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Imagining Others

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Article abstract

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ABSTRACT

It is often argued that the ability to imagine what others think and feel is central to moral functioning. In this paper, I consider to what extent this is true. I argue that neither the ability to think of others as having representational mental states, nor the ability to imagine being in their position, is necessary for moral understanding or moral motivation. I go on to argue that the area in which thinking about others' thoughts and feelings appears to play the largest role is that of supererogatory actions. Being able to get on well with others seems to be importantly predicated on our ability to think about their thoughts and feelings and being able to take up their perspective. However, when it comes to grosser moral norms and restrictions, such as harm norms, there is little reason to think that thinking about others' thoughts and feelings plays a central role in understanding such norms or being motivated by them.

RÉSUMÉ

Il est souvent argué que la capacité d'imaginer ce que les autres pensent et ressentent est au cœur du fonctionnement moral. Dans cet article, j'examinerai l'étendue de cette affirmation. Je soutiendrai que, ni la capacité de penser autrui comme possédant des états mentaux représentatifs, ni la capacité de s'imaginer dans leur position, ne sont nécessaires pour la compréhension morale ou pour la motivation morale. Je soutiendrai également que réfléchir aux pensées et aux sentiments des autres semble jouer un rôle plus important dans le domaine des actes surérogatoires. Être capable de bien s'entendre avec les autres paraît découler, d'une manière importante, de notre capacité à penser leurs pensées et leurs sentiments et à adopter leur point de vue. Toutefois, quand il s'agit de normes morales et de restrictions moins précises, comme le sont les normes relié au tort moral, il y a peu de raisons de penser que réfléchir aux pensées des autres et à leurs sentiments jouent un rôle central dans la compréhension de ces normes ainsi que dans la motivation découlant de ces normes.

It is tempting to think that fundamental to good moral functioning is the ability to imagine what others think and feel, or to be able to take up their perspective. Parents often encourage their children to think of how they make others feel as a means of training their moral sensibilities. Indeed, Martin Hoffman claims that this is one of the most effective ways of socializing your child.[1] And those who think that morality is, in essence, about balancing one's projects and ends against those of other people, naturally think that being able to imagine having certain ends is of crucial importance to morality.[2] Lastly, a person's thoughts and feelings serve as guides to how to interact with her in ways that enhance her wellbeing, or, at least, are not detrimental to it.

There are ways of thinking about others' thoughts and feelings that are relatively theoretical or distanced from the subject, and ways that involve more personal resources, e.g. perspective change. Thus, the idea that being able to imagine what others think and feel is central to morality can be fleshed out in two different ways. First, it may be thought of as simply involving the ability to ascribe thoughts and feelings to others. Second, it might be thought to involve more substantial imaginative abilities, like the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes. There may be other ways of substantiating this claim, but here I shall only be concerned with the aforementioned ones. Everybody agrees that our social abilities include the ability to ascribe representational mental states to others. More colloquially put, it includes the ability to think of others as having thoughts and feelings different from one's own, or that one would have in the same situation. This ability is more sophisticated than what is found in many other social animals, i.e. the abilities to see other animate beings as goal-directed and as subjects of hedonic states, like pain, anger and fear. Seeing others as animate and subject to hedonic states in this way is arguably necessary for morality, and for the purposes of this discussion we can assume that it is.[3] The question is what role, if any, more complex ways of thinking about others plays in morality.

I argue that whereas being able to imagine what others think and feel plays an important role in being able to live well with others, in being a kind, considerate, and nice person, it plays a relatively restricted role in more gross morality, i.e. in preventing us from killing or harming others, being just towards them, and so on. In what follows, I capture this distinction as that between gross moral norms and supererogatory norms. I acknowledge that, as it stands, the distinction is somewhat crude. It is meant to capture an intuitive distinction between norms that we are required to uphold (gross moral norms), and norms the living up to which is more praiseworthy than obligatory (supererogatory norms).

I first consider the idea that being able to imagine how others think and feel is necessary for good moral functioning, and reject it. In certain cultures, others' thoughts and feelings play a relatively minor role in the justification of harm norms and people with autism, who have problems thinking about others' mental states, experience relatively few problems understanding, and adhering to, central moral norms. Nevertheless, there is clearly *some* relation between the ability to imagine others' thoughts and feelings and morality, and the remainder of the paper investigates what this relation is. Daniel Batson's work demonstrates its effectiveness in helping behavior. But it turns out that imagining being in someone else's position is less conducive to helpfulness than simply thinking of others' thoughts and feelings.[4] Putting oneself in others' shoes is not required for, indeed it can be detrimental to, moral thought or motivation. I suggest that the distinctive role played by imagining what others' think and feel is in regulating close personal and peer relations and in supererogatory helping behavior. In the case of autism, it becomes clear that imagining what others think and feel is crucial to good social relations and interactions, but less so to the ability to understand and be motivated by grosser moral prohibitions and prescriptions. Such imagination does not, it seems, play a central role in curtailing violence against others, theft, dishonesty, and so on. Where it may help on occasion, the facts that people who have imaginative limitations are not known for their gross immorality (autism), and people with fine imaginative abilities engage in all manners of immoral actions (psychopaths) indicate that its moral importance is more circumscribed. Nevertheless, given that perspective taking is thought to be morally useful ought we to deploy it more often in morally relevant situations ? I argue that since thinking about others' mental states is replete with biases and is surprisingly inaccurate, it is a limited, albeit sometimes effective, approach.

I do not imagine (!) that I will have said the last word on the subject in this paper. What I hope to do is to show what imagining what others think and feel *won't* do for us, and provide some direction to future research on what it *will* do for us: it is important in the personal realm where morality, etiquette, and ordinary concern for others become hard to distinguish from each another.

IS THINKING ABOUT OTHERS THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS NECESSARY FOR MORALITY?

