

INTRODUCTION

Empathy is the ability to vicariously share the emotions of others. Empathy involves imagining another's psychological state while maintaining a self-other differentiation; it is knowing another person's state of mind without their state of mind being the same as yours (Howe, 2013). Empathy as a whole involves both a cognitive component, recognizing what another person is feeling, and an affective component, vicariously sharing an emotion very similar to what you think another individual is feeling.

It is widely agreed that empathy as delineated is needed for moral judgment. Some researchers, such as David Howe (2013), claim that "empathy oils the wheels of social life" (p. 15). Other emotion researchers, such as Abigail Marsh (in press) and Simon Baron-Cohen (2011), argue that empathy is at the core of morality. Recently, this view has been criticized, notably by philosopher Jesse J. Prinz.

DEFINITIONS/MAIN ARGUMENT

Moral Judgment

Judgments that individuals believe to be moral, where a moral judgment overrides other judgments. Moral judgment occurs when an individual judges whether another individual or group of individuals have transgressed a norm that is considered to override other norms.

Emotion

An emotion can be through feeling that consists of specific representational or propositional content accompanied by a specific sensational reaction. To experience an emotion is to feel a certain way about something (representational or propositional content) and have a corresponding feeling.

Main Argument

I critically examine the existing data in emotion research to show that empathy is not necessary for moral judgment. I argue that other emotions, such as disgust, are responsible for moral judgment, and that individuals are able to make moral judgments without empathy.

Moral judgment: theories of how they are made

Jonathan Haidt: The Social Intuitions Model

- ❖ Haidt's Social Intuitions Model of morality is grounded in intuition.
- ❖ Intuitions include various automatic and uncontrollable cognitive processes, including emotional appraisals and the automatic processes that occur outside the control of consciousness and reasoning (Haidt, Bjorklund, & Murphy, 2000).
- ❖ Haidt's approach is based on the 'affective primacy principle'.

❖ Examples

Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other. What do you think about that, was it OK for them to make love? (Haidt, 2001, p. 814)

❖ Only 20% of participants said that it was OK for Mark and Julie to make love. After the experimenter 'argued' with the participants, claiming that their judgment had no rational basis to be viewed as a moral transgression since no harm occurred, 32% of the participants said that it was OK for Mark and Julie to make love.

Is it OK for a woman to eat the flesh of a dead human, where the flesh is fully cooked so the woman is not be harmed in any way? (Haidt, 2001)

❖ Only 13% of participants said that it would be OK for a woman to eat the flesh of a dead human. When the experimenter 'argued' with the participants about their justification for viewing the act as a moral transgression, some participants changed their mind, which increased the number of participants who viewed the act as permissible to 28%.

❖ Haidt states that the scenarios "were carefully constructed so that no plausible harm could be found, and most participants directly stated that nobody was hurt by the actions in question" (Haidt, 2001, p. 817). Thus, there was no one to empathize with. The scenarios were devoid of empathy, but acted on other emotions, and were designed to trigger intuitive judgments.

Shaun Nichols: The Affective Resonance Hypothesis

- ❖ Shaun Nichols argues that affect or emotions, such as disgust, play a role in moral judgment and in the survival of norms throughout history.
- ❖ In Sentimental Rules, Nichols (2004) argues that affective responses, such as disgust, play a significant role in treating certain disgust violations as immoral rather than morally neutral.
- ❖ "Norms that prohibit actions to which we are predisposed to be emotionally averse will enjoy enhanced cultural fitness over other norms" (Nichols, 2008, p.269).
- ❖ Most individuals at a dinner party find it morally wrong if a guest spits into his glass and then drinks it. Although no one is being harmed and there is clearly no moral violation, the disgust elicited by the act leads to the judgment that the act is immoral. Alternatively, we may judge the act as a moral transgression because we think that it is disgusting.
- ❖ We have norms in our society that prohibit the gratuitous display of bodily fluids. These norms are closely linked with disgust responses, and are what makes these norms moral rather than conventional.
- ❖ We usually consider a norm a moral norm if it is affectively-backed. When a norm is backed by affect, it tends to stick as a norm in society and progresses as a moral norm throughout time.

- ❖ Many find it immoral when others wipe their nose on their cap or clothing, or re-swallow saliva (Nichols, 2008).
- ❖ Borrowing Haidt's example, in Western culture we find it immoral if a man masturbates into a chicken carcass and then cooks it for dinner despite the fact that no one is being harmed. It is evident that the disgust elicited by the scenario is what leads to the judgment that the act is somehow immoral.
- ❖ In many Eastern cultures, a woman who is menstruating would be considered immoral if she partook in a religious ceremony, or served food to others. Menstruation is viewed as dirty or unclean, thus eliciting disgust in many individuals who are a part of that culture. What is more, while such actions are considered immoral, individuals would not find it immoral if the fork is placed on the wrong side of the knife at the dinner table (a conventional transgression). Here, we can see how affect plays a role in determining whether we treat a transgression as moral or conventional.

CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

Contrary to popular belief, empathy is not necessary for moral judgment, and plays a marginal, if any, role in moral judgment. Other emotions, such as disgust, are responsible for moral judgment and play a significant role in how we view transgressions. Thus, empathy cannot be the core of moral judgment. Moral judgments associated with affect are guided by other emotions, disgust being primary.

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