THE EMPATHY MACHINE: A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Douglas Groothuis

Empathy is an underexplored dimension of the moral life. What if we could enter a machine that let us feel another person's subjective life? What kind of effect would that have on our moral awareness? Since this cannot (yet) be done, I suggest several ways to increase empathy and deepen our moral sensitivities.

Entering the Empathy Machine: A Thought Experiment

This is an essay on moral and religious philosophy based on a new thought experiment. Thought experiments have a long and chequered history in philosophy, and I cannot here explore their nature or purpose in depth. In fact, the protocol, propriety, and purposes of thought experiences are not entirely clear to me; but suffice it to say that the features of a thought experiment need not be existentially realizable, but they must be logically possible or at least imaginable. A thought experiment should also make some point not easy or possibly seen otherwise. Or it may simply present a claim in a different form than premise to conclusion arguments. Consider Plato's myth, 'The Ring of Gyges', from *The Republic*. It is unlikely anyone will ever become literally invisible, but we can well imagine what it would be like to be in this state and how it might affect one's moral conduct.

What is the Empathy Machine?

Consider a device that could convincingly capture the subjective experience of a person and then transfer those

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experiences into someone else's consciousness. A film called *Brain Storms* (1980) described such a machine, but did not capitalize on the empathy theme, but rather (not surprisingly) on experiences of sex and – more importantly – the experience of death. Our empathy machine resembles Robert Nozick's famous 'experience machine' thought experiment, which he concocted in order to argue for the deficiencies of one type of utilitarianism. Nozick's machine enables one to experience all the happiness one desired, but without any connection to a real, objective, physical, external world – the world of things, people, relationships, nature, and so on. In this world of qualia without correlation to external entities, one can easily maximize happiness, which is the goal of classic utilitarianism. But, of course, something is missing in this purely subjective world: the self as a moral agent among other moral agencies, come what may – pleasure *and* pain. If one would not be hooked up to the experience machine at the expense of participation in the world of sense and embodiment, then there is something deeply wrong with the axiology of utilitarianism.[1] This thought experiment suggests another similar intellectual adventure into the counterfactual.

Let us revise Nozick's thought experiment in more detail. We will turn it on its head, so to speak. The empathy machine records what is otherwise nearly inexpressible or at least inarticulate in the mouths of most of us. It records the pain and distress of every kind under the sun. That is, it captures qualia in some technological form. When one is hooked up to the empathy machine, there is a radical shift from the third-person and second-person to the first-person; from propositional knowledge to experiential knowledge (or Bertrand Russell's 'knowledge by acquaintance');[2] from *hearing* about pain and observing pain to *being* in pain and thus knowing it from the inside out. It is a shift from hearing-about or being-near to *being-there.*

The empathy machine does not generate autonomous and simulated sexual pleasure, as does Woody Allen's fictional 'orgasmatron' from his film *Sleeper* (1973). It is quite

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the opposite. The empathy machine produces pain, but not pain in the sense of *physical* torture. In the empathy machine we identify and feel the pain of others similarly tormented. The machine allows one to participate in the sensorium of another's distress – physical or mental – without bodily torture or deprivation. That is, one is not physically injured by the experience. Moreover, one can leave the empathy machine at will. Its discreet effects are not inflicted unbidden on anyone, but it can be chosen for a purpose. For example, a husband can enter the empathy machine to experience the full force of his wife's chronic illnesses – from the inside out. For a set period of time, he will feel all the muscle pain, weakness, fatigue, depression, despair, confusion, self-loathing, confusion, and shattered dreams. He cannot, by entering the machine, log her long years of discontent and dismay, but he can taste what these years have brought to her consciousness. He retains his identity (since he knows he is in the machine), but he takes on crucial aspects of her experience subjectively through a kind of intersubjectivity. In a sense, he takes on a secondary first-person experience. This demands a kind of double consciousness. However, this is not akin to any dissociative disorder wherein one switches from one sense of identity to the other because of a diseased condition of disintegration.

Dissociative identity disorder is characterized by the presence of two or more distinct or split identities or personality states that continually have power over the person's behaviour. With dissociative identity disorder, there's also an inability to recall key personal information that is too far-reaching to be explained as mere forgetfulness. With dissociative identity disorder, there are also highly distinct memory variations, which fluctuate with the person's split personality.[3]

But let us return to the empathy machine. To invoke popular culture, consider a 'Vulcan mind meld'. The character Mr Spock in the first generation of the television programme *Star Trek* is capable of tapping into another's mind and even experiencing that person's feelings to some

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degree.[4] We sometimes hear the expression 'I feel your pain', whether uttered flippantly or seriously. But the empathy machine makes this an experienced reality.