The most forceful way of putting the idea that imagining what others think and feel is central to moral competence—by which I mean understanding of, and motivation by, moral norms—is to maintain that it is required for it. On the one hand, it gives us an appropriate depth of understanding of moral norms, and on the other hand, it provides the required motivation to adhere to them. I do not know whether anyone actually holds as strong a view as this. The value of examining it, however, lies not in its rejection *per se*, but in the details of what makes it untenable. Seeing why being able to imagine what others think and feel is not necessary for moral competence helps us better appreciate the scope and nature of this ability.

Let us note, at the outset, that if a moral norm makes essential reference to a subject's thoughts and feelings, appreciating it and, perhaps, being motivated by it requires an ability to ascribe such thoughts and feelings to others. This I do not dispute. However, I am not alone in suggesting that most harm norms probably do not require knowledge of this kind to be understood.[5] Once we do rule out norms that make essential reference to representational mental states, however, it is much harder to see why the ability to ascribe thoughts and feelings to others is essential for moral understanding.

First of all, if the ability to think of others' thoughts and feelings plays a central role in moral understanding, we should expect justifications of moral norms to make essential reference to such categories. But whereas such justifications are common, they are also subject to cultural and sub-cultural variation. Many people maintain that they are required to act in accordance with morality because of considerations comparatively independent of how others think and feel. For instance, they are required to refrain from certain actions because of God's commands, the natural order of things, the *dharma*, or because we cannot consistently will that anyone in our position act that way. If the necessity view were correct, these people would not merely be wrong about morality, they would fail to have moral understanding in the first place.[6] This, it seems to me, moves us beyond the psychology of morality into the realm of normative ethics. And that is the topic of a different discussion.

Someone might object that people's justifications are mostly *post hoc* and, therefore, do not reflect their real appreciation of the wrongness of moral transgressions. True, deep appreciation is what real moral understanding is really about, and it involves an appropriate understanding of others as possessing mental states. The proposal, however, is not supported by the evidence. Young children and people with autism have problems thinking about others' thoughts and feelings—in terms of representational mental states—but they appear to have no principled difficulties grasping the essentials of the concepts of right and wrong (good or bad) or being motivated to do what is right and to avoid doing wrong. If this is right, then neither the ability to simply ascribe psychological states to others nor the ability to imagine being in others' positions are necessary for moral understanding or moral motivation. Let me therefore first present the evidence, and then later explain how it counts against these ideas.

I am not the first to point out that the abilities of people with autism are very relevant to the discussion. It is something that both Shaun Nichols and Victoria McGeer have stressed before.[7] People with autism[8] have significant difficulties thinking about what others think and feel. As a result, they often engage in behavior that is inconsiderate of others, which not infrequently leads to social exclusion. It does not, however, result in gross immoral behavior of the sort we would expect from someone who does not appreciate morality or fails to be motivated by it ; there is no increased tendency for instrumental violence, for lying, cheating, etc. In fact, people with autism are no more likely to engage in gross immoral behavior than people without clinical disorders.[9] They seem capable of appreciating the notions of wrong and right. Or rather, they certainly have *a* notion of right and wrong. Some people argue that this notion is more associated with ideas of rule following[10] or of universal order[11] than with the question of welfare, but, as I have just argued, that should not make us think that they lack an idea of right and wrong. People with autism seem to understand that harming or killing others is especially wrong, but also that there are other, less serious, types of wrongs. For instance, Temple Grandin talks of 'sins of the system', under which smoking used to fall when she was in school. Sins of the system contrast with things that are *really* wrong.[12] Grandin professes to not fully understand why sins of the system are wrong, but never questions why really bad things are wrong. The norms that people with autism appear to have particular problems with are rules for human interaction that have more to do with etiquette than with prohibitions on harm, lying, and so on. Both Temple Grandin and Shaun Barron report great

improvement in social interactions once they were able to imagine the situation from someone else's perspective.[13]

It may be objected that someone like Temple Grandin now has a rather sophisticated understanding of others' thoughts and feelings. I do not deny that. The important thing to remember, though, is that even as a child, when she did not possess much psychological understanding at all, Grandin did not exhibit the sort of moral incomprehension or lack of moral motivation that we would expect were the hypothesis we are considering true. This gives us reason to doubt that being able to think about others' thoughts and feelings is required for moral understanding or moral motivation. Another piece of evidence that counts against this necessity claim is that young children do seem to have an understanding of wrongs before they have a good grasp of the idea that others might have different thoughts and feelings from the ones that they, themselves, have.[14] All this suggests that thoughts about others' thoughts play a more circumscribed role in moral understanding and motivation than people tend to think.

It will be observed that the notions of moral understanding and motivation that I deploy are largely instrumental. Many think of them differently. Indeed, some deny that considerations that prevent one from harming others, other than those associated with the person's thoughts and feelings, are truly moral. Whereas we may discount understandings or motivations that are purely self-interested, but that nevertheless undergird understanding of, and motivation by, moral norms, being too picky about what counts as moral is problematic. Some atheists think religious people cannot possibly be moral if their understanding and motivation is undergirded by thoughts of God's will. Respect of God's will is, in their minds, ultimately contaminated by (self) interest in salvation. On the other hand, when Humanist Canada wanted to place the advertisement 'You can be good without God' on public transit busses in Halifax, the transit authority deemed the add too controversial and turned the society down.[15] Similarly, when a person on Yahoo asked whether it was possible for her, as an atheist, to do good deeds, many religious people blankly denied it.[16] Clearly, there is substantial disagreement about what counts as 'really' moral. It therefore seems wiser to adopt a more instrumental notion. Motivation that results in adherence to moral norms or the performance of morally supererogatory actions should be assumed to be moral as long as it is not purely and narrowly self-interested, and other things are equal. Similarly, understanding that moral prescriptions are relatively universal, binding, and not subject to change by a relevant authority, their transgression very serious and punishable, should count as moral, *ceteris paribus*.

