

IS EMPATHIC REGULATION A MORAL VIRTUE?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between the concepts of “empathy” and “virtue”. To this aim, I will distinguish two possible forms their relationship may take: empathy can either be conceived (a) as a virtue *per se*; or (b) as an enabling condition for virtues to develop. Pre-theoretically, we are driven to consider (a) as correct, and yet a better understanding of the concept of “empathy” shows that that is not the case. To argue against (a), I will discuss the problematic features of broad definitions of empathy (that make (a) seem trivially true; § 2). Before proposing a narrower definition – that I take to be useful to connect it with virtue (§ 4) –, I will focus more specifically on some of the problems empathy has (§ 3). Finally, I will sketch how empathic regulation, and not empathy by itself can make (b) true.

Keywords: Empathy, Virtue, Empathic Regulation, Moral Behavior.

1. *Introduction*

Empathy is commonly understood as enabling us to recognize the mental life of others – especially their emotional one –, to understand them, care for them, and to act in their interest (e.g. Slote 2013; Shamay-Tsoory 2011; Baron-Cohen 2011; Rifkin 2009; Preston, de Waal 2002). By recognizing others through the exercise of our empathic abilities, humans are often believed to act in morally acceptable or even virtuous ways. As a folk concept, empathy is identified with caring, helping, or being altruistic; and it is often tested empirically based on the outwards behavior manifesting the latter (Baron-Cohen 2011). Focusing on these features, empathy seems a moral good (against this view, Bloom 2014; 2017): improving it will automatically improve our moral behavior.¹

1 Most advocates of this view seem to imply that the term “moral” refers uniquely to other-oriented behaviors and virtues, to actions concerned with others’ well-

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to investigate the exact relationship between the concepts of “empathy” and that of “virtue”. While both concepts have received huge attention within the ethical debate, little has been done to understand how and whether they are connected (Battaly 2011; Slote 2013; Peterson 2017). With this aim in mind, I will first distinguish two possible forms the relationship may take. Empathy can, in fact, either be conceived of *a*) as a virtue *per se*; *b*) or as an enabling condition for virtues to develop (Miller 2009; Deane-Drummond 2017).

As Battaly (2011) correctly points out, pre-theoretically we are to some extent driven to consider *a*) as the correct option, and yet, she continues, a philosophical and psychological better understanding of empathy shows that that is not the case. I will argue that this misunderstanding follows from incorrect, commonsensical, and broad definitions of “empathy” and, more briefly, of “virtue” (§2). In fact, those definitions make *a*) seem trivially true by arguing, for instance, that evil and cruelty are just a lack of empathy and conversely that good is its presence (Baron-Cohen 2011, p. 15; against this view see Donise 2020). And yet, they do not provide necessary or sufficient conditions for something to be an instance of either concept, and, in doing so, they are unable to account for the biases, limitations, and excesses empathy actually or potentially has (Prinz 2011a; 2011b; Oakley 2011; Bloom 2014; Fuchs 2017).

I will then focus more specifically on empathy’s limitations and excesses (§ 3), and I will propose a more restricted definition of empathy (§ 4; modified from De Vignemont and Singer 2006, p. 435) that is – contrary to a broad one – able to account for those limitations, but that makes *a*) false. Under this definition, empathy would prove to be neither necessary nor sufficient for virtue (similarly, Darwall 1998, p. 261).

Rejecting *a*), as I would, however, says nothing about *b*), i.e. whether the ability to empathize can – and sometimes is – an enabling condition to develop other-oriented moral virtues, whichever they are. I will, thus, conclude by arguing in favor of the idea that the ability to regulate empathy (§ 5; cfr. Ray and Gallegos de Castillo 2019) can have exactly this role of making moral virtues like sympathy or compassion possible, in so far as it is a tool for avoid-

being. I do not share this assumption, although I believe other-oriented behavior constitutes an important and possibly ineliminable part of what being moral amounts to, and the one that is more easily connected to empathy. Pointing at the existence of other domains of what being moral amounts to is certainly a viable way to object to these views, I will not, however, focus extensively on it here as it will not allow showing the internal problems inherent in connecting empathy to morality. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I clarify this.

ing empathy's natural excesses and limitations (Kauppinen 2014). So, as it happens with the ability to regulate one's emotions, *if* the subject is capable of empathy, emphatic regulation has the effect of settling correctness conditions for the emphatic reaction which are necessary in order to allow empathy, thus regulated, to enable the development of moral virtues towards others.

