

## ***Saucers of Mud: Why Sympathy and Altruism Require Empathy***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Empathy and helping motives are more closely connected than philosophers and psychologists have realized. Empathy doesn't just cause sympathetic concern for others, but is conceptually tied to it. When we empathize with someone's distress at their pain, we ourselves are distressed by that pain and that in itself necessarily constitutes a motive to rid them of that pain. But helping motives like compassion or concern for others can be shown to be conceptually impossible in the absence of empathy. Compassion as a feeling and compassion as a motive are thus inseparable from one another, and this then lets the Chinese complementarity of yin and yang enter the picture. Yin can be viewed as a kind of receptivity, and compassion as a feeling instantiates such receptivity; but compassion as a motive instantiates yang conceived along somewhat traditional lines as a form of strong purposiveness. If moral sentimentalism is on the right track, then the motives and feelings it views as foundational to normative morality turn out to instantiate yin and yang conceived in traditional terms as an indissoluble complementarity. Moral sentimentalism properly pursued allows East to meet West in the field of ethics and possibly in other areas of philosophy as well.

### **KEYWORDS**

Empathy, compassion, Yin and Yang, receptivity, strength, complementarity, sympathy, moral sentimentalism.

### *1*

I have written a great deal in defense of a sentimentalist form of virtue ethics in recent years, and like David Hume, my work has placed a great emphasis on empathy (Hume didn't have the word "empathy" but often spoke of what we mean by empathy using the term "sympathy"). I have argued that empathy not only motivates us to help others (and even to conform to deontological side-constraints and the moral demands of respect and justice), but actually gives us a criterion for distinguishing right from wrong across the complete spectrum of

possible cases.<sup>1</sup> But this is not the place to repeat those arguments. I have also defended the role of empathy in the making of moral judgments (though somewhat differently from the way Hume advocated such a role), but, again, this is not the place for me to try to recapitulate all that I have said in that direction.

So what *am* I going to do here? Well, as I said just above, my view subscribes to and depends on the motivating force of empathy, but until very recently I think I had a somewhat distorted view of *how* empathy motivates altruistic behavior or just plain sympathy with the plight of others; a distorted view, however, that I shared with some of the most significant psychologists who have written about empathy. Martin Hoffman, Nancy Eisenberg, C. D. Batson, and I myself (following their lead) have long believed that the relation between empathy and sympathy/altruism is an empirical issue, that human sympathy and altruism develop as a result of developing empathy and that this is an entirely contingent matter that we have to learn about from the science of psychology (or personal observation).<sup>2</sup> But I now think we have all been mistaken about this. I therefore propose, initially, to tell you why I think we have been confused on this subject, and this conclusion will prepare us for the main topic of the present essay, the question whether there can be such a thing as altruism/sympathy independently of empathy. If there can't be such a thing, if such a thing turns out to be unintelligible, then the case for a sentimentalist account of morality will have been considerably strengthened.

2

Let's first talk about terminology. Most of us don't find it very difficult nowadays to distinguish between empathy and sympathy. When Bill Clinton said "I feel your pain," he was talking about what we now call empathy, and sympathy, by contrast, simply means a desire to see someone's lot in life or present condition improved. And (though this is a point that hasn't, I believe, been made in the philosophical or psychological literature) sympathy can be said to be a kind of minimum level of benevolence and of altruism/altruistic motivation more generally. A benevolent and altruistic person wants to help

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<sup>1</sup> See my *Moral Sentimentalism*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> See M. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; N. Eisenberg, *The Caring Child*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992; C. D. Batson, *Altruism in Humans*, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011; and my own *Moral Sentimentalism*.

another person, and sympathy may just be expressed in the desire to see the other person helped (by someone, not necessarily oneself). But I don't think one can actually count as sympathetic in this latter sense or way *unless there is something one would oneself do to help the other person*. If one wouldn't help the other person even if it was incredibly easy to do so, then any expression of sympathy would have to be considered hypocritical, "crocodile" sympathy. (I am reminded of Doctor Johnson's complaint about people who just "pay you with feeling.") But having made these points we still have a seeming conceptual divide: between empathy, on the one hand, and sympathy/compassion/benevolence/altruism, on the other. And I think that in the most important sense or way, this divide is actually illusory. Empathy's connection with sympathy, benevolence, compassion, caring, etc., is conceptual, not empirical.