To conclude, a proposal as strong as the one that maintains that the ability to think of, or imagine, what others think and feel is necessary for moral competence is untenable. It rules out the possibility that considerations that do not make central reference to how people think or feel can back up moral understanding. This is problematic, to say the least. It also sits uneasily with evidence from autism and child development. Nevertheless, it is doubtlessly true that this ability plays *some* interesting role in moral functioning, if we understand the moral realm broadly. But what role ? Studies on empathy provide part of the answer, and provide some intriguing results about the effects of different forms of imagining what others think and feel.

IMAGINING SELF VERSUS IMAGINING OTHERS

It is sometimes supposed that it is the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes that is central to good moral understanding. Putting oneself in others' shoes is usually thought to be equivalent to simulating them. When we simulate someone, we imagine being in the situation that she finds herself in. This elicits certain thoughts and feelings, which we subsequently ascribe to her. Ideally, we adjust for relevant differences between us. In the simplest cases, we may adjust a visual perspective ; e.g. I note that although I can see that there is a warbler on that branch, your view of it is obscured by a pillar. But we can also, in principle at least, imagine how we would react to a certain situation if we were looking for someone to kill. This kind of approach is very popular in prime time television shows, although there is little evidence that it is actually effective in catching real-life killers.[17] With the exception of Robert Gordon —who proposes that we imagine being *others* in their situation[18]—simulationists agree that when you simulate others, you imagine yourself in their position.[19] Simulation, then, is a more-or-less wholesale projection of a person into the shoes of someone else.

The idea that we simulate others in order to figure out what they think and feel has enjoyed much popularity for its simplicity and naturalness. The approach is usually contrasted with the theory theory, which maintains that our ability to ascribe psychological properties to others should be understood on the model of theoretical knowledge.[20] On the backdrop of this, more dispassionate, approach, simula-

tion theory has captured the imagination of many a theorist, who see in it elements capable of bridging the gap between thinking about others and morally relating to them. Simulating others can make us understand 'what it is like' for someone else[21] or lead us to *feel* for others.[22] This fits nicely with the commonsense view that moral relating to others is predicated on some ability to see things from their perspective, e.g. to understand what it is like for others to be treated the way we propose to treat them. This, of course, is either related to, or constitutes, a form of empathy, which is an emotional relating to others that has been shown to have effects on helping behavior.

Some of the best-known work on helping is that of Daniel Batson.[23] If subjects are asked to imagine how someone else would feel when in need, they are much more likely to report warm and sympathetic feelings towards the other *and* to help them if given the opportunity.[24] Many, including myself, have taken this to provide strong support of the moral effects of simulation.[25] In other words, when we imagine being in someone else's shoes, we come to empathize with the person, and this motivates us to assist her. When we are within the context of the simulation, *we* feel what we imagine the other is feeling, albeit probably in an attenuated way. But once we move outside the context of the simulation, we readjust our perspective and, as a result, we come to feel for the other, whose situation we were simulating.[26] But empirical studies give mixed support to the idea. For instance, it is not clear that imagining how another feels generally leads to an engagement of one's own psychological resources.

Batson and colleagues found that asking people to imagine what *they* would feel under the same circumstances as someone in need leads to different results than asking them to imagine what the *other person* feels under those circumstances.[27] If asked to focus on the plight of another, a person generally comes to feel a preponderance of warm, compassionate, and sympathetic feelings for the other. These feelings correlate with increased helping behavior, and are, therefore, generally regarded as being altruistic. Those asked to imagine *themselves* being in the position of the other, as opposed to considering how *the other person* feels in the situation, experience a mix of sympathetic feelings and more acute, unpleasant distress. Such distress is felt partly for the other, partly for the self. The latter form of distress is commonly known as personal distress and is associated with egoistic motivation. If it is easy to escape the situation that makes the person feel distressed (e.g. the room with the person in need), they are much more likely to do so than people who experience warm, compassionate, and sympathetic feelings as a result of simply thinking about the others' emotions.

It seems plausible that imagining *oneself* in the situation of someone in need provokes more intense feelings of distress because of the identification with the individual. The resultant mix of distress for the self and distress for the other lends support to the idea that an imagine-self instruction encourages simulation—engagement of the subject's own psychological resources—of the other's situation. For within the context of the simulation we really do feel for ourselves, counterfactually placed, as we are, in a situation of need. It is only at the close of the simulation, once we change our perspective again, that the resultant distress comes to be felt, in part, for the other. It is plausible that once we have come to feel personal distress (distress for ourselves in the counterfactual situation), it is hard to stop. Elsewhere, I have argued that at the end of a simulation, we change perspective completely.[28] This may not be so. The current evidence suggests that we retain some of the personally felt distress. And to the extent that personal distress motivates us to escape the situation, the danger of simulation is that it may cause us to be *less* responsive to the plight of others than other forms of thinking about others (e.g. just thinking about how they feel).[29]

The evidence that an imagine-other perspective does not engage the same emotional resources as an imagine-self perspective is of great import to the simulation approach. Firstly, it suggests that simulation that leads to, or involves, empathy is not generally deployed when we think about others' feelings. For if you ask someone to imagine how someone else thinks or feels, they do not appear to engage the more personal emotional resources associated with simulation. This is evidenced by the fact that the emotions she feels, i.e. warm, sympathetic, tender feelings, are not experienced by the subject, who most likely feels some form of distress.[30] In other words, the evidence suggests that people do not simulate in response to being asked to imagine how others would feel, since their resultant emotions are so different from those of the target.[31] This contrasts markedly with the imagine-self instructions where people do seem to engage their personal emotional resources. The implications for the simulation approach are potentially quite wide-ranging. Notice that the prediction that imagining ourselves in others' shoes (simulating them) involves our own emotional resources appears to be supported by the

evidence (the imagine-self perspective). It just so happens that when we are asked merely to think of others' feelings, we rarely simulate. Simulation theorists who believe that simulation *merely* gives rise to beliefs about what others think and feel would not find this evidence convincing, of course. However, if they suppose that simulation undergirds both the imagine-self and the imagine-other perspective, they must tell a story about why the subjects' feelings and motivations differ so much in the two sorts of situations. And it is likely that telling such a story convincingly is going to be much harder than simply giving up on the idea that simulation is as common a way of thinking about others, as is often made out to be the case.