Hence, empathic regulation is *useful* to those subjects that are endowed with typical empathic abilities. Learning to moderate and regulate one's own empathic reactions towards others paves the way for sympathy and compassion. If a subject lacks such abilities – as it is often claimed to be the case of subjects with ASD (Baron-Cohen 2011; against this view, see Smith 2009) or, less controversially, of psychopaths –, then of course her access to moral virtues will not proceed along that path. This, however, does not entail that they cannot have a different access to moral virtue; it simply means that that access is not mediated by empathy or by empathic regulation.

I will, therefore, conclude that neither empathy nor empathic regulation are *per se* virtues, and yet a suitable emphatic regulation (unlike empathy *per se*) can be *useful* as an enabling condition for developing certain moral virtues in interpersonal relationships, given the typical endowment of empathic abilities. In the absence of such endowment, however, one cannot claim that such virtues cannot be reached otherwise – being empathic regulation neither necessary nor sufficient for those virtues to develop.

2. Broad definitions of “empathy” and “virtue”

As anticipated, broad and commonsensical understandings of empathy and virtue seem to make it trivially true that the former is a moral virtue. In fact, if one includes in the definition of empathy phenomena going from the automatic and involuntary feeling we have when we see someone in deep distress to the altruistic or helpful behavior we might perform on the basis of that feeling (or of a more complex one), to caring for those in distress, recognizing their interests and making them, to some extent, our own, then empathy seems to be a characteristic that one ought to have, a virtue worth pursuing. Such definitions, however, make empathy a virtue *per se* at a level of explanation that is not philosophically interesting (Battaly 2011: 282). Empathy is too broadly conceived and the same can be said for virtues: in fact, a commonsensical understanding of them is centered on the idea that they «are qualities that make us morally good people» (Battaly 2011: 277ft). To argue for the connection between empathy and virtue I will, thus, account for the former in a narrower way (§ 4).

I have argued elsewhere against a broad definition of empathy (Songhorian 2015), but let me here briefly summarize some of the troubling features such definition has for the case at hand – namely, its connection to virtue. First, as anticipated, conceiving empathy broadly makes it look like a virtue in a trivial and philosophically uninteresting way: understanding empathy as a “moral good” and as “the only force that motivates kindness” and altruism (Bloom 2014; cfr. Bloom 2017), virtue is simply within the scope of the concept. However, such definitions make it hard to grasp the concept’s boundaries and to assess which concrete cases fall under them. Would it be possible to help others out of motives that are not connected to empathy in such a scenario? Could Grace help Frances because she knows she is being watched and because performing helping behavior would enhance her reputation? Or because, without any emotional reaction to Frances’s situation, she just believes there are good moral reasons to do so? The answer is clearly yes, even though broad accounts of empathy seem to have a hard time explaining why it is so. As far as the second example is concerned, a commonsensical understanding of empathy as directly entailing helpful behavior would be at odds with the possibility of the latter depending on no emotional reaction at all. As far as the first example is concerned, believing that empathy is the only force driving us to kind, helpful, and altruistic behavior² – or even that the latter are within the conceptual boundaries of the former (Preston, de Wall 2002) – hinders the possibility of actually assessing the motives one has. Behaviors apparently morally appropriate (or even good) can in fact be driven by non-morally relevant, or even evil, motives – e.g. Grace is interested in her reputation. And yet, if an externally helping behavior falls within the definition of empathy, or if it is through this behavior that empathy is inferred, then the distinction between authentic moral behavior and inauthentic or only superficial one cannot be grasped.³ From the outside, in fact, Grace behavior would appear identical in case she acted for an emotional reaction towards Frances’s situation and for her

2 “The key idea is that we *all lie somewhere on an empathy spectrum* (from high to low). People said to be evil or cruel are simply at one extreme of the empathy spectrum” (Baron-Cohen 2011, p. 15).