However, to make this point I first have to distinguish, as many philosophers and psychologists nowadays do, between two kinds of empathy. There is projective empathy, which involves putting oneself into the shoes or the head of another person (or animal), and then there is what is variously called associative, receptive, or emotional empathy, which occurs when we are invaded, so to speak, by the feelings or attitudes of another person. This is the kind of empathy Hume mainly spoke of using the term "sympathy," and it is the kind that plays the most central role in my own approach to virtue ethics and that, as I now think, is conceptually tied to sympathy, etc. Empathy in some of its embodiments depends on a certain degree or amount of conceptual and cognitive sophistication. A child of four cannot empathize with the sufferings of the people in another country the way an adolescent or adult can, because they simply lack the requisite concepts. And when a father is infected by his daughter's enthusiasm for stamp collecting, this too requires the father to know something about stamps, about collecting, and about his daughter. But the empathic infection occurs without the father consciously willing for that to happen, so we are talking here, not of the projective kind of empathy, but of the associative emotional kind.

And notice one thing. The father who is infected or, to switch metaphors, who takes in his daughter's enthusiasm by a kind of empathic osmosis, doesn't merely become enthusiastic in an unspecific or vague way. The enthusiasm has the same intentional object as his daughter's, namely, stamp collecting. (There is some ambiguity or leeway here as to whether he starts wanting to help her collect stamps or starts wanting to collect for himself or both.) In other words, receptive or associative empathy takes in an attitude, motive, or feeling with its intentional object, and this is something that Hume seems to have recognized

when he pointed out in the *Treatise of Human Nature* that we humans have a strong tendency to take in the attitudes of those around us. Thus if my parents love Winston Churchill (mine did), one can and will, without knowing it, take in that attitude, but the attitude taken in isn't just some generalized or vague form of positive feeling: it is positive feeling directed toward Churchill as its intention object.

These observations give us all we need to show that there is a conceptual, not a mere empirical, connection between the emotional or associative kind of empathy, on the one hand, and sympathetic, benevolent, altruistic, and/or compassionate motivation, on the other. If someone feels pain and is distressed about it, then they automatically, *ex vi termini*, count as motivated to alleviate that pain. That's just what distress *means*. But then consider someone who empathizes with, who empathically takes in, the other person's distress at their pain. This means feeling distressed oneself about their pain, and, again *ex vi termini*, this constitutes motivation to alleviate that person's pain. Which is what we mean by altruistic or benevolent motivation. So on strictly conceptual grounds empathy involves sympathy with and motivation to help another person. (Of course, the motivation may not issue in action if stronger contrary motives are also in play in the given situation.)

However, those who accept the above argument often have an interesting way of (in effect) resisting its force and implications. They say (at talks I have given) that even if empathy entails sympathy on the grounds I mention, there still might be such a thing as sympathy *without* empathy. And till very recently I haven't known how to answer them. I have tended to grant that there might in principle be such a thing as sympathy and benevolence without empathy in (extraterrestrial) species other than our own and have usually just insisted that in the human case, there is no such thing as sympathy or benevolence without a developed capacity for empathy. But now I think the case can be made stronger, that sympathy is conceptually impossible in the absence of empathy, and the very title of the present essay gestures allusively in the direction of the kind of argument I am now prepared to offer for that conclusion.

