

**CARING AND EMPATHY:
ON MICHAEL SLOTE’S SENTIMENTALIST ETHICS**

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Michael Slote has done a great deal to revive interest in sentimentalism. For Slote the focus of positive moral evaluation is the agent’s motive, that of caring for others, which can particularly involve empathy, or sympathy. However, there are challenges to this approach that Slote has not dealt with sufficiently. A major challenge comes from writers who hold that some empathy deficit disorders are completely compatible with moral agency. For example, persons with autism can perform morally praiseworthy or blameworthy actions even though they possess an empathy deficit disorder. Slote is aware of this challenge, and briefly responds to it, but I believe that sentimentalism has the resources to provide a more broadly satisfactory response to this challenge than the one Slote provides, and this will be the focus of the essay.

The Challenge

Jeanette Kennett argues that an empathy deficit cannot explain the moral failings of the psychopath, since autistics also suffer from an empathy deficit. Autistics possess a moral concern for others and a sense of duty, psychopaths do not. On her view then, against the Humean view of moral agency, empathy is not required. One need not be able to put oneself in the shoes of another in order to engage in moral agency, to act morally. This lends support, she believes, to the Kantian view of moral agency in which agents are those who reason from rules; they conform their behavior to rules of a certain character. Further, autistic persons “...though lacking empathy, do seem capable of deep moral concerns. They are capable, as psychopaths are not, of the subjective realization that other people’s interests are reason-giving in the same way as one’s own, though they may have great

difficulty in discerning what those interests are.”¹ The empathy is significant, but only as a means of gathering evidence about what those interests are. Others working in this area disagree, as I do, about the significance of this difference. For example, Victoria McGeer argues that autistics may lack empathy, but they have other affective states that ground moral agency, such as a strong desire for order that underlies their concern with rule-following. She also speculates that there are different spheres of concern that we see working in the moral psychology of autistics are lacking in psychopaths: compassion for others; concern with one’s place in the social order; and concern with one’s ‘cosmic’ place, and cosmic level order.

This challenge has been expanded upon by writers such as Frédérique de Vignemont and Uta Frith who formulate the following paradox:²

- a. Humean view: Empathy is the only source of morality.
- b. People who have no empathy should have no morality.
- c. People with autism show a lack of empathy.
- d. People with autism show a sense of morality.

As they note, Kennett tries to resolve the paradox by rejecting the Humean view, **a.**, in the paradox. McGeer opts for holding that empathy as the only source for morality is wrong, but that the Humean account of agency is not committed to this. Thus, as de Vignemont and Frith note, she is basically rejecting **a.** and **b.** in her response to the challenge Kennett poses. I agree with this general strategy, though a good deal hangs on what is meant by ‘empathy’ and what is meant by moral agency. Moral agency is actually fragmented amongst different capacities.

Slote, however, dismisses Kennett’s challenge with the following response:

Some autistic people may...be capable of empathy even if they lack the ability to respond to certain social cues....many autistic people demonstrate a remarkable

¹ Jeanette Kennett (2002) ‘Autism, Empathy, and Moral Agency’, *Philosophical Quarterly* 52: 340–57.

² Frédérique de Vignemont & Uta Frith (2007) ‘Autism, Morality and Empathy’, In W. Sinnott-Armstrong (ed.) *Moral Psychology, volume 3: The Neuroscience of Morality*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 273-280.

affinity for and emotional connection with animals...Finally, the examples that Kennett uses to illustrate the moral capacities of people with Asperger's syndrome make the responses of such people seem (to me) based more on the desire to fit in with or please those around them, than on what most of us think of as genuinely moral motivation. (2007: 126-7)

The basic strategy is to claim that either they do have (first-order) empathy, and are thus moral agents, or they lack it, but then also lack what we would describe as *true* moral motivation. Referring to the claims above, he rejects either **c.** or **d.** depending on what are taken to be the true facts regarding autistics.

But the Humean view can be addressed differently, I believe, and in a way that still keeps to the spirit of the sentimentalist approach which seems to rely so heavily on empathy. Empathy, as Slote understands it, is only a very small part of the sentimentalist picture of moral agency.

