

Knowing How It Feels and Feeling It

Compassion, Empathy, and Epistemology

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Outline

Different philosophers have semi-independently claimed that (something like) ‘empathy’ has a distinctive epistemic value.

Rough Idea: By ‘feeling our way into’ another person’s conscious state, we can know/represent/understand them in ways that we otherwise couldn’t.

Two obvious questions:

- **What sort of epistemic value is this?**
- **What sort of state has this value (i.e. what is the relevant sort of ‘empathy’?)?**

Outline

- Section 1: Marshall on Being In Touch
- Section 2: Smith on Knowing What It's Like
- Section 3: Zahavi on Perceiving Other's Experiences
- Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

Section 1: Marshall on Being In Touch

Colin Marshall is the most ambitious. He tries to go from

- A. Claims about the epistemic value of ‘compassion’*, to
- B. An answer to the question ‘why be moral?’

Tagline: “...*only good people can perceive sentient creatures as they really are, whereas selfish and indifferent people cannot fully face reality.*” (2018, p.157)

*He notes: “*The term I use... is ‘compassion,’ even though the term ‘empathy’ might also fit (‘sympathy’ is also a reasonable contender).*” (2018, p.12)



Section 1: Marshall on Being In Touch

What sort of epistemic value is this?

Marshall says that compassion involves the “irreplaceable epistemic good” of “being in touch” (2018, p.47):

“...being in touch is a three-place relation between a subject of experience (S), an object that is represented (O), and a property of that object (P):

S is in touch with property P of O just in case:

- 1. O has P*
- 2. S has a representation of O in which*
 - a. O is phenomenologically given, and*
 - b. P is revealed to S.”*

Section 1: Marshall on Being In Touch

Being in touch combines ‘phenomenological givenness’ with ‘revelation’.

These are both epistemically valuable, but being in touch has a special value that goes beyond the mere sum of the values of givenness and revelation.

But what are ‘givenness’ and ‘revelation’?

Section 1: Marshall on Being In Touch

What is ‘givenness’ (sometimes called ‘presence’)?

“In normal perception, we are tempted to think that our minds are “open” to the world and are presented with real things, and we are not tempted to think this when we merely imagine things. This is a matter of the represented objects seeming real in their very representation... This seeming realness might involve a special conscious quality (e.g., vivacity) or something belief-like. There are interesting questions about how sharp the perception/imagination distinction really is and how to explain it, but I will not tackle those questions. The distinction is intuitive on its own.” (2018, p.54)

Section 1: Marshall on Being In Touch

What is ‘revelation’?

“This notion of revelation may not be definable in more basic terms, so the best way to make it clear involves examples. Consider again Jackson’s case of Mary, who is raised in a black-and-white room and acquires perfect exam-passing knowledge about redness and seeing red... when Mary later leaves the room and sees something red, it seems like she gains something with respect to a certain property. Regardless of whether we think that property is physical or mental, we can grant that when Mary sees red, she makes an epistemic gain. This gain is the revelation of some property.” (2018, p.55)

Section 1: Marshall on Being In Touch

What sort of state has this value?

The relevant sense of ‘compassion’/‘empathy’ comes from the criteria of ‘being in touch’.

“Rahman... see[s] a wombat that is struggling to free its injured leg from a vicious steel jaw trap. Rahman is pained by the sight and feels moved to help...” (2018, pp.39-40)

“It is important that Rahman is pained in his very experience of the wombat - this is why he is in touch with the wombat’s pain... Condition 1 requires that the wombat have the property of being in pain... Condition 2a requires that Rahman have a presentation of the wombat as given. Rahman has that, since he sees the wombat... condition 2b [requires] that the very same representation in virtue of which 2a is satisfied for Rahman also reveals the property of pain to Rahman.” (2018, p.64)

Section 1: Marshall on Being In Touch

So compassion with a creature in (e.g.) pain requires:

A single representation which both ‘gives’ the creature and also ‘reveals’ the nature of pain.