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In her famous book *Intention*, published in 1957, Elizabeth Anscombe made a conceptual point that very much bears remembering.<sup>3</sup> She argued (roughly) that

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<sup>3</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957, p. 70 and *passim*.

certain desires don't in fact make any sense, that if someone claimed to desire a saucer of mud, we couldn't attach any sense to what they were saying unless they went on to suggest some intelligible reason why they wanted this: e. g., someone had told them they would give them a lot of money if they gave them a saucer of mud, or they needed the mud for a beautifying facial, or some such. The point is well taken; it makes no sense to suppose that someone just wants a saucer of mud and has no further reason for this desire beyond the simple desire itself. But how exactly does this bear on the topic of the present essay?

Well, I think it bears immediately and, I hope, decisively. Those who questioned whether sympathy needs to be underlain by empathy were saying that one might just be sympathetic or benevolent without there being any further basis for that motivation, that such motivation might, for example, be simply instinctual. But I now think this is a mistake, a conceptual mistake, and my reason for thinking so partly comes from Anscombe's earlier example. Though the matter is far from as obvious as what we (with benefit of hindsight) can say about the desire for a saucer of mud, I think, I now think, we in fact can't make sense of there being benevolence or sympathy lacking any further basis or reason for the benevolence or sympathy.

However, in order to show you this, I think I need to begin by making use of a maneuver that Bishop Butler used to very good effect in his Sermons from the Rolls Chapel. Butler wanted to show that people are capable of altruism, but he recognized a certain difficulty standing between himself and that goal: the fact that people know that helping others can be a very rewarding and even pleasurable experience and are inclined to conclude that we sympathetically help others for egoistic, rather than altruistic, reasons. (There is some evidence that even Kant was taken in by this kind of thinking.) So Butler, rather ingeniously, changed the subject from benevolence and altruism to malice and revenge. He pointed out that the person who feels malice toward another may get pleasure from hurting them, but also typically risks his or her own happiness and comfort in their effort to do dirt to the person they hate. Hurting the person is their goal, and the only pleasure they get in this connection is from the fact, when it is a fact, that that goal is (thought to be) achieved. And this is something it is fairly easy for us to recognize. But once we see the case for regarding malice and revenge as non-egoistic motives, it is easy or easier to see that an analogous case can be made for regarding benevolent action and motivation as non-egoistic. And I propose to use a similar maneuver to deal with the issue of whether sympathy and benevolence can ever be sheer and basic. To help us with that issue, it will be useful to focus on the opposite of these feelings,

on malice and the desire for revenge, the very feelings or motives that proved so useful to Butler's purposes.

Now no one could think that (the desire for) revenge could exist all on its own: revenge is always based on some offense or injury, imagined or otherwise. But this then contrasts, or seems to contrast, with malice (or malevolence). The Shakespearean critic A. C. Bradley once described Iago as having felt "motiveless malignity" toward Othello, and though this may not be entirely accurate to the play (Othello had passed over Iago for promotion at the time the play *Othello* begins), the idea of motiveless malignity doesn't seem a contradiction in terms the way the idea of motiveless revenge does. However, I still think we should be suspicious about the notion of motiveless malignity. When we think of the malice that actually exists among or in humans, there always seems to be an element of revenge or some other deeper motivation for the malice. Iago bore malice toward Othello, but also had a motive of revenge against Othello, and just think about it. When you and I feel hatred toward someone, don't we always think we have a basis or justification for feeling the way we do? Even the paranoid schizophrenic who deliberately injures others imagines that the others are out to get him or have done him dirt in the past, and so their malice and hatred toward others doesn't, in psychological terms, stand on its own.

But perhaps the psychopath raises a problem here. Some (but I don't think all) psychopaths have hereditary or congenital brain lesions or abnormalities. And many such psychopaths seem to want to hurt or harm others even if this in no way advances or promotes their own well-being. May such psychopaths not demonstrate the sheer malice that I am saying is conceptually impossible? Well, I am not sure. But I don't think we should rush too quickly toward classifying such people as having motiveless malignity. Perhaps, for example, their brain/neurological deficiencies make them paranoid like some schizophrenics, which would undercut the claim that there is nothing motivating or behind their malice toward so many others. Alternatively, their brain abnormalities or earlier psychological/sexual abuse may make it harder for them to control or moderate their anger when unpleasant things occur or are done to them, and this may make them angry at the world in a way most of us aren't. But once again, such anger and the malice that embodies it are not unmotivated or lacking in intelligible psychological grounding. So at the very least I am inclined to say the following.

