Expressing Entangled Empathy: A Reply

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This is a discussion in which I reply to the constructive criticisms of Diana Meyers, Myisha Cherry, and Remy Debes. In particular, I will further distinguish empathy from sympathy, explore how entangled empathy can help us develop better skills of attunement to navigate the complexity of moral experiences, and examine how entangled empathy can be motivating.

I've been thinking about alternatives to the standard ethical views on animals for many years, and in that thinking I've been increasingly concerned about the limitations that animal ethics has inherited from more traditional approaches to ethics. In particular, I've been critical of "extensionist accounts" that move out from a human center, usually assumed to be rather homogeneous, to more distant others based on their likenesses to those in the center. In addition to overlooking important differences, these accounts tend to view ethical demands as external constraints on behavior. When ethical requirements work from the outside in, we experience a detachment from or gap between our interests and action. Ethical demands do not arise from the agent herself in her context, or when they appear to, they need to be rationalized. These standard or traditional accounts don't usually consider the particular situations that make up our moral lives and thus, often, doing the right thing according to these accounts may alienate an agent not just from her commitment to important personal values and projects, but from her friends, family, community, and heritage. An alternative ethical approach that attends to these concerns, by seeing ethical demands as arising from the agent within her various relationships, can minimize the alienation.

The nonalienating alternative I have been developing is what I call entangled empathy. As Diana Tietjens Meyers correctly notes, it is a view that involves developing and correcting one's perception to accurately attend to others' wellbeing; to recognize and understand our relationships to others (and I would add, even relationships that are not usually thought to be relationships at all); and to see that our relationships entail responsibilities to ourselves and others. Entangled empathy is a type of caring perception that I think of as a process involving a blend of emotion and cognition. Although *Entangled Empathy* is focused primarily on rethinking our ethical relationships with other animals, I am delighted that my three thoughtful critics have recognized the potential of entangled empathy for other areas of philosophical ethics.

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Cherry, Debes, and Meyers have generously engaged my work and have pushed me to clarify certain claims I make in *Entangled Empathy*. I will not be able to address every issue they raise, but will focus on some of the places where their concerns converge. For example, they all suggest that I am proposing a rather "thick" concept, and I admit there is a lot packed into a small book. There is indeed more to say about the view—one that is not just about moral emotions, nor about just diagnosing reactions or developing prescriptions, and I hope others too will benefit from critically engaging with the idea. Entangled empathy, a robust process of moral perception that can generate more meaningful, flourishing relationships, will be enhanced by collective discussion, and I am so grateful to have the opportunity to extend the discussion here in response to my critics' rich commentaries.

Empathy—The Very Idea

All three of my commentators raise questions about what I mean by empathy and its relationship to other "moral emotions." In particular, there is somewhat of a consensus about the need to further explain why I am promoting empathy rather than sympathy. Meyers is concerned that I am too quick to lump sympathy with pity, and urges I reconsider. Sympathy, as Meyers describes it, is "a form of pro-social conduct . . . [that] presupposes both caring about the other person's wellbeing and being attuned to her sensibility" (this issue, 417). It is a type of feeling-along-with that can build community. Interestingly, she also thinks that sympathy is action-generating, but raises questions about why I think empathy is motivating. I will discuss the question of motivation below. Cherry, building on Adam Smith, develops what she calls "habitual sympathy"—affection built up over time that creates empathy—and wonders why there isn't room in entangled empathy for such sympathy and compassion. Debes, who himself has done tremendous work analyzing the history and variety of meanings of the term, suggests that the concept of empathy has in fact *always* been this malleable (this issue, 433), so he supports the legitimacy of my developing my own account in contrast to sympathy.