Since Marshall thinks that “Resemblance is necessary for the revelation of properties like pain” (2018, p.71), this representation must itself resemble pain.

In short, compassionate pain is a state that is painful and which ‘gives’ the other as in pain.

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Section 2: Smith on Knowing What It's Like

Joel Smith also argues for a distinctive epistemic role for something he calls 'empathy'.

He seems to be interested in something like what Marshall calls 'revelation', but not what Marshall calls 'presence'/'givenness'.



Section 2: Smith on Knowing What It's Like

What sort of epistemic value is this?

“the distinctive epistemological contribution of empathy is that it provides knowledge of how others feel....this seems to be something that only empathy achieves.” (2017, p.713)

This is distinct from knowledge of *what* others feel, which can come from many sources (e.g. testimony, inference, observation).

Section 2: Smith on Knowing What It's Like

What kind of state has this value?

“I propose the following:

A empathises with B if and only if

(1) A is consciously aware that B is ψ ,

(2) A is consciously aware of what being ψ feels like,

(3) On the basis of (1) and (2), A is consciously aware of how B feels.”

(2017, p.713)

Section 2: Smith on Knowing What It's Like

Let's unpack condition (2) there:

“in order to know what being ψ feels like A must be acquainted with the feel of ψ , for she must be able to think, ‘ ψ feels like this’.

To be acquainted with the feel of ψ , A must have experienced some state that feels that way. The most obvious way to satisfy (2), then, is if A is currently ψ .” (2017, p.714)

If A is currently ψ , then they will be in a state which, in Marshall's terms, ‘reveals’ the nature of ψ .

So the most obvious form of Smithian ‘empathy’ also meets the ‘revelation’ clause in the definition of Marshallian ‘compassion’.

Section 2: Smith on Knowing What It's Like

However, it's not clear Smithian empathy always involves revelation:

“it may be... possible for A to know that being ψ feels like this where the inner demonstrative picks out the affective character of ψ preserved in episodic memory...

Allowing for this is in accordance with at least one of our ordinary ways of speaking. For it can be entirely natural for Anita to say that she empathises with Betty's sadness since she, Anita, was in a similar situation last year but happily feels much better now. This is, I suggest, what we have in mind when we say, 'Yep, I know that feeling'.” (2017, p.714)

Section 2: Smith on Knowing What It's Like

Marshall at one point says that:

“A representation R reveals a property P just in case any subject who had R would have P revealed to her.” (2018, p.57)

Suppose I know that ‘ ψ feels like *this*’ because the inner demonstrative ‘*this*’ picks out “the affective character of ψ preserved in episodic memory”.

Am I in a state such that any subject who had that state would understand how ψ feels?

If I am, then Smithian empathy guarantees Marshallian revelation. If not, it doesn't.

Either way, there is no requirement of givenness, so Smithian empathy isn't Marshallian compassion.

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Section 3: Zahavi on Perceiving Other's Experiences

Zahavi aims to give a 'non-simulationist' account of 'empathy', to reclaim the concept from simulation theorists like Goldman.

Unlike Smith, Zahavi's main interest seems to be something like Marshall's notion of 'presence'/'givenness'.



Section 3: Zahavi on Perceiving Other's Experiences

What sort of epistemic value is this?

Zahavi argues that empathy gives us a kind of perceptual access to other minds that involves neither inference nor imagination:

“When I experience the facial expressions or meaningful actions of an other, I am experiencing foreign subjectivity, and not merely imagining it, simulating it or theorizing about it. I am experiencing the other him- or herself, and not merely some theoretical or imagined construct, some simulation or simulacrum.” (2008, pp.519)

Section 3: Zahavi on Perceiving Other's Experiences

Zahavi draws almost exactly the same perception-imagination contrast that Marshall does:

“For comparison, consider the case of perception. (1) I can theorize about the taste of Papaya juice, (2) I can imagine what its taste must be like, and (3) I can drink and experience the taste. To see the sorrow and pain in the other's face has more in common with 3, than with 1 or 2.” (2008, p.519)

So it seems Zahavi is interested in states that ‘give’ the other, or make them ‘present’, in Marshall's sense.