Aside from bizarre cases like psychopathy that we don't yet perhaps know enough about to characterize properly in moral-psychological terms, the idea of

motiveless malice doesn't make a lot of sense. To say of someone "he just hates people, and there is absolutely no reason why he does" seems to me to be saying something quite difficult to make sense of. And in that respect I think the case is similar to Anscombe's example. The simple desire for a saucer of mud is not something we can readily understand, and I say the same about the simple desire to hurt people, sheer malice. And if one can always wonder whether the neurologically damaged psychopath might not have a basic and unaccountable-for hatred of others, one can wonder too whether such a psychopath or someone else with a brain abnormality might not just have an unaccountable-for desire for mud. If we can't rule the former out, how can we rule out the latter? But, turning the tables, might we not rather conclude that it is as difficult to make sense of the idea that brain malfunctioning might make us hate people for no psychologically operative reason as it is to make sense of the idea that such malfunctioning might make someone desire saucers of mud for no other reason than that desire itself. Every case of malice we are actually aware of seems to have some psychological basis other than the malice itself, and I can see no reason to think that any possible or conceivable malice could really be otherwise.

But then this argument transposes to benevolence, sympathy, and altruism. If the idea of sheer raw malice makes no genuine sense, why should the idea of sheer raw benevolence make any more sense? Of course, we are aware of our sympathy for others more vividly and/or self-consciously than we are of the (potential) empathy or empathic transmission of feeling that I say underlies sympathy. But this is an epistemic matter, not a causal or ontological one. Even if we typically know sympathy before we know empathy, it doesn't follow that the former can exist without the latter. We may also know our own desire for revenge more vividly and immediately than we know the cause of that desire, but the former still depends for its existence on the latter. And similarly for lots and lots of other cases where the *ordo essendi* and the *ordo cognoscendi* proceed in opposite directions. We run into difficulties when we prescind from issues of knowability and just try to imagine malice with no psychological cause, and the case of benevolence/sympathy seems analogous. Imagine someone who is in trouble and someone who has sympathy for their plight. Doesn't there have to be something that *gets them to be or makes them* sympathetic with the other person's trouble? After all, a psychopath can recognize that someone is in trouble and feel no sympathy whatever for them, so the sheer recognition of another's trouble doesn't automatically arouse the sympathy of a bystander or onlooker. And in parallel doesn't there have to be something in, something

about, the onlooker that leads them to feel sympathetic? The idea that someone might just automatically want another person's suffering isn't a very clear one, and the idea that someone might just automatically want another person to escape a difficult situation isn't a very clear one either.

Now in the case of the psychopath, there is something missing, something which, if present, would allow and account for their sympathetic motivation toward someone who is suffering or in trouble. And the missing element or ingredient is, of course, empathy. As we have seen, empathy is a mechanism that converts distress on one person's part to similarly-directed distress on the part of another person, and this yields or constitutes altruistic motivation and sympathy on the part of the person to whom the distress is conveyed. (This can happen with some non-human animals as well.) In such a case, we can understand, and understand very well, how altruism and sympathy can arise. But if we don't posit empathy, then the motivation behind or for altruism seems difficult or impossible to fathom. And that is just what I am saying.