First of all, what does Slote mean by 'empathy'? Certainly, in the psychology literature, the term is used to pick out a variety of different psychological states. Slote deals with this issue early in the book, appropriately, in which he provides a sophisticated and very informative account that ties the psychology literature to the sentimentalist tradition in the history of philosophy. Basically, we need to note a distinction between empathy and sympathy. He captures this with the example of Bill Clinton: there's a difference between "...feeling someone's pain and feeling *for* someone who is in pain." (2007: 13) He continues:

Thus empathy involves having the feelings of another (involuntarily) aroused in ourselves, as when we see another person in pain. It is as if their pain invades us, and Hume speaks, in this connection, of the contagion between what one person feels and what another comes to feel. However, we can also feel sorry for, bad for, the person who is in pain and positively wish them well. This amounts, as we say, to sympathy for them, and it can happen even if we aren't feeling their pain. (2007: 13)

Interestingly, Slote avoids the issue of animals and empathy, since he views that as peripheral to his account, but Hume discusses animals and empathy quite prominently in his writings on empathy.

Be that as it may, not enough distinctions are made here. Some people refer to

empathy as simply involving the ability to put oneself in someone else's position. This may or may not involve feeling what that person feels. For example, on this understanding of empathy, one can exercise it even absent any particular feelings. A psychopath is capable of this kind of empathy—and, indeed, successful ones will be skilled at it—since deception requires being able to put oneself into someone else's shoes to try to see what *that* person would find plausible and convincing. I'll term this empathy (1). This is an important skill in successful manipulation of others, though it is also a crucial skill in the successful comforting of others—one needs to be able to put oneself in another's shoes to understand what that person finds comforting. Understood this way, empathy is important when it comes to gathering information about others that we need for practical deliberation. This is obviously not what Slote has in mind. For him, empathy involves having, via some kind of contagion, the emotions of others. I'll term this empathy (2). I don't think this kind of caring is necessary for moral agency, even on a Humean sentimentalist picture of morality. This is why autistics, though they don't seem to 'catch' the emotions of others, can still be moral agents. They still *care*. They care about the suffering of others, the happiness of others, and so forth, even if they have difficulty acquiring information that would help them act effectively to promote the interests of those they do care about. In this way, empathy deficits do not result in lack of moral agency.

However, some people mean by empathy something like sympathy, where one feels for another being. This is like Slote's use of 'sympathy'. Slote seems to hold the view that as our empathic capacities develop along with our cognitive capacities, we can empathize with others even when they lack the feelings we think somehow 'appropriate'. His example is feeling sad for someone who has terminal cancer but who is not aware of it. That person is not sad, but the empathizer knows the person would be sad if he or she knew about the terminal illness. (2007: 15)

Still, it seems that what is being run together is empathy as an emotional contagion and empathy as feeling a certain way (either sad, happy, etc.) when we think that emotion would be appropriate for the object of our empathy. These are not the same thing. It may be, as Slote intimates, that causally we need to go through the first stage developmentally, but that is just a contingent feature of human emotional development. Further, the

emotional contagion view alluded to by Slote is incomplete. It surely needs correction. Consider the example of a triage physician. He absolutely needs to tamp down his empathic responses in order to function well. Otherwise, he would be overwhelmed with sadness and despair. For him, in those circumstances, feeling what his patients are feeling is just too much. And there are many cases like this. It may be that the empathy (2) is useful, again, for giving us information but that it needs to be supplemented by something else—either cognitive considerations to the effect that, if we let the emotions run rampant we will be practically inefficacious, or perhaps there is an emotional dampener that comes into play when emotions risk overwhelming the agent. Whatever the story is, and maybe both are correct, for that matter, some corrective is appropriate.

At this point we have four distinctive notions at play: empathy (1), empathy (2), feeling the emotion we think appropriate for the object of empathy, and sympathy. But what is key for sentimentalism is that agent's care about the good, as opposed to simply recognize the rational demands recognition of the good places upon them. Of course, this runs against Slote's account, where it isn't just caring but *empathic* caring that is crucial to morality, where empathic caring is understood as the involuntary adoption of the emotions of others.

The view that I think is more plausible—given its ability to accommodate the views we have of moral agency given certain deficits—is that caring about doing the right thing is important to morality, and sufficient as the 'caring condition', even if the agent has no close relationships with specific other individuals. Further, it isn't just first-order caring that comes into the picture. I also believe, following Hume, that meta-cognition, broadly construed, is crucial to moral agency (though not to moral standing). Meta-cognition allows even more scope for reason's modulation of our emotional responses.

Caring about Caring

An important feature of agency is meta-cognition. Human beings, and quite likely some animals, possess the capacity to regulate cognition through higher-level cognition. However, animals and human beings differ in terms of the types of meta-cognition they engage in. Humans have the capacity to endorse or fail to endorse their own mental states.

Hume believed that this was a crucial difference between human beings and animals. Animals experience sympathy to some extent, but they aren't able to reflect on the sympathy that they feel and then either endorse it or recognize that it needs modulation.