Section 3: Zahavi on Perceiving Other's Experiences

However, he does not seem to make a claim for anything like 'revelation':

“when saying that empathy can provide a special kind of understanding, this is not meant to suggest that empathy provides an especially profound or deep kind of understanding. In order to obtain that, theoretical inferences and imaginative simulations might very well be needed. No, the specificity of the access is due to the fact that it is basic and intuitive; that is, the empathized experience is given directly as existing here and now.” (2015, p.151)

Section 3: Zahavi on Perceiving Other's Experiences

And he seems to actively deny any Marshallian revelation-by-resemblance:

“empathic acquaintance doesn't presuppose or entail sharing in any straightforward sense of the term. To empathically understand that your friend loves his wife is quite different from loving his wife yourself.” (2015, p.150)

Section 3: Zahavi on Perceiving Other's Experiences

What sort of state has this value?

It's not clear that Zahavi, or the tradition he is drawing on, has any explicit *definition* of the thing they call 'empathy':

“Empathy is a basic, irreducible, form of intentionality that is directed towards the experiences of others.” (2008, p.517)

“I am obviously not denying that my conscious recognition of, say, emotional expressions in others is subserved by various sub-personal mechanisms. The crucial question though is to what extent such mechanisms involve routines that merit [personal-level descriptions such as] simulations.” (2008, p.519)

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Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

The paradigmatic case of empathy is an altruistic response to someone in our immediate presence.

But what about

1. A sadistic but insightful response to someone in our immediate presence?
2. An altruistic response to what we know will happen soon, or is happening far away?

Do these count as ‘empathy’?

Do these share the epistemic value of the paradigmatic cases?

Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

Take the sadistic ‘empath’ first.

For Marshall, since compassion is defined as resembling the positive or negative states of the other, it automatically carries some degree of altruistic motivation.

“In general, I assume that agents who feel pain (compassionate or otherwise) are motivated, to some degree, to change things in a way that gets rid of that pain... a connection between affect and felt motivation is one part of agential well-functioning.”

(2018, pp.233-234)

Someone who has no inclination to help, isn’t feeling this sort of ‘empathy’, and isn’t ‘in touch with’ the other’s pain.

Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

However, both Zahavi and Smith accept this figure as genuinely empathising and as possessing the relevant epistemic value.

“On the account that I have been outlining, it is possible for A to empathise with B whilst caring nothing for her plight. It is common to cite, for example, a torturer who, on my account, ‘empathises’ with his victim the better to inflict pain...” (Smith 2017, p.716)

“it is possible to empathize with somebody without feeling any sympathy... Just think of the skilled interrogator or the sadist. Sadistic cruelty does not merely consist in failing to notice the other’s pain, but in empathically enjoying it (Scheler, 1954, p. 14).” (Zahavi 2008, p.516)

Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

Marshall can agree that the cruel person has Smithian ‘empathy’ *and* Zahavian ‘empathy’.

But he disagrees that the cruel person can have all the epistemic values. He considers a character called ‘Rupert’:

“Rahman and Rupert are taking a walk. They see a wombat that is struggling to free its injured leg from a vicious steel jaw trap. Rahman is pained by the sight and feels moved to help. Rupert, not pained at all by the sight, steps back to watch Rahman with cool curiosity.” (2018, pp.39-40)

Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

Since Rupert lacks compassion, he is not ‘in touch with’ the wombat’s pain.

“Rupert also has an experience in which the wombat is given (he sees the wombat too), but that experience does not reveal the property of pain to him, even if he has other representations that do.” (2018, p.64)

“Seeing the pain in the wombat’s struggles might require having experienced pain oneself. If so, then someone who had the former experience would also know what pain is like. But it would not be the perceptual experience that reveals the pain to the subject...” (2018, p.72)

Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

What do we think of this?

- You might deny that there is any special epistemic value to Marshall's notion of 'being in touch'.
- You might deny that, as defined, 'being in touch' is only available to compassionate responders.
- You might deny that 'compassion', defined in terms of resemblance, is sufficient for altruistic motivation.

