the way of comparing the benefits of empathy and other psychological mechanisms. Jordan et al. (2016) argue that their results show that concern rather than empathy motivates altruism and operationalize empathy primarily in terms of affective contagion. However, they found a strong relationship between concern and perspective taking across their studies (p. 1,115). Given this, their results could instead be interpreted as speaking to the relationship between cognitive empathy and concern in giving rise to altruism.

However, even concerns about affective contagion may go too far, particularly in taking emotion sharing to be uniquely risky. Consider the contrasting psychological processes recommended by Prinz (2011) and Bloom (2016) of, respectively, anger and rational compassion. It is clear that anger can misfire, be applied more to outgroups than ingroups, and be impacted by racial, gender, and other biases. Bloom's rational compassion may seem to fare better in this regard. It may seem prima facie that general concern for others moderated by rationality presents no risk of harm. Yet as Bloom himself notes, a cold and calculating morality can be dangerous, as in the case of Nazi doctors who performed horrific experiments on Jewish prisoners by convincing themselves that it was necessary for the Nazi project (p. 16). This is not to empirically reject either Prinz's focus on anger or Bloom's focus on rational compassion, but to note that their concerns about affective contagion likely overgeneralize as risks also attend to their preferred psychological mechanisms.

4. Taking Stock, Empathy's Potential Role in Existing Work

Having responded to some key challenges from empathy skeptics and discussed many of the positive effects of empathy, our best scientific evidence supports the claim that moral and political theory aimed at addressing real world problems may productively draw on empathy. How might this be done? In what follows, I will suggest that three highly influential philosophical contributions may be fruitful, in part, because they encourage perspective taking. I will begin with Peter Singer's "shallow pond" argument, then turn to John Rawls' "original position" thought experiment, and finally look at Adam Smith's "impartial spectator" device. While these considerations are somewhat speculative, they suggest that, much as empathy critics have overemphasized the risks of empathy, they may also have ignored the role that perspective taking already plays in fruitful philosophical theory.

4.1 The Shallow Pond

Peter Singer's "shallow pond" argument is one of the most influential arguments in the history of moral philosophy, and no doubt also one of the most impactful. The argument was first stated in Singer's well-known essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (1972), where Singer notes that an application of a plausible principle of beneficence is that if one is walking past a shallow pond and sees a child drowning, one is required to save the child despite the cost of muddying one's clothes. The controversial step is Singer's insight that most of us are in a position to prevent many children from dying of easy to beat diseases and causes all the time, by donating to effective charities working on global poverty. Hence, we ought to be donating considerable amounts to these charities, or we must acknowledge that we are not unlike someone who would walk past a child drowning in a pond. When Singer makes the argument in more public-facing work, he asks people to put themselves in the position of the person considering whether to save the child. The statement of the argument in his influential popular book *The Life You Can Save*, which follows how the argument is presented in many other essays and public lectures, is given in the second person: "On your way to work, you pass a small pond…As you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond…What should you do?" (Singer, 2009/2019, pp. 3–4).

I have skipped over portions of the text for brevity, but I take this as sufficient to show that putting the argument in terms that engage our capacity for perspective taking is powerful. From the perspective of the person facing the child in the shallow pond, it is clear what one ought to do. Singer's argument opens up the possibility that their perspective is in fact our own with respect to living children and other people in severe poverty right now. This drives home the point that empathy may not need only to be focused on people who are suffering or victims to have prosocial impacts, but also on people making moral choices, where in virtue of taking up their perspective, we learn something about what is morally required of us and are motivated to act accordingly.

4.2 The Original Position

A further contribution to normative theory that very clearly makes use of perspective taking is John Rawls' "original position" thought experiment (Rawls, 1971). The original position invites us to take the perspective of each other person who will live with us in a hypothetical society started from the initial point at which we are formulating the principles that will govern its institutions. These are the principles of justice for Rawls; the principles we would all agree to from a fair contractual procedure.