Now the reader may want to reply at this point that I am forgetting how easy it sometimes is to feel sympathetic concern in the absence of empathy. If (to take a famous example from Confucian thought) a child is about to fall into a well, can't one feel concern and act on that concern even if the child doesn't see their own danger and there is therefore no distressed state of the child to empathically latch onto? Yes, all of this is possible, but it only constitutes an objection to what I am saying about sympathy and altruism, if empathy exclusively takes in actual psychological states, and that assumption is far too limiting. It is possible to empathize with the distress, and suffering one knows someone *will* have if one does or doesn't do something, and in the case of the child about to fall into a well, the observer can have a quite vivid sense of what the child will feel and suffer once they have fallen into the well. Sympathetic, caring, altruistic adults are capable of feeling empathy with what can or will happen to or in another person (the psychology literature on empathy discusses this possibility), and so in the kind of normal case of helping motivation the reader may have worried about, both empathy and sympathy are present.

In the end, therefore, I think sympathy and altruism without empathy are very much like a basic desire for a saucer of mud: something we really can't understand. And at this point this comparison shouldn't perhaps be so surprising. If desire has intelligibility conditions and cannot attach to some intentional object independently of those conditions, then sympathy and altruism, which involve specific (and positive) forms of intentionally directed

desire, may have their own intelligibility conditions; and can one think of a better candidate for such a condition than empathy?

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In the light of the above, we might want now to consider the more general question whether empathy is necessary to any and every sort of moral helpfulness toward others. Sympathy and benevolence as I have been describing them don't rest on any specifically moral or ethical thinking (this is another aspect of their naturalness in Hume's sense of the term). When I benevolently help another person, I needn't be thinking that this is my moral duty or that it would be a virtuous thing for me to do—I may simply be impelled by my sense of what the other is suffering and my empathy for their state of mind. But in describing things in these terms, I have remained pretty much entirely within the sentimentalist moral tradition that derives from Hutcheson and Hume. Rationalists have other ways of justifying and explaining the motivation behind actions that seek to promote the well-being of others, and it would be interesting to consider whether any of them allows coherently for beneficent actions based on something other than benevolence, compassion, empathy, or (psychological) altruism.

Kant seems, for example, to have thought that our rationality (or rational freedom) as such can lead us to help others. According to Kant, reason grounds the Categorical Imperative, and one of the duties that follow out of the Categorical Imperative is the (imperfect) duty to promote the welfare of others. But, in addition, Kant thinks pure reason not only grounds this obligation but makes it have a certain motivational force with us. However, rather than try to tease out Kant's reasons for saying all this, I would rather talk about some recent ethical rationalists who I believe make the case for Kant's conclusions easier to understand than Kant himself does. Let's see if some more recent rationalist approach allows for helping motivation independently of an appeal to empathy.

I think John McDowell has made the overall best case, in rationalist or cognitivist terms, for the idea that empathy isn't necessary to helping motivation. In his "Virtue and Reason" he argues (roughly) that if someone isn't motivated to help someone in dire need or distress, that can only be because

they don't fully appreciate what the other person is going through.<sup>4</sup> A thoroughgoing apprehension of relevant facts can be automatically motivating, and in such cases, McDowell argues, the cognitive and the motivational are inextricably bound together—they can't even be conceptually prized apart. Now McDowell's view and others like it have been criticized as “queer” for tying the cognitive and the motivational so tightly together. But I am not going to object to this aspect of what McDowell is committed to. I can think of many cases where it seems plausible to suppose that cognition and motivation are inseparable and have discussed the matter at great length in my book *A Sentimentalist Theory of the Mind*.<sup>5</sup> My objection to McDowell's cognitivism/rationalism will come at his views from a somewhat different direction. We need to go back to the case of psychopaths.