But the basic structure of Marshall's picture can at least explain why he takes a different line on sadistic empathies than Smith and Zahavi do.

Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

Next consider our representation of absent targets. This can obviously count as empathy in Smith's sense.

But it seems like it can't count as empathy in Zahavi's sense:

“One implication (and limitation) of the phenomenological proposal is that by highlighting and emphasizing the intuitive character of empathy, it also restricts it to face-to-face-based forms of interpersonal encounter... in colloquial speech, it makes perfect sense to say that we can also empathize with [absent] individuals... For the phenomenologists such uses of the term must at the very least be considered derivative.” (2015, pp.151-152)

Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

Zahavi is explicit that this stops ‘empathy’ in his sense from having any essential role in morality:

“...any claim to the effect that, say, people in Copenhagen felt empathy with those affected by the earthquake and tsunami in Tōhoku in 2011 might be problematic in that it blurs the distinction not only between empathy and sympathy, but also between empathy understood as a perception-based direct acquaintance with the minds of others and some kind of imaginative projection or theoretical inference.

Thus ... the present proposal doesn't support or accord with the idea that empathy is per se morally significant and basically equivalent with compassion.” (2015, p.152)

Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

Hasn't Marshall painted himself into a corner here?

The epistemic difference between the sadist and the compassionate person lay in how revelation related to 'presence'.

Surely, empathy with future, past, distant, or merely possible people must lack 'presence' altogether (they're not present!).

Does this mean it's definitionally *impossible* to feel compassion for them?

Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

Marshall does not draw this conclusion. Instead, he broadens the notion of ‘presence’:

“One cloudy winter night, Leila and Natalia are discussing the arrangement of the stars in the Big Dipper. They have all the same test-passing propositional knowledge about the stars. Leila, though, can ‘see the constellation in her mind’s eye.’ Her experience seems much like a memory, but with the feeling that that is... how things would look if she could see the relevant part of the sky now. Natalia, by contrast, can quickly and reliably assemble a picture in her imagination based on her propositional knowledge. That picture does not seem to her like seeing with her mind’s eye, though she correctly believes that her imaginative picture corresponds to how things are.

Leila’s mental image of the constellation presents its object as real... [and] is intuitively epistemically better off than Natalia’s in virtue of this difference.” (2018, p.89)

Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

Marshall goes on to argue that we can have this sort of ‘presence’ in our representations of absent people.

Thus we can be ‘in touch with’ their mental states, when those representations also reveal, by resembling, how those states feel.

But sadistic, indifferent, non-compassionate thought about absent others can’t put us ‘in touch with’ their mental states.

Hence the epistemic advantage of good over evil is preserved.

Section 4: Sadistic Empathy and Empathy with the Absent

This seems to be a distinction *within* the broader class of imaginative states - even though 'givenness' was originally introduced in terms of a distinction *between* perception and imagination.

Certainly, this doesn't seem to be *Zahavi's* notion of givenness anymore.

Arguably this is the weakest part of Marshall's structure. But he needs to say something like this, given what he said about the sadistic empath.

Conclusions

There are two prominent epistemic values we might associate with things called ‘empathy’:

- Understanding how another’s state feels
- The minded other being made immediately present

Smithian ‘empathy’ is defined in terms of the former.

Zahavian ‘empathy’ is defined in terms of the latter.

Marshallian ‘empathy’ (‘compassion’) is defined in terms of a tight connection between both.

Conclusions

Both revelation and givenness (and hence both Smithian and Zahavian ‘empathy’) are compatible with indifference or cruelty.

Being in touch (and hence Marshallian ‘empathy’) is not compatible with indifference or cruelty, or so Marshall claims.

This is because revelation and givenness cannot be combined in the very same representation without altruistic motivation.

However, if we can ‘be in touch’ with the experiences of absent people, the relevant sense of ‘givenness’ must be a weaker one than Zahavi and the phenomenologists are talking about.

References

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