Moral Empathy: The Necessity of
Intersubjectivity and Dialogic Confirmation

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Notable educational theorists have begun to call for the cultivation of empathy in moral education. In *Releasing the Imagination: Essays in Education, the Arts and Social Change*, Maxine Greene ties imagination directly to empathy. She tells us, "[o]ne of the reasons I have come to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world is that imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible."[1] Nel Noddings claims that, "[t]here is considerable evidence that a mature empathy — one that can reach into and feel with others, even those whose physical and moral conditions are very different from our own — may be our best protection against complete demoralization."[2] Deborah Meier posits two goals essential to any democratic education: the first is informed skepticism, the second, informed empathy.[3] Moral philosopher John Deigh sounds a similar call for empathy in moral education.[4] These advocates of empathy suggest that the value of empathy pertains to its connection to morality.

CLARIFICATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMPATHY AND MORALITY

Experience also seems to tell us that a connection between empathy and morality exists. In its capacity to open our emotions to the perspectives of others, empathy enables us to perform acts of moral concern and caring. We see this phenomenon mirrored in literature. Juliet's Nurse agrees to be a messenger to Romeo at considerable risk to herself. Maggie Tulliver, in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss,* sacrifices a life with the man she loves to deter the devastation it would wreak on her cousin, Lucy. Yet, a host of counterfactuals emerge in life and literature in which empathy seems not only amoral but at times even immoral. First, there is the sadist, the Marat Sade, whose pleasure depends on sensitively gauging the other's pain. There is the manipulator, the Iago, whose revenge requires an intimate understanding of Othello's mental states. There are the "fusers," individuals who over-empathize with others. And yet, side-by-side with the sadists stand those who rescued Jews at enormous risk to themselves during World War II — people who say they were motivated by empathy.[5] What are we to do with the dissonance of this picture?

Alfie Kohn writes that "a definition, after all, cannot be proved right or wrong but can only be shown to be more or less useful."[6] I suggest that a more useful way to view the jangled account of empathy is as the improper conflation of a slew of related phenomena into the single concept of empathy. I posit that theorists and authors have been capturing individual components of a constellation of phenomena and calling each empathy. The current accounts of empathy are more akin to paintings of several different landscapes with similar features than those of a single landscape by different painters. Although these various empathies share so much in common that they may be phenomenologically difficult to distinguish, other

features may be significantly different across empathies. Moreover, these differ-ences may have moral significance. For this reason, I place the adjective "moral" before "empathy" and separate it from the sadists by describing moral empathy as the form of empathy that is likely to trigger moral action.

The question I explore in this essay is: What are the dimensions of moral empathy that may be missing from the other forms? In other words, what might be necessary for moral empathy? Elsewhere I have argued that a moral empathizer must experience resonating emotion of the same valence as the one being empathized with (the other).[7] In what follows, I argue that there are at least two other necessary dimensions. First, moral empathy must be intersubjective, and second, it requires dialogic confirmation from the other. Given the constraints of this paper, I do not discuss the connections that intersubjectivity and dialogic confirmation have to the moral domain. Nor will I argue in support of one particular moral theory over another; rather, I use a variety of moral theories to support my arguments. In this essay, I simply argue the *necessity* of intersubjectivity and dialogic confirmation in moral empathy. I then, briefly, point to the impact an understanding of these dimensions may have on the larger conversation about cultivating empathy in schools. I begin with my first claim, that of intersubjectivity.

The First Dimension: Intersubjectivity

Anyone who has been carried away by a character in a movie or drawn into the life of a novel's protagonist can attest to the fact that empathy with an object is possible. Martin Buber describes just such a phenomenon:

> to glide with one's own feeling into the dynamic structure of an object, a pillar or a crystal or the branch of a tree, or even of an animal or a man, and as it were to trace it from within, understanding the formation and motoriality of the object with the perceptions of one's own muscles; it means to "transpose" oneself over there and in there. Thus it means the exclusion of one's own concreteness, the extinguishing of the actual situation of life, the absorption in pure aestheticism of the reality in which one participates.[8]

The question is, can this type of empathy trigger moral responses? Can I morally empathize with a work of art? a pillar? a crystal? the branch of a tree?

I begin to answer these questions by examining the implications of empathizing with objects. The phenomenon must necessarily be projective given that no subjec-tive reality may be apprehended from objects, for none exists. An empathizer imbues the object with a reality that she herself constructs. This process parallels Webster's definition of empathy, "the imaginative *projection* of a subjective state, whether affective, conative, or cognitive into an object so that the object appears to be infused with it [emphasis added]."[9]

A projective empathy requires certain "materials." For example, one must find or shape a surface upon which to project. It is silly to project home movies onto the china cabinet or the portrait over the couch. Instead, one removes the painting or hangs a white sheet over it. The projective empathizer must behave similarly, for a human other cannot be fully considered as a subject for successful projection. The other's actual mental state is relevant only to the extent that it must be denied. This stripping or deflecting of aspects of the other's subjectivity gessoes the surface onto which the illusion will be projected. In a sense, a projective empathizer transforms

a human other into an object. Thus, if one can experience moral empathy with an object, then one should also be able to objectify the other and experience the same.