Secondly, the evidence suggests that moral relating to others has less to do with being able to take up their perspective, as in a simulation, than people tend to think. When asked to imagine how one would feel in the subject's position, one comes to experience the sorts of emotions that one imagines the subject would feel. By contrast, when asked to consider how the *other* feels, one comes to feel warm and sympathetic feelings, which are much less likely to be consonant with the emotions of the subject in question.[32] In imagine-other scenarios, it seems, the subject retains a certain distance from the other's situation. Interestingly, this gives rise to pure altruistic motivation in contrast to the imagine-self perspective. Contrary to what is often thought, then, there is evidence that retaining a certain amount of distance from the suffering other is more conducive to helping than imaginatively taking up her perspective. It is simply unclear that the prototypical altruistic attitudes of sympathy, compassion, and warm-heartedness are, in any deep way, related to imagining oneself being in someone else's position.

This idea of maintaining a certain emotional distance from the suffering subject is worth dwelling on for a moment. Martin Hoffman has argued that too much empathy is a bad thing; it leads to what he calls 'empathic over-arousal'.[33] The idea is that sometimes the empathic reaction can be so intensely aversive that it leads to primarily personal distress. Nancy Eisenberg, too, maintains that very strong empathy leads to personal distress.[34] This may be due to a person's empathy threshold, their emotional adjustment, their ability to help, or the intensity of the others' distress. That children whose facial expressions are the most reactive to seeing others in distress experience the greatest behavioral problems (opposition, aggression, defiance, etc.),[35] that highly empathetic training nurses have difficulties staying in the same room with seriously ill patients,[36] that very caring and empathetic psychotherapists are more likely to suffer 'vicarious traumatization' and consequently be unable to help their patients,[37] and that people exposed to a child crying vigorously feel a preponderance of personal distress over empathic concern compared to people exposed to a child merely fussing or crying, all speak in favor of the idea that empathizing with distressed others can lead to personal distress.[38] By contrast, people who are less reactive empathically (but not hypo-reactive) usually experience more empathy and less personal distress, help those in need more, and are not as likely to suffer from vicarious traumatization. Lastly, Janet Strayer found that children who experience more intense emotions than their target when they empathize are more likely to experience personal distress.[39] It would seem that too much empathy can be a bad thing.

Of course, empathy is one thing and perspective taking another. However, since certain types of perspective takings lead to exactly the sort of personal distress that Hoffman and others propose is the result of empathic over-arousal, there is reason to think that, in effect, not only is imagining oneself in others' shoes not the most effective approach to achieve moral motivation, it can also have more long-term damaging effects on the individual (vicarious traumatization). It may, e.g., be inadvisable for people who are rather sensitive to others' distress to imagine being in their shoes. Imagining yourself in someone else's position, of course, really does produce significantly more empathy for the subject than simply imagining their situation objectively; just like imagining how the other feels does.[40] But the distress that is *also* elicited by this perspective taking exercise is about as strong as the empathy or sympathy towards the subject. And that distress, in its turn, is going to increase the likelihood of the person *not* helping the other in need if it is easy for her to escape.

It should be noted that imagining being in someone else's position sometimes really does stimulate pro-social motivation. Even where personal distress is high, subjects are quite likely to help the person in distress if escape from the situation is difficult. Furthermore, Batson and colleagues found some evidence that imagining being in someone's position can promote actions that benefit the other.[41] In Batson's studies, subjects had to assign tasks to themselves and a partner.[42] In the first study, one task was significantly more attractive than the other. Subjects were given the opportunity to flip a coin in order to decide task allocation. This was supposed to make salient to

them that fairness was at issue. People who were asked to imagine how they would think and feel in their partner's position assigned themselves the desirable task as often as people who were not asked to adopt any perspective—which is to say, 75% of the time. Coin flipping had almost no effect. By comparison, people asked to imagine the others' feelings assigned themselves the desirable task less than half the time (42%). In the second study, participants were told that they and another participant were to answer certain questions. For each correct answer, the subject would receive two raffle tickets, but the other person would receive nothing. Subjects were then given the opportunity to change this unequal assignment of rewards. In this condition, imagining being in the others' position had a large effect on reward assignment. A full 83% of participants in this condition opted for an equal distribution of rewards (each participant gets a raffle ticket) compared to the no-perspective group, only 38% of which chose this option. So imagining being in someone else's position sometimes has pro-social effects, as long as benefits can be shared, it is not a zero-sum game, and so on.

The above leads me to make two preliminary suggestions concerning the effects of thinking about others' thoughts and feelings. First, thinking about how others feel promotes motivation to help them *if* they are in need. It is important to note, however, that experimental situations are much more clear-cut and less subject to the sorts of biases that I discussed above. They are also situations where people think of others in need, where that need is not the result of their actions. Such studies, therefore, give us only a partial picture of the positive effects of thinking about others' feelings. After all, if we think of our enemy's feelings, we are quite likely to become even more incensed with him. Experiments with children show that children empathize much less with the victims of their own actions, than the victims of other people's actions.[43] Other studies show that in-group members empathizing with out-group members is actually counterproductive if they have to actually interact with such individuals (as opposed to simply making abstract judgments about them).[44] Second, imagining being in someone else's shoes is not the best approach when it comes to moral motivation. It often leads to personal distress, which is associated with egoistic motivation, and it sometimes has no effect at all. It does appear, however, to be a method that is very much in use.