This is crucial to the actual practice of morality in that it is commonly recognized amongst sentimentalists that our emotional reactions, even our *caring* emotional reactions, frequently require correction. Reason plays a prominent role here.

Smith and Hume both proposed idealizing procedures as a way of making the correction. Evidence of what is the case, facts, and so forth are quite relevant to this in as much as those facts influence how one feels. Slote notes that it is a part of good character to try to get relevant information:

A mother who cares about her child wants to know how to do what is good for her child, and this involves knowing and initially learning all sorts of nutritional and medical facts....In deciding what to do, say, for a child, a parent needs a substantial degree of epistemic rationality... (2007: 120)

Slote argues that theoretical reason is crucial to moral behavior. However, he retains what he views as the classical sentimentalist skepticism about practical reason. We need to be very clear about what this skepticism involves. When Christine Korsgaard, for example, talks about skepticism regarding practical reason she focuses primarily on the issue of motive skepticism, which is the idea that reason cannot *by itself* be a motive for action.³ It is true that the classical sentimentalists are committed to such a view. However, as Slote himself notes, they are not committed to ignoring reason's role in practical deliberation in other ways. So if we limit our account of practical reason in such a way as to exclude reason as itself a motive, we are open to have a wide variety of accounts of practical reason. It would just be some account of how we figure out what we are supposed to *do*, as opposed to what it is we are supposed to believe. Of course, a sentimentalist can give an account of this.

The Sentimentalist is offering a slightly more complicated view of practical

³ Christine Korsgaard (1996) 'Skepticism about Practical Reason', in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.311-334; originally published in *The Journal of Philosophy* 83: 5-25, 1986.

deliberation in morality than the rationalist. It is not that reason plays no role in practical deliberation at all, it is not that reason has no role, even, in regulating our non-basic desires. It is simply that reason is not the source of our basic desires, whatever they may be. We can call this the *Sentimentalist motivational thesis* (SMT), and this is primarily the claim that Slote focuses on defending. Because our desires are affected by our cognitive states—what we believe and what we know—reason plays a role in regulating them. This is true in morality as well as aesthetics. My desire to help someone with their groceries depends on my belief that they haven't stolen the groceries. My desire to see a film will depend on my believing that it is aesthetically pleasing.

But there is also meta-cognitive regulation of our emotional states as well as our beliefs. Even when we have all the facts straight we may fail to endorse an emotional response. We may, for example, feel that we are being biased in favor of the near and dear, or prejudiced against someone who we don't know very well. Or we may view our emotional response as out of proportion in some way. All of this is perfectly compatible with SMT, and yet it offers a more complex view of how our emotions are regulated either by beliefs about those emotions or higher-order feelings.

On Hume's view human beings possessed the capacity to reflect on and endorse our moral sentiments. It was this capacity that distinguished humans from animals for Hume in terms of moral agency and judgment. Animals could possess lesser forms of virtue on his view, but because they couldn't reflect on their sympathetic responses they were unable to exercise the sort of authority over their actions needed for agency. They cared about others, there was ample evidence of that, but no evidence that we know of that they had any normative attitude towards the caring itself.

Crucially, they cannot take the idealized perspective required for moral judgment. For Hume, the corrective viewpoint is 'the general point of view'. This is the correct place from which to make judgments of virtue, but it also just is the standard for virtue itself. On the issue of just making a *judgment* of virtue, or moral goodness, or rightness the Humean would hold that the individuals initial reaction needs to be viewed from an idealized perspective that is independent of the individual's biases and prejudices, as much as possible. One might further add the consideration (implicit in Hume, I believe), that one

have as much information as possible about effects (and Slote agrees information is important), but also that one consider how one feels about one's reaction and then try to diagnose that feeling if it seems off. This would be part of the reflective endorsement required to ground our normative commitments.

How does all this relate to the initial problem regarding empathy deficit disorders such as autism? The autistic person cares about caring in the appropriate way. The autistic person has the right sort of meta-cognitive states, yet has trouble acquiring the information necessary to figuring out what individuals are actually interested in. We might properly regard it as partly an attentional deficit. It is interesting because the 'executive' meta-cognitive level is in play, but has little to get a grip on. This is perhaps what causes the well known anxiety experienced by autistics who are put in a position where they are required to act, particularly in novel situations where new information needs to be acquired and processed.

Thus, persons with autism are capable of moral judgment, they have the caring that is required for moral agency, though they may lack exactly the sort of empathic skills Slote insists on. However, this isn't a problem for sentimentalism *per se* at all. The sentimentalist simply holds that the basis for normative commitment is desire.

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