Yet, objectifying others has moral implications. One of the most common practical formulations of Kant's categorical imperative is that one ought to "act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end."[10] In his explanation of this formulation, Kant clearly distinguishes between things and persons and how we ought to treat each.

> Beings whose existence depends, not on our will, but on nature, have none the less, if they are non-rational beings, only a relative value as means and are consequently called *things*. Rational beings, on the other hand, are called *persons* because their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves — that is, as something which ought not to be used merely as a means — and consequently imposes to that extent a limit on all arbitrary treatment of them....Persons, therefore, are not merely subjective ends whose existence as an object of our actions has a value *for us*: They are *objective ends* — that is, things whose existence is in itself an end, and indeed an end such that in its place we can put no other end to which they should serve *simply* as a means.[11]

Things have relative, contingent value, and *persons* have absolute value in and of themselves. To treat a human other as a thing, whether consciously or not, on which to project one's feelings, denies the other the status of personhood. H.J. Patton, in his analysis of the *Groundwork* states Kant's meaning baldly, "it would be *wrong* to use [persons] simply as a means to an end whose value is only relative [emphasis added]."[12] Within Kant's ethical approach, one cannot treat another as an object and be behaving morally.

Similarly, Nel Noddings argues that aesthetic caring (the caring of objects and ideas) is qualitatively different from ethical caring. Given that there is no other subjective reality to apprehend, and no possibility that the caring can be completed in the other, moral caring cannot result from empathizing with objects.

Further, ethical "caring is always characterized by a moving away from self."[13] In the type of projection described above, one does not move away from self; one moves self into others and objects. Self expands not by including others but by co-opting them. The one-caring must act on the knowledge that she *derives from* her relationship with the other. If she projects a false (or enforced) mental state onto the other, any action she takes will be grounded in her own needs. Moral caring is necessarily *responsive* to the needs of others. One's chances of responding morally to another's needs requires an assessment that matches (as much as is possible) the other's state. One must "consider [the others'] natures, ways of life, needs, and desires."[14] One must *receive* (rather than project onto) the other, and her subjective state. Clearly, moral relationships cannot occur with objects or when an empathizer, in the process of projecting, objectifies the other. Viewed through the lenses of two ethical approaches usually considered at odds, Kant's and Noddings's, we find nonetheless important agreement that moral empathy requires a human other.

To sum up the need for an interpersonal moral empathy:

1.) All conceptions of empathy have either an object, a human other, or both as an "other."

2.) If moral empathy includes empathizing with objects, then it is necessarily projective.

3.) A projective empathy objectifies an animate other.

4.) (At least) two fundamentally different moral approaches claim that conceiving of a human other as an object is not a moral act.

5.) Therefore, an empathy that has an object (or objectified other) as "other" cannot be the moral form.

6.) Given that moral empathy cannot occur with an object, it must occur with a human other.

Although the phenomenological experience of empathizing with objects may be indistinguishable from moral empathy, the latter is necessarily interpersonal.

THE SECOND DIMENSION: DIALOGIC CONFIRMATION

A common feature of the terrain of intersubjective empathies is the notion that empathy provides the empathizer with information pertaining to the other's state of mind. The intransigent problem of whether we *can* have knowledge of other people's minds (and, if so, how) thus pertains to empathy. Debate over this issue emerged as a response to John Locke's claim that the only *direct* knowledge we have is of our own ideas. The implication is that knowledge of other peoples' minds must be given indirectly (if given at all). Consider the following example: I see my friend Sharon touch a plate that came directly from the oven. I see Sharon quickly pull her hand away and bend over cradling it. Although I cannot directly perceive her feelings, I believe I know how Sharon feels. The philosophical debate questions whether I *know* how she feels.[15] Given that the mental state an empathizer ascribes to the other must (as accurately as is possible) correspond to the actual state of the other, this question is crucial if one is to avoid projection, and hence, objectification. Below, I sketch the epistemological debate over other peoples' minds. This conversation informs us of the need for something I call dialogic confirmation. Dialogic confirmation consists of direct verification by the other that the empathizer is "right" about what she believes to be the other's state of mind.

John Stuart Mill would tell me that I know how Sharon feels because:

> other human beings have feelings like me, because, first, they have bodies like me, which I know in my own case, to be the antecedent condition of feelings; and because, secondly, they exhibit the acts, and other outward signs, which in my own case I know by experience to be caused by feelings.[16]

Mill's position is called the argument from analogy. In the case of Sharon, I know that when *I* pick up a hot plate, I respond with the same physical action *and feel pain*. I infer from my own experience (and my experience with others) that Sharon feels similarly.