I distinguish entangled empathy from sympathy to help clarify some of what I understand the process of entangled empathy to be. Entangled empathy is a process of perspective-taking that may draw on affections that build up over time—Cherry's habitual sympathies—but it need not. I think it is generally true that we are better at taking the perspective of someone whom we have developed intimacy with over a period of time. Indeed, we are often in a better position to understand what is going on with someone to whom we have a deep or historical connection. But we are not unable to imagine the perspectives of different others, although it isn't easy or simple, just because they are not close to us spatially, emotionally, and/or physically. Chris Cuomo and I argue that it is within close relationships that we may build up the imaginative skills of perspective-taking across distance (Cuomo and Gruen 1998). Building on those initial thoughts, I argue that entangled empathy is not limited to those who are nearest and dearest. Unlike Hume's and Smith's sympathy, which tends

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to focus on more immediate others, as Cherry rightly points out, given that entangled empathy is a reflective and caring process, one can use one's capacities to feel and judge over spatial and contextual differences, to empathize with distant others.

This process will more often than not incorporate sympathies as feeling-along-with, the phenomenon that Meyers raises, but it is never simply that. That is just one feature that is neither necessary nor sufficient for entangled empathy. As Meyers herself points out, feeling-with can often be problematic when someone, for example, is feeling distraught about an event that does not warrant that feeling, as when someone expresses that they feel disgust at same-sex affection, for example. Too many of us have witnessed that misguided reaction, and it does not warrant sympathy (although pity may be more appropriate). Sadly, such visceral prejudices have become more noticeable of late, and they are not the sorts of feelings that one should empathize with. Empathy helps reveal the experience of the interiority of the other, what Meyers describes as a "poignancy" and Martha Nussbaum describes as "a vicarious visualization that causes these circumstances to come alive in the theater of my mind" (Nussbaum 2001, 331), but entangled empathy contextualizes and expands on these perceptions.

Empathy directs us to focus on and seek to understand the circumstances of the other. This understanding may not be complete and often is in need of significant revisions; however, the goal is to try to take in as much about another's situation and perspective as possible. Importantly, entangled empathy does not involve abandoning one's own attitudes, perspectives, and value commitments. It provides an important reference point from which to assess the features of a situation and to ask appropriate normative questions. Cherry suggests that the process I am describing can be the site for the development and nurturing of other emotions, and I would add it can also be a site for the correction of some emotions too. I agree that entangled empathy can "activate" other emotions. In combination with thoughts, observations, sensitivities, and emotional responsiveness, entangled empathy marshals our perceptions toward action. Entangled empathy goes beyond feeling what others feel, as the process is to develop a caring perception—a recognition that we are in both obvious and more distant relationships with others and are responsible in these relationships. It is an experiential process that is a blend of emotion and cognition.

We can go wrong, and this is another way in which entangled empathy differs from sympathy when the latter is understood as a feeling. If we understand empathy as being like sympathy, then some of the loud criticisms of empathy, like those of Paul Bloom, for example, would be of greater concern. Bloom writes, "By empathy, I mean, 'Putting yourself in another's shoes, feeling what they feel'" (Bloom 2014). This is not an uncommon understanding of empathy, one he calls "emotional empathy." That label presupposes a particular understanding of emotion, and it is helpful to unpack it.

There are different ways to understand what emotions are, and whereas Bloom seems to be thinking of emotion as sensation or feeling, others have, in my view, convincingly argued that where bodily sensations are understood through biological or psychological explanations that are not subject to reason, emotions can be

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explained by the reasons that give rise to them and can be altered in light of those reasons. I would go further and point out that some emotional states can also alter reasons. Emotions are the sorts of things that we can be taught or conditioned to feel or not feel, and reasons can be changed based on our affect. To reiterate, entangled empathy is not itself an emotion, but a process of engaging caring moral perception.

The Role of Empathy in Ethical Theory and Practice

Much of the development of my view of entangled empathy was inspired by Iris Murdoch's critique of traditional ethical theories (Murdoch 1970). Murdoch was worried about the way standard approaches require that a moral agent submit herself to the authority of external forces, like principles or rules, and in doing this, she is detaching herself from her experiences, commitments, personality, or as Murdoch put it, her "vision of life."