Thinking about what others in need feel tends to promote actions that are aimed at helping the other. The need in question, however, is not usually desperate, i.e. the person will not be killed, irreparably harmed, etc. In other words, it would be fair to say that the need in question does not obligate others to help. Helping the person is a supererogatory act. This does not make helping any less laudable. In fact, the opposite is true. What is the case, however, is that refusal to help should not be regarded as immoral. It is worth noting, in this context, that Batson, himself, warns that altruistic motivation induced by an imagine-other perspective should not be confused with moral motivation. Such altruistic motivation can lead to immoral actions, such as unfair distribution of resources.[45] So, thinking about others' feelings is known to have powerful effects on motivation to benefit the other. All the situations that we have considered, however, are plausibly regarded as calling for supererogatory actions. If one task is undesirable and another desirable, morality does not prescribe that we should choose the undesirable one for ourselves so that another can benefit. Fair distribution of rewards, as in the raffle tickets experiment, seems more likely to be associated with a norm prescribing fairness, but it could certainly be disputed whether it falls under a solid moral norm. By contrast, harming others is clearly proscribed by harm norms.

What I am gesturing at is that thinking about others' thoughts and feelings is primarily useful in promoting supererogatory acts, not in promoting adherence to norms prohibiting gross immoral actions, such as killing, harming, stealing, lying, etc. This idea is supported by data from autism. When I talked about people with autism, I indicated that the ability to imagine what others think and feel appears to be very important when it comes to forging closer social relationships. A lot of social interaction is guided not so much by a web of unspoken rules as by a sensitivity to others in executing our actions. We consider how what we do will affect others, which is part of what make us nice persons. Not doing so may make us unpleasant, but not necessarily immoral. Or so, at least, I shall argue in the next section.

FITTING IN

Many people with autism who have managed to become reasonably well integrated in society, believe that part of the reason for their success is their increased ability to think about and understand others' thoughts and feelings. Among other things, they maintain that thinking more flexibly about others' motives and internal states allows them to deal with their anger better. They also find that they are able to maintain positive relationships with others due to their enhanced appreciation of folk psychology. It is interesting to observe that the anger management issues that they have appear to be no different from those of ordinary people, and the treatment that is effective with normal people is effective with them too, e.g. cognitive-behavioral therapy. Similarly, much of the advice that people with autism give to each other about how people and social relationships work is advice that ordinary people would find useful. Autism highlights the multifarious ways in which thinking about others' thoughts and feelings influences ordinary social interactions.

Let us first consider anger management. Many people with autism are subject to inappropriate and powerful outbursts of anger. Part of that anger is related to the attitudes that other people have towards them, frustration at their lack of control, etc. To what extent might improved ability to imagine what others think and feel help ? Shaun Barron blames his previous poor social relationships on his need for control, self-absorption, and lack of understanding of others' perspectives on things. He claims that:[46]

People with autism can be so wrapped up in their own thinking that they fail to see the effect their words and actions have on the people around them. At times my own need to control my environment was so strong that whenever the rules I created in my mind were broken, even in the slightest way, it was an earthquake of gigantic proportions. Autism does not give a person a license for displaying poor manners and hurting others' feelings. (222)

It was being so caught up in trying to preserve some semblance of order in my life and having little ability to deviate from it. It was also an inability to see something through someone else's eyes. When something or someone violated my house of cards—and it happened a lot—I became so filled with fury that it consumed me. I couldn't apologize under those conditions—there was no room in my thinking processes for anything other than the rage. (225)

If people failed to respond the way I expected, I assumed I had done something wrong or stupid. It never occurred to me that there were other perspectives than mine, and in fact, many possible, plausible different ways to interpret such an interaction. (255)

Barron maintains that working on trying to understand others, taking up their perspective, and so on played a large part in his improved social life and general wellbeing. Both Barron and Grandin recount countless failed interactions with others as a result of their deficient understanding. They attribute their successful social interactions to their acquired psychological knowledge, in particular to taking the perspective of the other person.

Failures to interact well with others range from serious moral transgression—e.g. physical violence or murder—to *faux pas*'s. People with autism do not appear to have particular difficulties across this entire range. Their problems start somewhere around being profoundly self-absorbed and a serious nuisance to others—e.g. shouting hysterically at others and throwing things around if they do not do exactly what they want them to do—and continues through the finer aspects of etiquette norms—boring others with a blow-by-blow account of Freddie Keppard's biography, e.g.[47] Therapists usually assume that the most serious problem people with autism have is learning how to behave in a socially appropriate manner—learning etiquette—not learning how to avoid gross immoral behavior. This fits with most of the first-person accounts you find in the literature. To be sure, Grandin was thrown out of school for throwing a book at another girl, but although we may agree that this is a regrettable event, it hardly matches the sort of misdemeanors that are commonly observed among children with conduct disorder, e.g. Violent aggression is *not* a characteristic trait of people with autism *qua* the disorder.[48] This is not to say that people with autism cannot be violent ; they certainly can. However, psychologists have found no correlation between the disorder and propensity of violence.[49]

Self-help books for people with autism tend to focus on etiquette, and self-consciously so. Here you find advice about the value of bathing regularly, changing clothes, using deodorant, and so on. But apart from this rather basic advice, they read like average self-help books, *not* instruction manuals for developmentally disordered people. From reading the literature on people with autism—including really high-performing ones—one would expect much more basic manuals, but Grandin and Barron include advice beneficial to any-

one but the most socially adept.[50] This is sophisticated advice about how to get on with others in the more fine-grained ways. It concerns how to deal with personal interactions in small groups, how to forge social relationships, how to maintain them, and so on.