3 I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that the distinction between authentic and superficial altruistic behavior could be a way for advocates of the broad account to solve this issue. What I take to be problematic in such a strategy is accounting for the tools to properly distinguish them. Accounting for non-morally driven helping behavior is extremely difficult if the latter falls within the definition of empathy (Baron-Cohen 2011; Preston, de Wall 2002). To do so, one will need to avoid collapsing helping behavior onto empathy.

reputation. When we think of a virtuous character trait we expect more than simple compliance, we expect that the agent has acted on the basis of the right kind of reasons or considerations, and not just that she has performed an act that look ok from the outside. Someone keen to accepting a strong connection – but not a full identification – between empathy and moral behavior might grant that there are cases in which the latter depends on traits or considerations different from the former, that is to say that the set of good behavior is not completely identical to that of empathy. While, at the same time, believing that, when empathy is truly there, a helpful, kind, or altruistic behavior will follow, and thus that it is worth having an empathic character. And yet, that is debatable as well. We can certainly feel someone else's pain or joy without doing anything about it: we can for instance postpone helping because we are in a hurry or worried about our own life, even though we feel we should. It is not always because of a lack of empathy that we do not help the homeless on the street (Bloom 2014; Baron-Cohen 2011). If helping or being kind always follow from empathy, then these cases will be impossible. Those that conceive empathy as strongly connected or intertwined with helping behavior have a hard time with these cases.⁴ They are similarly troubled by *Schadenfreude* and sadism: enjoying someone else's pain, in fact, seems to imply recognizing their emotional state. If this recognition is part of what being empathic means, then helping behavior, kindness, and altruism do not always follow from empathy: empathy can also pave the way for rejoicing others' pain, for immoral behavior (Donise 2020).

The problems I have briefly summarize here should prove sufficient to see the difficulties advocates of empathy being a virtue *per se* should face. If empathy and virtue are defined in extremely vague and broad ways, then several phenomena are hard to account for. Before proposing the definition of empathy I find more suitable to account for these phenomena (§ 4), let me focus more carefully on some other problematic features of empathy (§ 3) that, I will claim, call for an amoral definition of its nature.

4 A strategy for solving these cases could be distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic empathy. However, by doing so, empathy will lose its characterization as the ability to share and resonate others' emotions to be uniquely identified, when authentic, with an action tendency, an inclination to help. We could not authentically share, in this framework, the emotions of a novel's protagonist nor, in real life, we could feel together with others when there is no help to be provided.

3. *Empathy's biases, limitations and excesses*

The aim of this paragraph is that of underlying some other problematic features of empathy – regardless of its definition. Elsewhere I have argued that such features make the contribution empathy can provide to moral behavior quite limited as opposed to what is often portrayed in political and social discourse (Songhorian 2019). Here I want to focus on the specific problem they pose to accounting for empathy as a virtue *per se*. The problematic features I will focus on are: (a) empathy has several limitations and biases; (b) an excessive empathic response can lead to pathological altruism (Oakley 2011; Oakley, Knafo, Madhavan and Wilson 2012); (c) even though empathy can be a useful guide to moral behavior, it is neither necessary (ASD) nor sufficient (limitations and biases) for the latter to occur, under any definition.

The literature on empathy has underlined, as far as feature (a) is concerned, that our *natural* tendency to empathize with others is flawed (Prinz 2011a; 2011b; Bloom 2014; Fuchs 2017). To be fair, David Hume and Adam Smith in describing sympathy were already aware of the limitations and flaws it could have: sympathizing with the nearest and dearest is clearly easier than doing so with a stranger and both recognized it as a feature requiring us to somehow step away from sympathy being the *only* relevant ability to behave and judge morally (Hume 1739-1740: III.iii.1.14; Smith 1759: I.i.1.9; I.i.4.9 and II.ii.3.4; I will get back to this in § 5). Again, if one argues for a broad conceptualization of empathy, it is hard to account for this flaw. On these accounts, empathy, sympathy and their connection to morally good and virtuous behavior seem to collapse on the former, thus hindering the possibility to recognize that empathy can drive us in immoral or vicious directions and forgetting that there might be other virtues that are not related to empathy. Empathizing with loved ones is clearly easier and more effective than empathizing with a stranger. We easily recognize and are more prone to help those we care about. If that is so, empathy and pro-social behavior seem less strongly tied: we need some further element – i.e. caring for that person for instance – to be really moved to action. While this is obviously problematic for those theories that understand empathy as a virtue *per se*, its problematic nature is not troublesome only for those theoretical approaches. In fact, one may say that there is nothing necessarily wrong with caring more for loved ones and being more prone to help them as opposed to caring for and helping a stranger. And that, all things being equal, is certainly true: we have special duties deriving from our relationships. However, our ability to empathize is not only improved