What prevents a psychopath from fully appreciating how bad or painful it is or would be for one of his (potential) victims and being motivated to help them (or not hurt them in the first place)? Psychopaths are famous for being able to “get into the heads” of their potential victims (this presumably is projective empathy), so how can the rationalist like (the early) McDowell say that their lack of appropriate motivation is due to their lack of appreciation of relevant facts, to their not seeing certain facts as salient in the way a moral person would? Well, let me suggest that empathy may make the difference here and may be (part of) the only possible explanation of the difference of motivation between a psychopath and a moral person. Psychopaths may be able to get into the heads of other people, but they characteristically lack the ability or tendency to empathically feel what others feel. So if the psychopath fails to appreciate certain facts about another's need or suffering, fails to see those facts as salient in a way that would motivate them to help, that may be precisely

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<sup>4</sup> McDowell, “Virtue and Reason” in R. Crisp and M. Slote eds., *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Incidentally, if someone argues against the analogy between malevolence/malice and benevolence that I have been making use of on the grounds that benevolence seeks to bring about something impartially good, the flourishing of other human beings, and malice seeks to bring about something bad, their suffering or faring poorly, they have actually given the game away. If benevolence is based in the thought of the goodness of what it seeks to bring about, then it isn't the sheer desire for the welfare of another, but rather anchors itself in a conception of what is good in itself. So this sort of objection does nothing to show that sheer benevolence, the sheer desire for the welfare or happiness/non-suffering of another, makes sense.

<sup>5</sup> M. Slote, *A Sentimentalist Theory of the Mind*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

because they lack (associative or emotional) empathy. It would then turn out that the lack of empathy makes it impossible for the psychopath to fully apprehend the suffering of others and to be motivated on that basis to help rather than hurt them. So McDowell's purely rationalist/cognitivist route toward motivating helping behavior seems blocked, and once again we need empathy in order for such helping morally good behavior to occur.

Is there any other possible way for the rationalist to argue that empathy isn't necessary to the kind of helping motives that morality (at least in part) depends on? Well, let me mention one other possibility. In *What We Owe to Each Other*, T. M. Scanlon argues that people have reasons for action and belief, that they can recognize such reasons, and that the reasons are capable all on their own of motivating actions or beliefs.<sup>6</sup> For Scanlon, the notion of a reason is not reducible to any naturalistic notion, but can in any event be seen as equivalent to the idea that a given consideration favors a certain belief or action. Scanlon holds that many of us think we have reason to help others, and on his view the fact that it appears to one that one has a reason to help someone can on its own motivate one to help that person. But such a rationalistic view of moral or altruistic motivation (Scanlon is not talking about a "natural virtue" of benevolence here) makes no mention of empathy or of any need for empathy in order for the appropriate helping motivation to occur and eventuate in actual helping, and it is worth considering whether in fact Scanlon's view can coherently avoid any appeal to empathy in the way it seems committed to doing.

I think that, as with McDowell's views, the psychopath represents a stumbling block for Scanlon's rationalistic views. One thing seems clear: even if there appear to some of us to be reasons to help others, such appearances don't occur to the psychopath. It doesn't seem to him or her that he or she has reason to help rather than hurt the person they want to victimize. (I am leaving aside cases where the psychopath has an egoistic and ulterior motive for wanting to help some other person.) And the best and most obvious explanation of why the psychopath doesn't seem to see any reason to help is that they lack the kind of empathy with others that involves feeling what others feel. In that case, empathy and the capacity for empathy seem to make the difference between the psychopath and those of us to whom there appear to be reasons to help others, and so again, as with McDowell, the rationalist account that Scanlon gives of helping motivation seems essentially incomplete. The sentimental factor of

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<sup>6</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

empathy has to be brought into any full picture of the phenomena here, and so I am inclined to conclude that any non-egoistic motivation to help others depends on empathy. Not only do the so-called natural virtues of sympathy, benevolence, and compassion require empathy, but empathy has to be brought into *any possible* account of non-egoistic morally mandated or desirable helping motivation.