I go into such detail with people with autism's understanding of others—specifically taking up their perspective on things—because I believe it highlights something important about this way of relating to others. Most importantly, it has more to do with close and smooth social contact than with moral behavior of the grosser sort. This is in line with what we found earlier. It seems that we should not look to sophisticated social understanding for the wellspring of serious moral norms. Understanding the importance and bindingness of such norms and being motivated to adhere to them do not require any particularly sophisticated understanding of others. However, the ability to function smoothly with others on an everyday basis does. And, as we have seen, being helpful and nice to others is also closely related to thinking of them in a certain way, i.e. in terms of relatively sophisticated psychological concepts.

BIASES AND LACK OF ACCURACY

If thinking of what others think and feel when they are in distress promotes sympathy and/or empathy and helping behavior, it seems plausible to suggest that we ought to consider others' thoughts and feelings more often. It will help us to be (morally) better human beings. Here, I look at some of the difficulties we experience trying to understand others and argue that this fact raises important issues about how morally useful thinking about others' thoughts and feelings actually is.

The first problem is that we turn out to be relatively bad, not at ascribing psychological states to others, but at ascribing *the right kinds* of states to them. In a range of studies meant to measure the *accuracy* of psychological attributions, William Ickes and colleagues found that people are much less good at it than they assume. On average, people are correct a mere 22% of the time. Only a small number of people, in one study as few as 11%, are aware of when they are likely to be accurate, and when not.[51] There is a poor correlation between confidence in one's accuracy and actual accuracy.[52] More relevant for our purposes is Ickes' finding that there is no correlation between the propensity to empathize or sympathize with others and accuracy:[53]

There was not a single reliable correlation between the perceivers' scores on any of these components—their propensity to imagine the perspective of others, feel emotional concern for their plight, identify with fictional characters, and experience emotional distress when others suffer—and the perceivers' empathic accuracy scores.

Although not everyone agrees with Ickes' research methodology, his results ought to dampen any great enthusiasm one might have about the power and importance of thinking about others' inner lives. The resulting pessimism should, however, be tempered somewhat by the finding that friends and dating partners are better at gauging each others' thoughts and feelings. People are about twice as accurate with friends and partners compared to strangers, averaging 36% accuracy.[54] Another potentially encouraging result—depending on your attitude—is that incentivizing accuracy results in more accuracy, particularly for men. In one study, Klein & Hodges offered cash incentives for accuracy and found that accuracy improved.[55] In other words, if you can incentivize accuracy, people get better at getting others' thoughts and feelings right, although not dramatically so.[56]

The issue of accuracy is complex. The fact that we tend to be shockingly inaccurate means that we ought to be very careful indeed in putting too much stock in what we think others think or feel. But even if our psychological ascriptions are wrong, they may nevertheless lead to good results. Perhaps, if we think that others are more easily hurt than they actually are, we are prone to treat them with more consideration. On the flipside, if you are wrong about the other person, what you think you ought to do may turn out to have very little to do with assisting her. As experience teaches, we do not simply err about others' thoughts and feelings in ways that make us act kinder or more considerately towards them. Therefore, lack of accuracy should make us somewhat wary of the suggestion that psychological ascription is crucial to moral judgment or moral motivation.

What is more problematic than simple lack of accuracy is that inaccuracy is sometimes due to motivated reasoning. In brief, we think things are a certain way because it serves some interest of ours, or we engage in reasoning that is more or less assured to have us reach the conclusion we are already partial to. We may ignore evidence, give excessive attention or credence to evidence that supports our favored view, and rest satisfied with sloppy reasoning that sidesteps shortcomings in our arguments.[57] Folk psychological ascription and reasoning is no different. It, too, is subject to a host of so-called biases. For instance, our emotions, psychiatric or mental condition, self-image, or social context all bias how we think about others' thoughts

and feelings.[58] Let me note, however, that by 'bias' I do not mean to indicate that they are interruptions to stable processes serving predictive and explanatory functions.

People's views about emotions differ, yet nobody denies that mistaken, sometimes outright silly, beliefs are associated with the emotions. Whereas some people argue that emotions *cause* the relevant beliefs,[59] others that emotions *contain* them,[60] or that they are the result of automatic, subconscious judgments,[61] all agree that emotions often lead to, or contain, distorted ideas about others' attitudes. For instance, when we are jealous of someone, we tend to think that they are desirous of someone other than ourselves. For the purposes of the discussion here, it does not matter whether those thoughts are the result of our emotions or of subconscious judgments or appraisals. What matters is that our jealous thoughts are often not justified by the evidence (using ordinary standards of belief justification).[62] The same is true of many other emotions, e.g. shame, fear, and anger.[63] It is quite likely that the reason that emotions sometimes give us a quite distorted view of the world is that they are 'personal'. We experience them when something is (particularly) relevant to our concerns. Richard Lazarus thought that emotions ultimately are about how the world affects our wellbeing.[64] This helps explain why our emotional beliefs often concern others' attitudes towards us: when I am angry with someone, I tend to think of her as being blameworthy, and when I am afraid of someone, I tend to think of him as intending or wanting to harm me. Notice how egocentric these thoughts are. The world is understood primarily in terms of how it affects *us*. This spells trouble for views of morality that lean heavily on our thinking about others' thoughts and feelings. Arguably, we need morality the most when we pursue some goal, the obtaining of which may be difficult to square with the pursuits of others. But those are the times, this research suggests, that we are least likely to think of others' thoughts and feelings in an accurate and objective manner. We are more likely to interpret them in a way that dovetails with our pursuits.