Considering Virtue and Empathy

None of the four classical virtues (prudence, courage, self-control, and justice) or the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) directly implicates or addresses empathy, although love comes the closest. In order to love, one must reach out of oneself and, to some degree, reach into another person. 'Love seeks not its own', as the Apostle Paul put it. One imagines what chronic illnesses or a terminal illness or the loss of a son or daughter must be like. Then one can attempt to express an informed and heart-felt concern (that is, love) for that person in that state and to take the appropriate actions – however foreign it may be to one's own first-person experiences. If autism is sadly characterized by the inability to enter into the subjective world of another, then the empathy machine produces a state that is the exact opposite of autism. The aim of the machine is to produce a condition of other-orientation. This would not generate altruism per se, but it is conducive to altruism. Altruism is a tangible expression of love. As Jesus said, the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself. This ties the awareness of oneself directly to the awareness of another. This insight is further grounded in the golden rule: 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.'

We often chastise cruel behaviour – such as insults, lying, or stealing – by saying, 'How would you feel if someone did that to you?' Or: 'Would you like that done to you?' This presupposes and applies the golden rule, which demands a kind of empathy as the basis of altruism. Moreover, it seems that altruism requires a degree of empathy.

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Moreover, in Christian theology, God-in-Christ entered into the suffering of humanity through his humiliation. As the writer of Hebrews says of Jesus:

> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

Pertaining to Christ's crucifixion, the same book says:

> But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Hebrew 2:9)

I have not found much on empathy as a virtue (or as conducive to other virtues) in the literature of moral philosophy, although other works, usually on psychology, dilate on it. It seems that those interested in virtue theory (both virtue morality and virtue epistemology) would be the more likely to reflect on this state of being than would those explicating deontology or consequentialism. The moral philosopher William Frankena, who was principally a deontologist, nevertheless gives place to virtues in a secondary sense, and speaks of the need for 'benevolence' to motivate one to duty. In this connection, he cites statements by Josiah Royce and William James. First, Royce's reflections:

> What then is thy neighbor? He too is a mass of states, of experiences, thoughts and desires, just as concrete, as thou art. . . . Dost thou believe this? Art thou sure what it means? This is for thee the turning point of thy whole conduct towards him.[5]

Similarly, William James writes:

> This higher vision of an inner significance in what, until then, we had realized only in the dead external

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> way, often comes over a person suddenly; and, when it does so, it makes an epoch in his history.[6]

Both Royce and James, then, attribute to these empathic experiences a kind of moral epiphany, a quantum leap forward in moral awareness and moral virtue. Contemporary philosophers Jay Wood and Robert Roberts say much the same thing as Royce and James: 'Empathic self-transcendence is itself a virtue. . . . An inability to see from an alien perspective is a cognitive deficit that is also a personal failing.'[7]

Time spent in our empathy machine would increase this kind of awareness astronomically. If one decided to embark on a voyage into another person's multifarious dimensions of pain, one would set oneself up in antithesis to any hedonic theory of value. Inside the empathy machine, pain is multiplied, not pleasure. But the purpose is the cultivation of deep virtue leading to wise actions.

The Metaphysics of Persons and the Empathy Machine

For the experience machine to work, a particular ontology of persons must be in place. Any world-view that denies the objective reality of persons as genuine substances who endure over time and who experience life in the irreducibly first-person singular mode is hard pressed to employ this thought experiment to any benefit. The empathy machine is only desirable as an exercise in gaining moral knowledge given some substantial view of the self in a world of other selves. Otherwise, one cannot stipulate the objective existence of irreducible others who become the subject of one's own experience. I will not suggest which world-views may fail this test. Rather, that is left to the reader.

But those holding world-views that affirm the existence of individual selves that can grow in moral knowledge should consider the implications of the empathy machine. The

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ontology of theism is the most amenable to this endeavour. One would need courage to enter this machine, even for a brief period of time. Likewise, one would need wisdom, since gratuitous (or at least misguided) suffering is obviously not its purpose; nor is the perverse gratification of masochists.