As I discuss in the book, following Murdoch, in traditional ethical theories, the moral agent is conceived as someone who already has a handle on any given situation, who knows what he is doing, whose thoughts and intentions are "directed towards definite overt issues" (Murdoch 1970, 7), and whose responsibility is a function of impersonal knowledge. I love the irony in Murdoch's comparison of this sort of moral action with shopping: the agent enters the shop "in a condition of totally responsible freedom" and surveys the products and chooses to purchase one product or another. But there really is only so much that one sees of that "inner life" through outer behavior; it is an anemic view of our inner life, if it provides anything at all. That we perform behaviors that are meant to project meaning very different from what we internally experience is a good part of what therapy and other efforts at self-reflection start with. These outward behaviors become the focal point of ethical choice and action; the inner life of the agent remains mysterious or, when accessible, beside the point of ethical theorizing.

In order to provide a more meaningful account of what moral choice involves—an account that would include what goes on between choices and attends to the fixation and elevation of "choice"—a more robust and nuanced picture of both the inner workings of the agent AND the outer "structures of value round about us" must be painted. That is what entangled empathy is, in part, trying to provide: an embedded and embodied process of moral perception.

But it isn't just the first-person perspective, just our own moral perception, that entangled empathy is interested in improving. I see entangled empathy as requiring the movement from the first-person to the third-person point of view. To meaningfully attend to the particularities of another being's interests, desires, sensitivities, aspirations, and so on as they occur in particular contexts, under certain norms, within social relations of all sorts, and to avoid projecting one's own states of mind on others, this movement from me to you and back, through these shifting perspectives, is key. Entangled empathy helps an agent understand herself and her situation better and thus helps her to discern what is relevant and what is not in her own

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choice context. Moreover, it helps us see what is relevant to the choice situations of others (or what is preventing choices) in particular, by drawing attention to the well-being of another, whatever state it may be. Entangled empathy isn't just a form of ethical attention, but a particular form: caring or loving attention, attention that is directed toward another's flourishing.

Meyers argues that this presupposes a fairly significant "cultural understanding." She notes "as far as I can tell, empathetic experience is not the source of the conceptions of values and disvalues that are needed to interpret another individual's subjective experience. Rather, empathy mobilizes a culturally transmitted, normative conceptual repertoire that underwrites the empathizer's appreciation of the moral significance of others' needs, frustrations, sensitivities, and so forth" (this issue, 421). I see Debes's worry about "fullness" as related to this concern. Debes raises this as particularly worrisome for my project of understanding very different others, such as nonhuman animals: "*Our* interpretations are so saturated in human concepts, theory, and ideology that it seems wild to say nonhuman animals could fathom them. So how can they confirm what *we* mean by *our* interpretations of *their* perspectives?" (this issue, 435).

I agree that we often stumble when we fail to grasp human, cultural understandings of the values and disvalues that are presupposed by empathetic experience. I take it that evaluating those presuppositions is one of the tasks necessary for getting empathy right. An empathetic agent's evaluations, deliberations, and choices are shaped, at least in part, by the social context in which she lives. Various social institutions and norms affect expectations. Empathetic engagement will often involve examining the conditions under which both the empathizer's and the one with whom she is empathizing's choice sets are formulated, and considering both the internal and external factors that helped shape deliberative capacities and the objects to which choices are directed. Entangled empathizers will be attuned to the distribution, both just and unjust, of hermeneutical resources that have an impact on choice and action. An astute empathizer will thus try to answer a host of questions, including: What psychological predispositions do I have and does she have and how do they affect our different levels of confidence in choosing? How do cultural understandings of value affect our sense of our worth as deliberators and the worth of our choices? Were certain deliberative paths closed to me or to her by familial, educational, social, political, racial, gendered, economic, or religious barriers or prohibitions? How successful do I think I will be in my empathizing with her and what do I need to do and know to be more successful? Will my success or failure depend on the social position I occupy? The social position she occupies? Do people like me culturally or historically have less chance of empathetically succeeding and of "making a difference"?