But let me now mention one final way in which someone might want to claim that the latter sort of motivation might be explained without bringing in empathy. It could be said (this is the sort of thing Kant says) that the conscientious desire to do one's duty can motivate someone who thinks it is their duty to promote the welfare of others to actually help other people, and it is surely far from obvious that the desire to do one's duty and the recognition or belief that one has a duty to help others require empathy. There are in fact two ways one might go about answering this possible objection, one more critical, one more positive. The critical route will tell us to focus once again on the psychopath and ask why such people lack the desire to do their duty (and are incapable of guilt for moral failures). Surely, the absence of empathy will be part of the most plausible answer, and in that case one cannot invoke the conscientious desire to do one's duty as motivating helping behavior without implicitly assuming that the person with such a desire is capable of empathy.<sup>7</sup> But there is also a more positive way of answering the present objection to what I have been saying here. The objection effectively assumes that we can have moral concepts without having empathy, but many of us hold that psychopaths are like the congenitally blind. The latter lack full color concepts even if they eventually can tell you that grass is green and blood red. And by the same token one might say that psychopaths don't really understand what terms like "right" and "wrong" mean even if they learn (for adaptive social reasons) to be able to tell people that stealing and killing are wrong.

But even if there is some initial tendency nowadays to think that psychopaths lack full moral concepts, can this view of them be supported in some more definite or positive way? Well, I think it can be, but that is a very long story. In my book *Moral Sentimentalism*, I argue—to some extent following Hume—that our second-order empathic experience of being warmed by the first order empathic warmth some agent displays toward some third party (e. g.,

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<sup>7</sup> Terminologically, the desire to fulfill one's duty to promote the welfare of others can be regarded as a form of altruism even if it isn't thought to be based on empathy, but I am using the term "altruism" more narrowly as a catch-all for all and only natural (in Hume's sense) helping motives.

their friend or sibling) serves to fix the reference of the term “morally good” for us; and I argue that the way cold-heartedness empathically chills us helps fix the reference of “morally wrong” in a similar fashion. This is not the place to repeat the earlier arguments. But if the ideas just mentioned are on the right track, they serve to explain *why* psychopaths are like blind people with respect to the relevant concepts. Their lack of associative/emotional empathy undercuts their ability to fix the reference of moral terms in the way I believe is essential to the meaning, to a proper semantics, of moral language.

All in all, then, I don’t think we can have beneficent or helping moral motivation in the absence of empathy. This goes well beyond anything I or anyone else has previously said about the moral role of empathy, and it moves us toward the conclusion that empathy is probably the most significant factor in the moral life.

## 5

Conceptual/philosophical speculation is a very risky business, and I have been doing quite a lot of that here. But in this concluding section, I would like to speculate further and in a new direction. Let’s say that the above discussion supports the idea of an inextricable connection between empathy, on the one hand, and sympathy, benevolence, etc., on the other. One can’t have either one of them without the other. But consider how this relates to the fact that we think of sympathy, benevolence, compassion, and the like both as feelings and as motives. The above argument shows or seeks to show that the feeling side of, say, compassion is irrecusably tied up with the motivational side, and this in and of itself seems to me to be an interesting result. It can seem strange (it always has to me) that compassion is considered to be both a feeling and a motive, and the argument I have given helps explain how that can make sense. If the empathy/feeling side of compassion and the motivational side of compassion cannot be separated, then one can see how it makes sense to hold, as common sense does, that compassion is a feeling and also a motive. And exactly the same points can be made about benevolence, caring, and sympathy.

But now I want to make what will seem to most of you like an incredible leap of topic. I think what I have just been saying offers a philosophical foothold for the ancient Chinese complementarity of yin and yang, and if that is the case, moral sentimentalism illustrates some themes that go beyond Western culture. Now yin and yang are nowadays not thought to be serious topics for

philosophical thinking—even by the Chinese. Like us Westerners they are accustomed to various popularizations of yin and yang—as with macrobiotic diets; and they are aware, as most of us Westerners are not, of how ancient yin/yang explanations of physical phenomena (e. g., of how sunlight differentially affects the two sides of a hill) have had to yield to more quantitative and mathematical explanations of such phenomena of the sort that are the mainstay of (elementary) modern physics. But despite these problems or limitations, I think suitably updated notions of yin and yang can be useful for present-day philosophical purposes, and I am going to try to persuade you of that here and now.