when a loved one is concerned: *similarity* and *proximity* modulate the extent to which we can actually share others' emotions, regardless of who they are and what their relationship with the person empathizing is. So, it is not only previous relations, love and care that improve empathy, but also the extent to which someone is similar or close to us. And this can lead us to behave in ways that are not justifiable on the basis of special duties or relations, but that are just based on morally irrelevant factors such as ethnic, national or local identities (the so-called in-group biases). In a nutshell, while it might well be the case that I have justifying reasons to help, care and recognize more the interests of a loved one, doing so with someone *just* on the basis of physical similarity (through my enhanced ability to empathize with that person) will be unjustifiable. Conceiving empathy as a virtue *per se* would, thus, mean believing this kind of bias – that is, the fact that empathy can be improved towards people just because of morally irrelevant similarities with the empathizer – is morally acceptable or even fosters virtuous conduct. To account for this pitfall of empathy, one will need to define it in a narrower way (§ 4) and to disengage it from the idea that it is a virtue (although nothing has yet been said about its possibility of fostering other virtues; cfr. § 5). Similarly to what Hume and Smith proposed, to develop virtues one may need empathy (or sympathy), although it is certainly not sufficient for them to develop. Shortly, I will claim not only for its insufficiency, but also for the fact that it may not be necessary in all given cases (when considering feature (c)).

Another bias empathy shows is its being stronger when focusing on an identifiable individual as opposed to a unidentifiable one (Small, Loewenstein and Slovic 2007). Our donations to charity, just to provide an example of something we identify as a virtuous behavior, are modulated by whether we can identify the victim of a certain condition. Focusing on one individual in distress is more effective – in terms of the amount of money we send to charities – than learning the statistically relevant information about all those in peril. I believe the data showing we are more prone to donate to charities if we identify a victim, when the rational thing to do will be to donate more if we know many are in distress (and not just one person), can be explained again with a bias of our empathic abilities. Obviously, empathy as the ability to pick up and resonate others' emotions is stronger if one can see or imagine an identifiable individual, and that is not problematic *per se* (unless one attributes to empathy the characteristic of being a virtue). What is troublesome is in fact believing it is the only ability playing a role in driving our moral behavior. If that is so, then it will be right and virtuous to help only identifiable victims.

Many more biases could be identified as modulators of empathy – e.g. the emotional state the empathizer is in, the media exposure to certain perils –, but those discussed so far should be sufficient to convince the reader of the problematic features of empathy and of the impossibility to believe it is *per se* a virtue.

The second problematic feature (b) is that it does not seem to be true that the more empathic the better. Being excessively focused or concerned with what others feel can hinder the possibility for the empathizer to recognize her own plans, desires and feelings. This might lead to forms of emotional identification (Scheler 1923) in which the sense of self, rather than being improved and enhanced by the relation with others (Smith 1759), can be lost or strongly hindered. This is what some have defined as pathological altruism (Oakley 2011; Oakley, Knafo, Madhavan and Wilson 2012) and that certainly cannot be conceived of as a moral virtue. Furthermore, if empathy has to do with our ability to understand others in their particularity, in their being different individuals with specific emotional lives, with desires and plans of their own, one cannot but conceive this ability as strongly connected with the possibility for the subject of recognizing her own emotional life, plans and desires. Forgetting that empathy is a relational concept requiring at least two subjects and that the empathizer has a sense – implicit or explicit – of the difference between herself and those with whom she empathizes means equating empathy with emotional identification. Making, thus, the connection with virtue even harder.

If by considering the biases and limits empathy faces (a) one is forced to accept that it is not a sufficient condition for moral behavior and moral virtue, one may be still tempted to conceive it is a necessary one. And yet, if high functioning individuals with ASD actually have little or no empathy (Baron-Cohen 2011 vs. Smith 2009), then either one considers empathy not necessary for someone to be a moral agent or one has to reject that they can be such agents. However, they are certainly able to engage in moral actions even if they might have learned how they should behave in a more cognitive and rule-guided manner as opposed to the way in which typical children do. Therefore, at least in some cases – i.e. ASD – empathy is not necessary for moral behavior. This, however, does not mean that empathy is a useless ability to learn how to behave morally and that no virtues can depend on exercising it. What it does mean is that it is not the only possible path to achieve moral behavior or moral virtue. Some individuals achieve the latter by different means, and even typically developed individuals do not need to always empathize to behave in a

virtuous manner. There is much more than empathy to be a decent moral agent and even more so to be a virtuous one.