Given the close connection between thinking of others in certain ways and our emotions, it is easy to see how certain pathologies of emotions can lead to systematic misrepresentations of what others think. Highly anxious or fearful individuals tend to regard all manners of people and situations as threatening ; aggressive individuals tend to see others as blameworthy ; and people who are depressed are prone to think that others have derogating attitudes towards them.[65] Indeed, depression is associated with a tendency to feel shame *and* with a poor self-image. According to William Swann, people are strongly motivated to have their self-conceptions confirmed, even when they are negative.[66]

There are a couple of other biases that are worth mentioning, i.e. the false consensus effect, the spotlight effect, the illusion of transparency, and projection. People have a tendency to think that their own choices, attitudes, and behavior are more representative of the general population than they actually are, with the result that they over-attribute to others such preferences, etc. (the false consensus effect[67]). They tend to overestimate how salient their actions and appearances are to others, and consequently they overestimate the degree and extent to which people have positive or negative assessments of their actions and appearances (the spotlight effect[68]). Further, people think their thoughts, wants, and feelings are much more transparent to others than they actually are. In other words, they have a tendency to think others know much more about them than they actually do (the illusion of transparency[69]). Lastly, in projection, the subject (usually) attributes unwanted psychic states—ideas, desires, or emotions—to another person. In this way, she disowns some of her own psychic states, while at the same time retaining some awareness of them. For instance, someone who fancies someone other than their romantic partner might come to suspect that *their partner* fancies someone else. In other cases, what is projected out undergoes some transformation.[70] Where psychoanalytic projection used to be regarded with some suspicion by social psychologists, there is now increasing evidence of its existence.[71] Engaging in a certain degree of projection is presumably a precondition for good mental health because it reduces internal conflict. It is important to note, though, that projection usually creates a false image of others and what they think of us. And the image need not be benign.

Mere inaccuracies may lead us astray in our thoughts about others, creating some problems caring appropriately for them. This may be a minor problem, however. It pales in the light of the realization that we often think of others as wanting, thinking, and feeling things because thinking of them that way serves some, not necessarily conscious, interests of ours. The interests that I have enumerated, i.e. evaluating someone's effects on our wellbeing, self-confirmation, self-stability, and so on, are not moral in any interesting sense. Indeed, they are very much *self*-interests. If self-interested biases operate even

at the level of our thoughts about others' thoughts and feelings, this creates problems for the role of such thoughts in moral action. After all, either it serves our interests to reciprocate, etc., or it does not. In the former case, ordinary prudential reasoning and motivation will do, and in the latter, we would need some reason to overcome our more egoistic motivation. But if thinking about others' thoughts and feelings is already biased by our self-interest, it is less useful to do so than it is often thought.

Nevertheless, Batson-type experiments demonstrate that it is useful, in many circumstances, to think of others' thoughts and feelings. Nevertheless, the approach is vulnerable to biases and influences that may lead us astray because we are prone to understand others in a way that fits our (self) interests. The worry is that thinking about others' thoughts and feelings is going to be the most effective when doing so does not conflict with other, important, interests, or when doing so fits our interests. In the famous *Good Samaritan* experiment,[72]the vast majority of subjects that were made to believe that they were late for a presentation failed to stop to check on a person slumped in a doorway, appearing to be in serious distress. About half of those people reported not having noticed anything about the situation that required intervention. They noticed the person, but 'failed' to notice his distress (quite a feat apparently). This experiment may not be representative of the vast number of morally significant situations that we find ourselves in, but it highlights the extent to which extraneous factors affect the way we conceive of others' emotional states. This fact puts a rather definite limit to the usefulness of the approach, and indicates that moral competence is rather complex. Of course, what I have said here does not challenge the idea that our moral competence is, as a matter of empirical fact, linked with our ability to ascribe psychological states to others.

CONCLUSION

It is tempting to think that our moral attitudes towards others will markedly improve once we consider their thoughts and feelings in more detail, once we take up their perspective, etc. The conclusion that I am left with, having examined the proposal in a variety of forms, is that thinking about what others think and feel improves our ability to interact with them, but it does so in a less gross way than is often assumed to be true. It improves our motivation to help others in need. This is certainly a great benefit, but it should be noted that most of the experimental evidence concerns *supererogatory,* not morally required, helping. Thinking about others' thoughts and feeling, particularly in the context of taking up their perspective, also appears to be useful for knowing what sorts of actions to perform and which ones to refrain from if one wants to establish, improve upon, or maintain social relationships with others. It is, however, not required for, nor need its use substantially improve, the ability to refrain from unleashing violence upon them, stealing from them, and so on. This is supported by evidence from people with autism, whose social relations improve with increased perspective taking and ability to think about others' thoughts and feelings.

Now, I have been rather helping myself to the notion of moral supererogation, and some people will no doubt dislike what I have been saying. Opinions diverge significantly about what aid we owe—i.e. we are *required* to give—others, and what aid is laudable, but optional. By and large, the experimental data concerns situations in which people are not in dire or immediate need. The classical Batson scenario involves helping a young woman care for her younger siblings by running errands, etc., lest they should be put up for adoption. It does not involve saving a drowning child, helping someone up who has fallen over, etc. The young woman is clearly in need, but it is doubtful that others are *obligated* to help her. Whatever your favored position about moral obligations—some favor very few, others very many—you can presumably agree that there are rather large differences between the prohibition on murder, the injunction or recommendation to help a person in (not desperate) need, and the prescription that one should not speak out of turn. I tend to think of the actions as, respectively: morally prohibited, morally supererogatory, and socially inadvisable. However you want to classify them, there are clearly important differences between them. And what is striking, I think, is that whereas we have evidence that thinking about others' thoughts and feelings plays an important role in supererogatory actions and socially appropriate action, there is little evidence for it playing a central role in morally prohibited actions.[73] Yet, grand claims are often made that the ability to think about others' thoughts and feelings and/or the ability to take up others' perspective are central to good moral functioning generally. As I have been at pains to argue, it is in the finer details, the niceties, the little considerations, etc. that the use of perspective taking really comes into its own. It is what makes life with others easier, smoother, and more pleasant.