Behaviorists would tell me that I know how Sharon feels because a mental state *is* the behavioral state; the relationship between the two is non-contingent. Behavior is part and parcel of mentalistic dispositions. Given that behavior is observable, mental states are also observable, and thus, knowable.

A major trouble spot for Mill results from the fact that the argument from analogy requires inductive reasoning from the case of a single, particular, self. If this

induction were possible, then a logical (albeit extreme) result would be the existence of solipsism — the doctrine that I am aware of nothing but my own experiences and have no way of getting through them to a public world. Wittgenstein exemplified this point with his "beetle" in a box analogy. If everyone has a box with something inside, and that something inside, no matter what it is, is to be called "beetle," then the word "beetle" does not refer to *the* object in the box; it refers to *any* object in a box. The same holds in the case of "pain." If everyone were to ascribe the term "pain" to an individual sensation, what then would "pain" mean? For one person, it might be anxiety, another fear, another pleasure. There is no way to verify the correctness of any assessment of others' psychological states because there is no standard for comparison.

A few caveats undermine the behaviorist argument as well. First, it is possible for a person to conceal or fake behavior; an actor crafts behavior, and a person may suppress a physical response to a psychological state. Second, there are cross-cultural differences in emotional displays. O. Klineberg points to Chinese tongue protrusion in response to surprise as an example.[17] Finally, we may just be plain mistaken about the other's state. The title of Stevie Smith's poem, "Not Waving but Drowning," tells this story well. These exceptions lead us to the conclusion that "[b]ehavior is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for mental states."[18]

Since I cannot know Sharon's mental state from my own case, and I cannot be sure from her behavior, how can I accurately assess her mental state? Here, Husserl's "intersubjective" epistemological stance proves helpful. This position not only accounts for the fragile and incomplete nature of the "knowing" of other minds, it suggests a method for improving the accuracy of the what we *can* know.

For Husserl, the first step in accessing any part of the objective world (including other minds) is the recognition that different perspectives exist. His concept of "apperception" explains how we possess this sort of knowledge. Sitting in my office, I "know," even though I cannot see it, that my computer has a back side. I could position myself to see the back if I chose to do so. But I cannot be both "here" typing, and "there" looking. However, I know that "there" exists and that the view from there is different than the one from "here." Even if I have never been "there" to see the back of my computer, my imagination, as well as my previous experience affords me the "knowledge" of its existence. Apperception holds for people as well. I "know" that if you are standing behind my desk and have vision, you can see the back of my computer.

Crucial to this notion of intersubjectivity is the recognition that I cannot actually move my "here" into your "there," garnering your perspective. Husserl tells us, "[w]hereas I can freely change my position in relation to all objects thereby changing the variety of appearances [perspectives], in which they are given to me, I cannot separate myself from my living body, or vice versa."[19] Hence, the only things I know, I know through intersubjectivity, through *verification* by other subjects, through the collective "knowledge" inherent in the summing of perspectives. Given the practical impossibility of summing perspectives, knowledge of objects and others in the world is necessarily incomplete. However, the accumulation of other perspectives brings us closer to the regulative ideal of objective knowing.

How might the notion of intersubjective verification pertain to moral empathy? An empathizer edges as close as possible toward a reading that matches the other's state of mind when the other directly confirms the empathizer's assessment. When I tell Sharon what I think she feels *and* Sharon tells me that I "know" how she feels, I am as close as *I* can get to knowing her mental state. If Sharon and I cannot directly communicate, according to the notion of intersubjectivity, the next most accurate confirmation consists of a conversation with *all* other people, everywhere. The point next to that is all other people, everywhere minus one, and so on. The point providing the most imprecise sort of confirmation consists of confirmation by a single person — not the other. Of course, there may be no confirmation whatsoever. I may simply assume that Sharon feels pain. One is least sure of the other's mind in this lonely state. Moral empathy maintains stringent standards of confirmation; it *requires* dialogic confirmation from the other. Deductions about the state of another's mind must be "checked and rechecked if one is not to lose one's way and make a fiction [object] of the other."[20]

What might dialogic confirmation look like in practice? We may find confirmation in speech. I tell Sharon what I think she feels; she then modifies my assessment or confirms it. But dialogic confirmation need not be in the form of speech. Much of, if not the majority of, communication takes place non-verbally. So although when I see Sharon respond to the hot plate as she does, and I may confirm her mental state verbally, it is likely that I will find sufficient dialogic confirmation by catching her eye and mirroring what I think she must be feeling. Her response to my expression clues me into the accuracy of my assessment. At times, silence can be, as singer-songwriter Suzanne Vega tells us, "more eloquent than any words could ever be." However, accepting non-verbal confirmation runs the risk that plagues the behaviorists; what if I think that Sharon is "waving" when she is actually "drowning?" A condition that ameliorates this problem is my friendship with Sharon. An empathizer's familiarity (personally and/or culturally) with the other increases the likelihood of apprehending her mental state. But the problem remains; an empathizer must always be wary of accepting non-verbal confirmation.