Entering the Empathy Machine

Consider an example of someone who should consider entering the machine. John, a bright and intellectually adventurous fellow, is told repeatedly by close friends and his wife that he tends to be impatient and rude with slow-witted or mentally handicapped people. They are often the butt of his jokes and he steers clear of them, even one who is a part of his own extended family. But John experiences something of a moral epiphany through an accident. After checking out of the supermarket with his friend, he makes a disparaging remark about the bagger, who obviously has Down's syndrome. To John's surprise and horror, the female bagger hears his comment, and loudly announces that she is quite competent at her job: 'I'm a good worker, even though I'm not like you!' She then breaks into tears and runs away. Several strangers observe the scene and stare at John with scornful amazement. For a brief moment, John inhabits a new moral world – that of the other. He begins to wonder what it would be like have a mental handicap, to know it, and to live in world where most others do not share this condition.

John is thus a good candidate for some time in the empathy machine, with the dial set to 'mental limitation'. But not only would John experience the diminishment of his prized wit and intelligence, he would also experience memories of being taunted as a child, being left out of social gatherings, sexual frustrations, and the experience of being ridiculed by a bright and insensitive man (like John himself). In fact, something like this was the subject of a

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film called *Charly* (1968), which was based on the best-selling book *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes. In this story, a mentally retarded man, Charly, gains exceptional intelligence, only to tragically lose it in the end. Moreover, some brilliant people lose much of their intelligence to dementia – and yet know, in some sense, what they have lost. This is the subject of the heart-rending novel *Still Alice* (2009), by Lisa Genova.

My case for the empathy machine is rather empty if it does not translate into non-science fiction applications. How might one cultivate empathy in *this* life? Let me list several recommendations briefly:

1. Slow down your pace of life and carefully listen to others. As Kant said, we should treat people as ends in themselves and never merely as means. For empathy this translates into a deep awareness of the other *as other*, as a subjective being outside oneself, but like unto oneself. This may require toning down or eliminating some technologies that needlessly divert attention from the human beings in our midst.
2. Read literature that takes you into other worlds and other selves. Although the characters are fictional, the kinds of lives and existential situations described usually are not. The works of Dostoevsky, particularly *The Brothers Karamazov*, stand out in this respect.
3. Reading profound biographies and autobiographies (or both) of various people from various cultures helps place one more into the subjectivity of others. The better memoirs might have the same effect.
4. Films that emphasize dialogue, relationships, and character development, such as *Babette's Feast* (1987), may aid one in inhabiting a different human world and, as such, increase empathy for those featured in the films.

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5. One might also read high-quality psychological studies on the nature of empathy to better understand its dynamics. Some counselling programmes even offer entire courses on empathy for future counsellors.

If my argument is sound, anyone in reasonably good health and with the appropriate metaphysics of persons and who lacks the morally sufficient empathy required for altruism – I imagine this would include all mere mortals – should consider entering the empathy machine, come what may. But short of having such a machine, one can use one's empathetic imagination to enter into the subjective pain of others. This is profoundly anhedonic; it is not done for any immediately felt pleasure, but for the purpose of growing in moral awareness, moral knowledge, and character growth. A kind of satisfaction may eventually result as one's empathy grows because this state allows one to know existential and moral reality more deeply.

Review of the Argument

This is the argument stated above in formal terms.

1. Thought experiments are legitimate tools for philosophy, given certain conditions.
2. Empathy is a vitally significant part of the moral life, even if often unrecognized.
3. Empathy is conducive to altruism.
4. Altruism is a desired moral orientation.
5. The empathy machine is a legitimate thought experiment.
6. One should enter the empathy machine to gain a new kind of moral knowledge, as long as one's world-view makes possible this kind of thought experiment.

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Conclusion: Empathy Unbound

This article offers a new thought experiment through the auspices of the empathy machine. If empathy is not only a psychological state but a moral virtue, and a virtue required for altruism, then the development of empathy is crucial to moral knowledge and moral character. Entering the empathy machine would help increase empathy through a kind of double awareness. But in the absence of such a science-fiction device, we can engage in practices that may increase our sense of empathy in this troubled and all-too-selfish world.[8]

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Notes

[1] Robert Nozick, 'The Experience Machine', in Louis Pojman (ed.) *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 5th edn (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2007), 146–7.

[2] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1910), ch. 5.

[3] 'Dissociative Identity Disorder,' WebMD, <http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/dissociative-identity-disorder-multiple-personality-disorder>.

[4] Film: Star Trek III: *The Search for Spock*. Written by Harve Bennett, Directed by Leonard Nimoy. TV Episode: Star Trek: The Next Generation episode, 'Sarek'. Written by Peter S. Beagle, Directed by Les Landau. Thanks to Michael Stark for these references.

[5] William Frankena, *Ethics*, 2nd edn (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 69.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 122. Thanks to Michael Stark for this reference.

[8] Thanks to Sarah C. Geis, Michael Stark, and David Werther for their comments on this article.

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