The aim of this paragraph was to show some problematic features of empathy that makes it troublesome to conceive it as a moral virtue *per se*. Such features remain problematic for empathy even if one accepts that a too broad definition is misleading and simplistic. Thus, before concluding by analyzing the actual relationship empathy and virtue have – namely the fact that the former can be an enabling condition, neither necessary nor sufficient, to develop some virtues (§ 5) –, let me focus on a definition of empathy that better accommodates its limits and biases and that can serve as a philosophically more interesting notion to connect it to virtue.

4. *Empathy's narrow definition*

As we have seen in § 2, defining empathy in a commonsensical and broad way may easily account for its understanding as a virtue, but it does so at the cost of being philosophically uninteresting and being unable to account for the many cases of empathy's failure. If empathy is a virtue *per se*, how can we account for the occurrences of empathy without a subsequent morally virtuous behavior?

It is for this reason and for the intrinsic limitations of empathy (discussed in § 3) that a narrower definition might better serve the purpose of connecting it to virtue and to account for its role in recognizing others and one own emotional life.

Empathy narrowly construed can be defined as follows:

- (i) one is in an affective state;
- (ii) this state is [to some extent] isomorphic to another person's affective state;
- (iii) this state is elicited by the observation or imagination of another person's affective state (De Vignemont and Singer 2006, p. 435).

Focusing on such a definition of empathy – something along the lines of what some have called immediate empathy (Kauppinen 2014) or affective empathy (e.g. Shamay-Tsoory *et al.* 2009) – means disentangling empathy from other phenomena that are certainly related to it, but are more complex and require the contribution of other abilities. Just to give an example, perspective-taking or cognitive empathy are sometimes conceived of as other aspects of empathy. And yet, to be able to walk a mile in someone else's shoes (a figure of speech that explicate how we can

take the perspective of someone else) implies more than the affective attunement that seems to be crucial in affective empathy. We need to be able to imagine ourselves in the position of the other, to compare how we ourselves would feel with how that person actually felt (often our life plans, desires, hopes and emotions differ from those of others). In a nutshell, we need to be able – as the definition *cognitive* empathy shows – to deploy a bunch of cognitive abilities that are more complex than those an immediate empathic response seems to imply.

Focusing on the narrow definition proposed is useful for various reasons. First, it accounts for many failures of empathy and, more importantly, for its amoral nature. If what counts as empathy is just an affective state A is in because of seeing or imagining B in a similar state, then it is harder to stress its normative or moral significance by itself. At this very stage, *Schadenfreude* and sadism are possible, just as much as it is ok to be more empathic to the near and dear.

What is morally relevant, thus, is how I direct my immediate empathic responses, how I regulate empathy, but it is not at the level of the immediate and often involuntary feeling of sharing the others' emotions that I do that. A different standpoint needs to be added for me to recognize that empathy can lead me astray. I may not be immediately capable – or even at all capable – of changing my emotional reactions to the expressed emotions of others, but I might still know that I should not let them guide my behavior if I aim at being a virtuous individual. The more cognitive capabilities that are somehow conflated in the definition of empathy by a broad definition can here be more easily distinguished by adopting a more restricted definition.

Second, accounting for empathy's biases, limitations, excesses is possible if we restrict its definition and accept that something more than empathy is needed to grant good or virtuous behavior. If we rely uniquely on our immediate emotional ability to share others' feelings, there is – as we have seen in § 3 – no way to distinguish between cases in which being guided by an increased empathy for the near and dear is warranted and cases in which it is not. Furthermore, an excessive concentration on immediate and broad empathy will easily count as virtuous behaviors that are forgetful of the self/other distinction, in which the virtuous thing to do amounts to losing oneself in the pursuit of focusing on others.