What do I mean by updated versions or notions of yin and yang? In a recent article, I have argued that we can make the most ethical sense of yin and yang via the Western notions of receptivity and active/rational control.<sup>8</sup> Yin is often equated with passivity and often with pliancy or pliability, but it is also often equated with receptivity (there is no term in Chinese for “receptivity” and “yin” may be the closest that language comes to our notion of receptivity). And I think that, unlike passivity and pliability, receptivity is a positive and broadly valued quality that, equated with yin, can be counterbalanced with or against the quality I am proposing to equate with yang, the quality (and notion) of active/rational control.

I have argued elsewhere that Western philosophy has tended to emphasize active/rational control at the expense of the value and virtue of receptivity, but the point then is that we need and need to value both active/rational control and receptivity in our lives and thought. And I think these two qualities can be viewed as necessary complements in the moral or ethical life. Again, I have made the arguments for this conclusion elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> But for present purposes and given what was argued earlier, something very interesting (I think) follows if we conceive yin and yang in this updated philosophical way. When we empathize with the distress of someone who is in pain, we are receptive to them in a way the psychopath never is with anyone. And when we ipso facto are then motivated to help (remember, though, that this doesn’t mean we actually will help—other motivational factors may override our compassion), we are motivated to actively do something effective as a means to alleviating the pain of the other person; and this motivation to help shows us as active and

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<sup>8</sup> See my “Updating Yin and Yang”, in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 12 (3): 271-282 (2013).

<sup>9</sup> See my *From Enlightenment to Receptivity: Rethinking Our Values*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

interested in exerting control over what will happen to the other person. (Rationality comes in because if one doesn't, cognitively, seek to find or learn about the best means to help the other, the fact of compassion is criterially challenged or undercut; one doesn't count as compassionate if one is slapdash about finding proper means to helping the other person.)

So I am saying that compassion, benevolence, and the like have the yin quality of receptive feeling and the yang quality of desiring actively to help in a specific way—they have both of these at the same time and, as I have been arguing, each aspect is inseparable from the other. And this gives yin and yang a deeper, further foothold in our discussion because that complementarity is traditionally viewed involving just such an inextricable or irrecusable relationship. The traditional symbol of yin and yang depicts yin with a small circle of yang in it and yang with a small circle of yin in it, and this is one way to symbolize the ancient view that yin and yang is a necessary complementarity, that yin and yang are really yin/yang.

But the present discussion gives these ancient and philosophically somewhat vague (and suspect) notions a particular and definite embodiment. If you can't have compassion as feeling without compassion as motivation and vice versa, then you can't have a certain sort of receptivity without also having a certain sort of control-seeking activeness and vice versa; and if one buys my updating of the notions of yin and yang, then in the sphere of moral sentiments you can't have yin without yang or yang without yin and they are invariably instantiated together. The (valued or positive) moral sentiments thus all have a yin/yang character, and that is a philosophically significant fact both about the sentiments and about the ancient Chinese complementarity of yin/yang.

But if moral sentimentalism lends itself to an interpretation via the Chinese categories of yin and yang, we really shouldn't be too surprised. What we call moral sentimentalism had its origins, in the modern West, in eighteenth-century Britain, but there is a strong element or aspect of sentimentalism in traditional Confucianism: in Mencius and in neo-Confucians like Cheng Hao and Wang Yangming who were strongly influenced by him. However, the specific idea that yin/yang applies to compassion and other particular moral sentiments doesn't seem to have occurred to any Confucian or neo-Confucian (or later Chinese) philosopher, so what I have just been saying is intended as a contribution to the overall Confucian tradition at the same time that it represents, as I believe, a philosophical application of yin/yang to or within moral sentimentalism. I also think yin/yang has applications outside of ethics, but that is a long story to be told on another occasion.