From a normative perspective, there are additional concerns about relying too much on imagining what others think and feel. A good number of biases affect our ability to accurately ascribe psychological properties to others. Some are more insidious to the extent that they are self-interested distortions of others. So whereas imagining others' thoughts and feelings certainly has morally beneficial effects, it is in many cases a less effective approach than is often thought.

It is interesting that religious and moral injunctions to treat others as we would like them to treat us, or at least not to treat them in ways that we would not want them to treat us, are often thought to support the idea that being able to imagine oneself in another's position is essential to morality.[74] However, an equally, if not more, plausible interpretation is that reciprocity lies at the core of morality. Unless your orientation towards others is one of reciprocity, you can think all you want about others' thoughts and feelings, but it won't help you fully grasp, and be motivated by, central moral norms. This, at any rate, is a suggestion worth pursuing.

NOTES

1 Hoffman 2000.
2 Deigh 1994.
3 Cf. Nichols 2004.
4 Batson 1991, Batson et al. 1997.
5 Nichols 2004.
6 For a more complete argument for why we should not dismiss such reasons for moral action, see Maibom forthcoming.
7 Nichols 2004, McGeer 2008.
8 I follow the tradition in much philosophical literature on this in referring specifically to high-performing people with autism, and in not making a distinction between them and people with Asperger Syndrome. Anything here said about (high-performing) people with autism is meant to apply equally to people with Asperger Syndrome.
9 Bjørkly 2009. Since the target group is people with autism that are high-performing, and there is no universally agreed upon distinction between high-performing autistic people and people with Asperger's Syndrome, I use evidence from Asperger's Syndrome to support my claim.
10 Kasari, Chamberlain, and Bauminger 2001.
11 McGeer 2008.
12 Grandin 1995, 103-4.
13 Grandin & Barron 2005.
14 Nichols 2004.
15 CBC News, February 2, 2009 (http://www.cbc.ca/canada/nova-scotia/story/2009/02/02/ns-transit-god.html ?ref=rss).
16 http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index ?qid=20090720202227AAyN95E (12/08/2009).
17 For a critique of the profile-based approach to catching serial killers, see e.g. Bealey 2004.
18 Robert Gordon 1995.
19 There is reason to think that he finds this move attractive because it avoids assuming that people make an assumption of similarity (Gordon 1995). But where it may avoid this problem, it takes on the burden of unpacking what it means to say that one imagines *being somebody else in their position*, over and above imagining being (oneself) in someone else's position along with some adjustments as to beliefs, desires, and temperament, say.
20 Churchland 1981, Stich & Nichols 1995, Maibom 2003.
21 Ravenscroft 1998.
22 Goldman 1995, Maibom 2007.
23 Daniel Batson 1991.
24 Batson 1991.
25 Maibom 2007, Goldman 1995.
26 Maibom 2007.
27 Batson et al. 1997.
28 Maibom 2007.
29 The evidence is very complex. The fact that imagine-self perspective leads to a mix of personal distress and distress for the other does not show, by itself, that it gives rise to two different emotions. It might give rise to just one that is felt as if for the self at one instance and as if for the other at another.
30 The point is not that the simulator needs to be accurate. Rather, it is unlikely that an empathic reaction to someone in need would be these warm, fuzzy feelings, which are more characteristic of something like sympathy.
31 Note that this result is not easily explained by 'bad' simulation. That is, we may suppose that the reason for the divergence is simply that the simulator fails to match the subject's emotions. However, the sorts of situations envisaged in the experiment are pretty obviously situations in which the subject is distressed.
32 It is certainly possible that people come to experience warm, sympathetic feelings for others by first experiencing or imagining experiencing the emotions that the subject is likely to feel under the circumstances. But there is no indication of such a process in Batson and colleagues' results.
33 Hoffman 2000.
34 Liew et al. 2003.
35 Cole et al. 1996.
36 Stotland et al. 1979.
37 Figley 1995.
38 Zeifman 1997.
39 Strayer 1993.
40 It is worth noting that the difference was significant, but not large at all (Batson et al. 1997).
41 Batson et al. 2003.
42 Batson et al. 2003.
43 Zahn-Waxler et al. 1992.
44 Vorauer & Sasaki 2009.
45 Batson et al. 1999.
46 Grandin & Barron 2005.
47 Cf. Barron, p. 297-9.
48 See note viii.
49 Cf. note ix.
50 Grandin & Barron 2005.
51 Ickes 2003.
52 Ickes 1997, 2003.
53 Ickes 2003, 81.
54 Ickes 2003.
55 Klein & Hodges 2001.
56 The accuracy numbers of Klein & Hodges (2001) are generally higher than those reported by Ickes. Ickes' numbers have been tabulated over many studies, however. The increased accuracy of men improved by approx. 15% from 28% to 43%. This is still well below getting it right just half the time.
57 Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982, Nisbett & Ross 1980, Wason & Johnson-Laird 1972.
58 Frijda et al. 2000, Swann 1990.

59 Maibom 2008.
60 Frijda & Mesquita 2000.
61 Solomon 2003.
62 Cf. Maibom 2008.
63 I have developed these ideas in more detail in Maibom 2008.
64 Lazarus 1991.
65 American Psychiatric Association 2000, Tangney & Dearing 2002, Walker 1984.
66 William Swann 1990.
67 Ross et al. 1977, Kunda 1999.
68 Gilovich & Savitsky 1999.
69 Gilovich et al. 2000.
70 Freud 1911.
71 Kawada et al. 2004, Schimel et al. 2003.
72 Darley & Batson 1973.
73 There is rather mixed evidence about the effect of dispositional empathy on aggression. Some studies show no effect (e.g. Jolliffe & Farrington 2004), some show some effects (e.g. Miller & Eisenberg 1988)
74 For instance Confucius said: "do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" (*Analects* 15: 23) and Jesus that "therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (*Matthew* 7: 12).

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