

# **Is empathy necessary for moral behavior? It all depends on what the concept of empathy means**

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In their insightful review, Will and Klapwijk discuss whether empathy is necessary for moral judgment, and argue that it may play a critical role in moral action. They further call for research that would specifically examine the cognitive and neural mechanisms involved in moral action. This latter aspect is certainly a fascinating topic worth of being empirically studied. Yet this is difficult to be operationalized in a scanning environment, which necessitates a repetition of trials in order to obtain sufficient signal to noise ratio. By nature such experimental manipulations cannot be similar to ecologically valid situations that one may encounter when having to decide a particular action. Besides, in real life, even when we know how we ought to act, we often fail to meet our obligations due to a host of factors including personal weaknesses, social context, peer influences, etc.

Another important aspect of their article concerns the role of empathy in morality. Although the authors never explicitly defined what empathy means, it seems that they equate this concept with emotional sharing. And this might be a problem. In reality, empathy is not always a direct avenue to moral behavior. At times empathy can interfere with moral decision-making by introducing partiality, for instance by favoring kin and in-group members. But empathy also can provide the emotional fire and a push toward seeing a victims' suffering end, irrespective of its group membership. To better understand the complex relations between empathy and moral decision-making, it may be useful to abandon the slippery concept of empathy, and instead make use of more precise constructs such as empathic concern, perspective taking and emotional sharing (Decety and Cowell, 2014).

While psychological research clearly demonstrates that empathy plays a role in motivating prosocial behavior, this is particularly the case when empathic concern develops in concert with understanding others' internal states (Svetlova et al., 2010). Thus, while empathic concern and cognitive empathy (perspective taking) may facilitate moral and prosocial behaviors, it is not clear whether emotion contagion does the same. There is some evidence that it does not (Williams et al., 2014). The results from the fMRI study by Yoder and Decety (2014a) support the view that cognitive empathy, but not emotional empathy, predicts justice motivation. Moreover, in a follow up study, which employed high-density EEG/ERPs with the same stimuli, moral judgments were reflected in differential

amplitudes for early components associated with emotional salience as well as cognitive appraisal (late positive potential, LPP). Importantly, individual dispositions in cognitive empathy, but not affective empathy, significantly predicted modulations in LPP amplitudes (Yoder and Decety, 2014b).

The fact that cognitive empathy, but not affective empathy, is associated with justice sensitivity does not mean that emotions do not play a role in justice motivation or that they are not necessary precursors for moral values. Developmental neuroscience research clearly shows that they do (Decety et al., 2012). But, emotions become moral when they are inserted into a special perspective, the perspective of moral goodness, which transforms their naturalness and spontaneity into cultivated intentions.

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