Empathy in this minimal sense is thus an ability or a predisposition to attune oneself with others' emotions – by recognizing that the emotions one is mirroring or attuning to are not originated in oneself, that is to say by being aware (implicitly or explicitly) of the self/other distinction. An

ability or predisposition cannot by itself be identified with a virtue. What might be virtuous, instead, is the way we educate and regulate such disposition. If it is true (although highly disputable) that some individuals have a “zero degree of empathy” (Baron-Cohen 2011) to begin with and others are endowed with high levels of empathy, it is contentious that we might view a natural (or primitive) disposition as a virtue *per se*. Traditionally, virtues require a certain effort by the agent possessing them, an exercise to make them second nature. They are hardly conceived of as first nature: doing so would mean accepting an extreme version of the naturalization of ethics and of virtues. Claiming that empathy is a virtue *per se* is tantamount to claiming that our natural and possibly unchangeable tendency to share others’ emotional lives is already a virtue, that no effort or exercise is needed to be good moral agents: we just are or are not (Baron-Cohen 2011). I take this to be an extremely counterintuitive consequence of believing there is a connection between empathy and virtue. It is for this reason that empathy should be better understood in a minimal sense and its relation to virtue should be conceived of as if the former – at best – could be an enabling condition to develop properly moral virtues by means of the subject exercising and regulating its immediate emotional responses.

The aim of this paragraph was to show how a narrower definition of empathy – different from those analyzed by Battaly (2011) – could better serve at accounting both for its limits and excesses and for its connection to virtue. In the following paragraph I will say something more about the positive connection between these two concepts. In fact, if up until now I have shown why one should reject the claim that empathy is *per se* a virtue (in line with Battaly 2011), nothing has been said so far about the possibility that the ability to empathize can – and sometimes is – an enabling condition to develop other-oriented moral virtues. I will deal with this issue in § 5.

5. *Empathic regulation as an enabling condition for virtue*

Based on what we have seen so far, and in line with Battaly (2011, p. 287), empathy *per se* cannot be confused with either a moral virtue (such as benevolence or the sympathy of Smith’s [1759] impartial spectator) or with an intellectual virtue (such as open-mindedness). Empathy is an *involuntary* and *automatic* ability and «no capacities are themselves virtues» (Battaly 2011, p. 287). Empathy is *amoral* (as mentioned, it is compatible with *Schadenfreude* and sadism):

Empathy can be consistent with the indifference of pure observation or even the cruelty of sadism. It all depends on why one is interested in the other's perspective. Sympathy, on the other hand, is felt as from the perspective of "one-caring." (Darwall 1998, p. 261).

Interestingly, Darwall introduces in this quotation a distinction between empathy – as an amoral ability – and sympathy possibly a morally connotated phenomenon, in which the perspective taken is incompatible with immoral or amoral outcomes. To be sympathetic one necessarily has to care for the other (again, as distinct from oneself).

As anticipated, classical sentimentalists like David Hume and Adam Smith were well aware of the kind of biases and limitations empathy shows and thought that they could be overcome by elaborating it in a more detached and impartial manner, by regulating empathy from an ideal or general standpoint (Hume 1739-1740: III.iii.1.14; Smith 1759: I.i.1.9; I.i.4.9 and II.ii.3.4).⁵ Sympathy, thus, implies a regulated version of empathy in which other information or dispositions are relevant as well. Ideally regulating empathy means reflectively and over time learning to distance oneself from the situations and improving our emotional response when it is unjustifiably lacking and reducing it when it is excessive. The cognitive abilities briefly mentioned in § 4 – e.g. perspective-taking and cognitive empathy – will, in this account, be a constitutive part of what being sympathetic means, although they do not need to be actively present each and every time we behave.⁶ I cannot be interested in the well-being of another if I am unable to put myself into that person's shoes and to consider her situation both impersonating her and projecting myself into it (what Kauppinen has called respectively other-focused or self-focused cognitive empathy;

5 As the reader may know, Hume and Smith never use the term "empathy", on the contrary they refer uniquely to "sympathy". This, however, is not sufficient to claim that the concept of empathy was absent from their thought, since the term "empathy" did not enter the English vocabulary before Titchener (1909a; 1909b) coined it to translate the German term "einfühlung" as distinct from "mitgefühl", which is usually translated as "sympathy" (Escalas, Stern 2003, p. 567; see also Stueber 2017).

6 Smith already noted that, from exercising over time proper sympathy, general rules emerge (Smith 1759: III.iv.7-8) and we conform to such rules without the need to activate each and every time the complex machinery required to empathize and to position ourselves just at the right distance. Thus, ideally regulating empathy is a general capacity to be developed rather than an occurrent state. We learn to ideally regulate empathy, but we do not need to engage in a reflective and effortful cognitive process to behave virtuously every time. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I clarify this point.