Of course, the same is true of verbal confirmation; I could be wrong in my assessment of Sharon's confirmation. This raises a problem with the notion of dialogic confirmation in general. If, as I have claimed, the other's state of mind is never absolutely knowable, then the confirmation that one may receive from the other is prey to this same claim — for is the "confirmation" not also a state of mind? Would I then not need to confirm the confirmation? In response, I again state that there is no such thing as absolute knowledge regarding other peoples' minds. The moral empathizer desires to know the other *as best she can.* Confirmation simply provides her with more and better "information" toward this end. The more "knowledge" she has the better. And so, although absolute knowledge is the ideal, it is important that a moral empathizer recognizes what Buber so wonderfully describes:

> Of the complete relational event we know...our part of the way. The other part only comes upon us, we do not know it; it comes upon us in the meeting. But we strain ourselves on it if we speak of it as though it were some thing beyond the meeting.[21]

Moral empathy must be considered a dynamic "conversation" between persons, not a snapshot. The empathizer must continually question her assessment of the other's state of mind. In this way, empathy regulates its own weaknesses; "it incorporates a capacity to assess its own aptness."[22] As Lorraine Code says, though "[t]here may be no closure...there are points of action, nodal points informed by a developing understanding, testable for its effectiveness."[23] Dialogic confirmation provides moral empathy with a way to ameliorate the problem of other peoples' minds and provides a tool for self-assessment.

<div align="center">CONCLUSION</div>

In this essay, I have argued the necessity for two dimensions of moral empathy: intersubjectivity and dialogic confirmation. The claim that empathizing with objects is not connected to the moral domain is particularly salient for educators. For example, many theorists advocate cultivating empathy in schools through literature.[24] Understanding the moral limitations and indirect connections of literary empathy to morality will help determine the ways this can be done. Certainly, educators must not expect that exercising and increasing a student's capacity to empathize with characters in novels will *necessarily* increase the student's moral empathy towards human others (although it is not unreasonable to assume some positive influence). Acknowledging the intersubjective dimension of moral empathy impacts how we foster empathy via the content of curriculum.

Dialogic confirmation also influences how we cultivate empathy in schools. A moral empathizer must be trained to "check and recheck" her assessment of the other's state of mind. It is not enough for an adult to tell a child who has hurt a peer that the other child is hurt. The adult must guide both children into a dialogue in which confirmation may be found.

As educators, we must never lose sight of the fragility and uncertainty of the interpersonal empathic relation when discussing the cultivation of empathy in moral education. To forget is to endanger the very ties between empathy and the moral domain.

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1. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995).

2. Nel Noddings, "Thinking, Feeling, and Moral Imagination," (in press, 1997).

3. Deborah Meier, "Supposing That," *Phi Delta Kappan* 78, no. 4 (1996)**:** 271-76.

4. John Deigh, "Empathy and Universalizability," *Ethics* 105 (1995): 743-63.

5. Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: The Free Press, 1988).

6. Alfie Kohn, *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life* (New York: BasicBooks, 1990), 114.

7. Susan Verducci, "Empathy: Emotional Knowledge or Knowing Emotion" (Paper discussed at the Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society, Vancouver, British Columbia, 12 April 1997).

8. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 97.

9. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary,* ed. Philip Babcock Gove (Springfield, Mass.: Miriam Webster, 1993).

10. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H.J. Paton (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 96.

11. Ibid., 96.

12. Ibid., 33**.**

13. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 16.

14. Ibid., 14.

15. "Knowledge" here means knowledge of the objective truth.

16. Louis Pojman, ed., *The Theory of Knowledge: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1993), 465.

17. O. Klineberg, *Social Psychology* (New York: Holt, 1940).

18. Pojman, *The Theory of Knowledge*, 466.

19. Edmund Husserl, "Ideen II" in *Husserliana IV*.

20. This does not mean that when an empathizer finds confirmation for her deductions about the other's state of mind in the other that she knows that state of mind. Knowledge of other minds, as noted above, is an epistemological ideal; it can never happen in practice. Lorraine Code, "'I Know Just How You Feel: Empathy and the Problem of Epistemic Authority," in *The Empathetic Practitioner*, ed. Ellen Singer More and Maureen A. Milligan (Rutgers University Press, 1994), 90.

21. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 76.

22. Code, "'I Know Just How You Feel,'" 81.

23. Ibid., 90.

24. Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*,; Noddings, "Thinking, Feeling, and Moral Imagination;" Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).