We can develop a slightly different set of questions when the relationship is between a human empathizer and a nonhuman toward whom one's ethical attention is directed. For example, what were the early rearing conditions this animal experienced and how did that shape her current experiences? What sort of species-typical behaviors does a creature of this kind usually engage in and does she have opportunities to engage in those behaviors? What sorts of social relationships are important, whether they be with conspecifics or animals from other species, including humans?

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Is this animal able to be alone, if she chooses? Is she able to make choices about who to spend time with, where to be, what and when to eat? Are these the sort of choices that are meaningful to this particular animal?

Answers to these questions and others will help us develop better skills at perceiving and noticing the complexity of moral experience in the world and navigating the "values round about us" as richly and fully as we can. When we work at it, our entangled empathetic responses will be more apt.

Why Care?

Debes wonders why we need moral perception to be caring or why another's wellbeing or flourishing is what we attend to, and I think my response to the oft-cited, though somewhat far-fetched, example of the so-called "empathetic" torturer provides part of an answer. The successful torturer would need to know what really causes anguish, and thus will be a very good behavior-reader, in order to produce the most pain. But one would be hard-pressed to articulate what is ethical, as opposed to simply efficient, about the torturer's capacity to accurately determine what causes his victim pain. What the torturer cares about is the result of his own actions, not the state that result produces in his victim. Entangled empathy not only has us attend to the pain the torture victim is experiencing and the way this torture harms her, but also the values, or in this case disvalues, that motivate the action that leads to the harm. Caring about these things would not condone these actions. Entangled empathy is intended to provide an alternative approach to arriving at a judgment about why such action wouldn't be condoned. Wellbeing is the value theory that informs moral perception that structures ethical engagement. Of course, there are different conceptions of wellbeing, and I intentionally leave that notion open, but whatever the torturer is allegedly "empathetically" doing, it isn't entangled empathy. Through entangled empathy we see not only whom we ought to attend to and what their situation evokes, but also whether and how we should respond in ways that help to preserve and promote their wellbeing.

One of the most serious ways we go wrong, where "we" is humanity quite broadly, is to not engage our empathy at all. Too many people just don't care. Or maybe they have limited energy for empathetic attention, and when they do expend that energy it is directed to those nearest and dearest. Most of us are busy and absorbed in our own problems, projects, and plans. Many of us also have the luxury of not thinking about the problems that so many people around the world and most other animals are confronted with, in one form or another, almost every day.

This brings me to questions of moral motivation that all of my critics have raised. There are at least three levels of motivation to discuss. The first is meta-level motivation: why care about ethical action in the first instance? I haven't been fully convinced by any answer to this question, and I don't think I have provided one. I am interested in trying to improve my moral perception and act well in my dealings with others, human and non, near and far, friends and strangers. The approach I'm offering

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is directed at those who, like me, are already interested in figuring out what would constitute ethical perception and action, not those who don't really care about ethics at all.

The second motivational question involves attending to others' wellbeing: why should I care about others, why should I be moved to attend to them from an ethical perspective? Why should their wellbeing, however understood, matter to me? Traditional views have us focus on others insofar as they are vessels of happiness, suffering, or utility; or they are members of a kingdom of ends, instantiations of our shared humanity who deserve respect; or because behind the veil of ignorance I don't know if I'm me or them, and the impartial perspective urges us to think of our own wellbeing, in the abstract, as being as valuable as their wellbeing. My view is different from these views in that I think we must focus on others because they co-constitute our very agency.

This is the *entanglement* part of entangled empathy. As Meyers notes, I have a relational conception of the self, but it is a rather robust relational ontology; not the simplistic notion that we are all "related" nor the idea that my personal relationships shape who I am. I argue that our agency is co-constituted by our social and material entanglements. I don't think it is a reductive account, as she suggests. Indeed, I wouldn't even know how to make it so considering that our entanglements are so complex. Social entanglements often extend beyond the human and far beyond our geographical location. By material entanglements, I have the old sense of materialism in mind, that is, our socioeconomic opportunities and limitations and our consumer choices, for example. I also am invoking the new sense of materialism, which would include our entanglement with the food we have access to, the safety of our physical environment (for example, water, air, particulate matter, toxic exposure), the nature of our microbiome, and a host of other relations. These entanglements are quite complex, and include our relations to the child slaves who harvest cocoa for chocolate; the orangutans who are on the brink of extinction due to our consumptions of palm oil and palm products; those working in sweatshops who provide cheap clothing; our greenhouse-gas-emitting activities that are creating climate refugees. All of these relations, in part, constitute who we are. Our identities are not simply "socially constructed"; rather, we are who we are at any particular time as an expression of entanglements in multiple relations across space, species, and substance. I take this notion of entanglement from feminist philosopher of physics Karen Barad, who is thinking of it in Bohrian terms. Here is what Barad has said about entanglement, ethics, and action:

> Matters of fact, matters of concern, and matters of care are shot through with one another .... All bodies, including but not limited to human bodies, come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity .... differentiating is not about Othering, separating, but on the contrary, about making connections and commitments. So the very nature of materiality itself is an entanglement .... Ethics is therefore not about right responses to a radically exteriorized other, but about responsibility and

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> accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming, of which we are a part. Ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities .... Responsibility, then, is a matter of the ability to respond. Listening for the response of the other and an obligation to be responsive to the other, who is not entirely separate from what we call the self. (Barad 2012, 69)

As I understand Barad, and as I am thinking about it, we care about others because they are fundamentally part of our own agency. They don't simply "influence" or "shape" us, they co-constitute us. My failure to respond to others is not just a failure of my responsibility, but represents a rupture in my very moral agency.

Returning to Meyers's earlier concern about cultural norms and inspired by Cherry's political examples, consider how responsibility is understood in communities where norms of restorative justice and community service are strong. Rather than viewing certain activities as supererogatory, people in communities with strong social norms of collective care usually see community activities as their responsibility. Rather than calling the police if there is a problem, for example, we might see violent activity as a problem that we as a community should be responsive to. Social-psychological studies have identified what is called "social loafing" or "the bystander effect," the phenomenon of failing to take action to prevent harm in conditions in which others are expected to do so. Presumably, bystanders believe that preventing a harm from occurring, or aiding one in need, is not their responsibility. I'm suggesting that this belief structure is shaped by a narrow conception of the self, a conception that can be effectively altered by seeing the ways in which our agency is co-constituted by others and our responsiveness to those others. And fortunately, there is some evidence that when these failures of responsiveness are pointed out, many people's self-concept is negatively affected and they work to change.

The psychological literature is also replete with discussions of empathy as coupled with a motivational state in order for helping action or pro-social behavior to occur.[1] Generally, these "psychological" motivational states fall into two mutually exclusive general categories: self-interested motivation and altruistic motivation. If the self is understood as deeply relational, the distinction between these motivational states breaks down. And this is the third sense of motivation I want to mention. Attuned moral perception moves me to act on behalf of the wellbeing of others who co-constitute my agency. Directing one's empathetic attention toward others is also shaped largely by whether one is so motivated, so while entangled empathizing moves us to action, we can alter our empathetic focus by acts of will. The process of being moved by entangled empathetic attention and being moved to refine our empathy are part of the dynamic process of developing our moral perception.

When one is made aware of a shortcoming in her responsiveness or a failure of her empathetic attention, when she is able, in other words, to see that she is in a "bad" relationship, as I put it—by which I mean one of instrumentalization,

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exploitation, or violence, for example—she cannot maintain that relationship *and* hold onto the belief that she is engaged in loving or caring attention. That sort of attention is part of what it means to be a moral agent, I suggest, so one is at least going to be moved to change one's conception, and I would hope, that will also lead to behavioral changes.

But there is a deeper resonance to the question "why care?" that addresses a danger that has been mentioned to me on a number of occasions and that all of my critics discuss. That is a worry about the possibility of ever really, truly understanding and empathizing with another. In the book, I discuss a case worth repeating briefly here. Two wealthy black parents who raised their children to be cautious in white society were devastated in the aftermath of an incident in which their son, who was walking near the boarding school he attended in Connecticut, was called the "N" word. The son became scared and angry, and felt vulnerable. This incident had a negative impact on his schoolwork and his confidence. When the father, Mr. Graham, tried to get the attention of the administration at his son's school, he received little response. This led him to realize that he was no better able to understand the perspective of the white people to whom he reported the incident than of those who called his son the "N" word (Graham 2014).