Kauppinen 2014). But that goes beyond emotional or immediate empathy – a relative mirroring of the emotions of others we often experience by passing by a stranger in such a quick manner that it is unthinkable that one needs to imaginatively change one’s place with the other to *feel* that.

The immediacy of empathy, again, is a further argument against its direct connection to virtue. Even without moving too far from a commonsensical understanding of virtue, it is hard to think of something as an instance of a virtue if the subject has no control, responsibility, or awareness of having a specific characteristic or of performing upon it.

And yet, empathy can well be one route to acquire virtues such as sympathy and benevolence; it can be an enabling condition for those virtues to emerge. *Empathic regulation* – as opposed to empathy *per se* – seems a concept that would more easily relate to virtue (Ray and Gallegos de Castillo 2019) since it allows avoiding the excesses typical of empathy and moving towards more aware and pondered ways of sharing with others. As briefly mentioned, regulating empathy from a more detached or impartial standpoint is precisely what Hume and Smith will call sympathy (in its more complete form, the one relevant for morality). If empathy is pondered and regulated – that is to say if the subject learns to regulate her own emotional reactions when facing others’ emotions (without excesses or biases), if she has the *correct* empathic reactions (Kauppinen 2014) –, then she would more easily move towards a virtuous *habitus* (sympathy). This, however, is still not enough for claiming that empathic regulation is always either *necessary* or *sufficient* to the acquisition of moral virtues (think about ASD subjects). What can be said, at this stage, is that, *if* the subject has typical empathic abilities, then it would be useful for her to learn how to regulate them so as to develop some moral virtues. As it happens with the ability to regulate one’s emotions, *if* the subject is capable of empathy, empathic regulation has the effect of settling correctness conditions for the empathic reaction which are necessary in order to allow empathy, thus regulated, to foster the development of moral virtues towards others. Such an enabling condition might also be the easiest way to acquire those virtue, granted it is not the only one possible. To clarify this point, sharing others’ emotions and realizing that we should regulate empathy – just as much as we learn to regulate all emotions – is likely how the majority of typically developed individuals get to be concerned and interested in being morally decent – if not virtuous individuals. As Smith claims, we become soon aware that the gaze we direct towards others is identical to the one the direct at us and are, thus, interested in being recognized by others just as much as we recognize them (the first instances of emotional regulation depend on what we expect

others to deem appropriate). However typical or likely, it is still possible to acquire virtues without empathy. If a subject lacks empathy – as it is often claimed to be the case of subjects with ASD (Baron-Cohen 2011; against this view, see Smith 2009) or, less controversially, of psychopaths –, then of course her access to moral virtues (if any) will not proceed along that path. This, however, does not entail that they cannot have a different access to moral virtue; it simply means that that access is not mediated by empathy or by empathic regulation. Furthermore, claiming that empathy is an enabling condition for some moral virtues does not imply that all virtues depend on empathy's regulation.

Learning to moderate and regulate one's own empathic reactions towards others paves the way for sympathy and compassion – it is the kind of exercise needed to develop a virtuous second nature.

So, if neither empathy *per se* nor empathic regulation can be conceived of as virtues themselves, the latter can certainly – in most cases – be a proxy to develop some other-oriented moral virtues, it can be an enabling condition for them to be acquired.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to investigate the exact relationship between the concepts of “empathy” and that of “virtue”. While both concepts have received huge attention within the ethical debate, little has been done to understand how and whether they are connected (Bataly 2011; Slote 2013; Peterson 2017). With this aim in mind, I have distinguished two possible forms the relationship may take. Empathy can, in fact, either be conceived of *a)* as a virtue *per se*; *b)* or as an enabling condition for virtues to develop (Miller 2009; Deane-Drummond 2017). Having rejected *a)*, I focused on how empathic regulation can be conceived of as a proxy to the development of other-oriented moral virtues. Other-oriented moral virtues require more than immediate empathy: they demand us not only to pre-reflectively knowing about the self-other distinction, but to recognize it and deploy all the cognitive tools we have available to avoid unjustified forms of partiality – towards oneself or the near and dear. Empathy can, thus, develop into benevolence, compassion and sympathy only if we are capable of exercising a regulatory function: up-regulating empathy towards distant and different others and down-regulating it towards our loved ones (Kauppinen 2014; 2017).

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