Rawls (1971) himself does not claim that the original position depends on empathy, but the important work of Susan Moller Okin (1998) suggests that its most defensible interpretation, compatible with gender equality, depends on empathy being activated. She notes that since participants in the original position "cannot think from the position of nobody" they must instead "think from the perspective of *everybody*, in the sense of *each in turn*," considering which principles different members of society would accept and reject (p. 101). To do so requires

"strong empathy" (*ibid.*) on her view and engagement with perspectives quite different from one's own, as well as caring to learn about these other perspectives. Thus, to actually carry out the original position thought experiment, which has empirically been found to have prosocial impacts (Huang et al., 2019), we must lean into its focus on taking the perspectives of others, engaging our capacity for cognitive empathy.

4.3 The Impartial Spectator

A final example of an important philosophical development that employs perspective taking is Adam Smith's "impartial spectator" and broader projectivist moral theory (Smith, 1759). For Smith, it is central to the kind of being that we are that we have the capacity to take one another's perspectives. While Smith holds that affective contagion can help us access the emotions of others, he emphasizes that perspective taking allows us to engage with their points of view and emotions from a distinct vantagepoint (Fleischacker, 2019, p. 30).

For Smith (1759), morality involves norms and ideals that emerge when we engage in this process of perspective taking, considering what others think and feel. Our evaluations of ourselves and others become moral when we assess our own and others' sentiments and motives from the perspective of an impartial spectator, a "man within" that judges from an impartial point of view.

In recent work, Justin Bruner and I have found that people tend to view the impartial spectator as an attractive way of coming to principles for arranging and reforming society's institutions (Bruner & Lindauer, 2020). As Sen notes (2011), Smith's impartial spectator is the perspective of a human being independent of nationality, and hence may provide a wide range of perspectives to draw upon in considering both our own actions and broader questions of interactions between persons anywhere. Cognitive empathy is central to Smith's moral theory and moral psychology, which continue to be compelling and attractive philosophical contributions that may be useful in solving practical problems that we inevitably face in our interactions with one another.

None of this should be taken to suggest that perspective taking is a social panacea. The range of perspectives people generally take is impacted by ingroup-outgroup bias, though the effects of this bias can be attenuated by reducing the perception that these groups are unified and coherent entities (Cikara et al., 2014). Perspective taking may also face barriers to accuracy across groups and, relatedly, be impacted by affective polarization, but correcting these inaccurate perceptions may help to address these drawbacks (Murray et al., forthcoming). Whether or not all downsides of cognitive empathy can be addressed through interventions, as discussed above, there is significant evidence that perspective taking can play important prosocial roles. Further, as I have argued here, perspective taking may be playing a key role in some of the most influential and impactful philosophical theorizing on moral and political issues.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined the role that empathy should play in moral cognition through the lens of fruitful moral theory – what types of theories of individual and political morality are best suited to help us solve practical problems that inevitably arise in collective and cooperative living. Perspective taking or "cognitive empathy," in particular, emerges as an especially potent aspect of empathy that can contribute to impartial moral attitudes and actions. In the course of defending empathy from objections, I presented some positive reasons to think that empathy is important to moral thought and action, and can make us more sensitive to harms and injustices faced by others. These points suggest that empathy is well poised to play a role in fruitful moral theories. Finally, I considered the possibility that three key philosophical contributions – Singer's (1972/2019) shallow pond argument, Rawls' (1971) original position thought experiment, and Smith's (1759) impartial spectator device – may already employ perspective taking in ways that make them fruitful.

In the chapter that follows this one, Antti Kauppinen (forthcoming) argues that empathy may sometimes prevent us from engaging in risky forms of impartial moral thought and action, helping us focus on the suffering of individuals and oppose the use of them as means to promote the overall good. In terms of my fruitfulness framework, Kauppinen may be interpreted as pointing to the ways empathy can be fruitful in preventing the wrong kinds of attitudes and behaviors towards others. Of course, normative theory is unavoidable in determining what ways of focusing on individuals are morally appropriate, but once we have sorted out our normative commitments, my view holds that we must ask whether empathy is conducive to fulfilling them. At this juncture, my view is that our best philosophical reasoning and scientific evidence suggest that empathy can help our normative concepts to be practically fruitful, and that we should be careful to respect its limits while harnessing its power to promote moral thought and action.

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