In many ways Mr. Graham is right. White people in a culture of anti-black racism cannot understand the burden of racism. And if white people can't understand Black people, what hope is there to understand a chimpanzee in entertainment, a dairy cow, or a lab rat? Perhaps entangled empathy is simply too optimistic to think any sort of meaningful moral perception is possible.

Recently, I was asked by Frank Wilderson, whose work I much admire, why do I care? I got a better sense of the force of his question after reading his paper "'Raw Life' and the Ruse of Empathy."[2] In it Wilderson interrogates "an optimism that assumes relationality within and between all sentient beings." His analysis is that there are some beings who are beyond relationality. "The explanatory powers of empathy and analysis are scandalized when confronted with the Black position, a paradigmatic location synonymous with slavery" (Wilderson 2013, 184). Following on the definition of slavery provided by Orlando Patterson as a permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons (Patterson 1988), Wilderson sees Blackness as a form of social death, a state of being deprived of relationality. So "even perceived moments of empathic identification with the Slave are ruses" (Wilderson 2013, 189), as one cannot empathize with objects or beings that are not in the relation. Further, he argues that if empathy is meant to facilitate and produce "civic relation and if anti-Blackness is the generative mechanism of this mode of production, then it becomes understandable how and why" (201) empathy is problematic.

There are two concerns here; the latter is not unlike the worry that Debes raises about epistemic injustice, although in a different register. Debes says "dominant social groups trade on existing, 'collectively' shared—perhaps we should say, mainstream—forms of social understanding to reach self- and interpersonal understanding. And disempowered groups are pressed to conform to these normalized, mainstream social

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understandings" (this issue, 436). If these normalized understandings require, as Wilderson says, the social death of Black people, and these understandings are what entangled empathy is relying on, then it looks like entangled empathy is in the service of anti-Blackness and should thus be rejected. Debes is right insofar as this form of understanding is meant to be full understanding, and he is also onto something if the understanding required for entangled empathy inescapably emerges from mainstream "narrative tropes." But I'm not sure why either needs to be the case. Trying to fully understand is not the same as actually achieving full understanding. Understanding among those on the margins happens all the time. Indeed, following the insights of Black feminists, often those on the margins understand more than those at the center, as they have opportunities for understanding both.

What I take us to be doing when we are engaged in entangled empathetic moral attention is working through complicated processes of understanding one another and other animals in situations of differential social, political, and species-based power. Usually what we "get" is just a glimpse. We never really "know," but too many people use the idea that we can't really know as an excuse to opt out of working at it. I take this to be a failure of both imagination and moral agency.

The second worry will be something I continue to work out, and that is a more robust description of relationality. On the relational ontology I envisage, there is no place beyond relations; anti-Blackness or speciesism, for example, are political and ethical relations that view whites and humans as justified in regarding Blacks and animals as fungible, disposable, and perhaps paradoxically, outside of relationality. But as I've suggested, the relations we are in are not always, perhaps not even often, the sorts of things we choose. Some relations I am forced into, some I seek to develop, some are unjust, some are harmful, some may even seek to forever deprive me of my subjectivity. And since we are constituted in various ways by these relations, when some relations make it hard to see ourselves and others, entangled empathy will seem almost impossible. But that these relationships are part of us means that we can, indeed must, work with them and try to change them for the better.

I think that is something to care about.

Notes

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1. See, for example, C. Daniel Bateson's research on the empathy-induced altruism hypothesis, which suggests that empathetic emotion evokes altruistic motivation to benefit the person for who empathy is felt (Bateson 1991). See also Hoffman 2000 on internalization and guilt.

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2. Wilderson's article is focused on empathy in the context of performance studies, but the insights are more generally applicable.

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