

Nothing More than Feelings? The Role of Emotions in Moral Judgment

DAVID PIZARRO

One of the standard instructions given by judges to members of the jury is that they should not allow any emotions of sympathy influence their judgments (Feigenson, 1997). These instructions reflect a fundamental assumption on the part of our legal system that the presence of emotions in the deliberation process works against the goal of accurate judgments concerning moral blame. This assumption is by no means restricted to our legal system. Historically, many theorists have shared the view that emotions are detrimental to moral reasoning and moral judgment. This view, stemming from a philosophical tradition traceable to the writings of Kant (1785), has had a profound influence on the psychological study of morality.

In this paper, I review the primary arguments for the traditional position that holds emotions as antagonistic to moral judgments. I argue that this position is untenable given the information about emotions and emotional processes that has emerged in the psychological literature of recent years. I then offer a theoretical model of emotive moral judgment that takes a closer look at how emotions, specifically empathy, play an integral role in the process of moral judgment. I argue that emotions should not be dismissed as irrelevant or harmful to moral evaluations, but that affect can actually aid moral deliberations. The emphasis here will be on moral judgments (i.e., judgments concerning the rightness or wrongness of situations, actions, or individuals); I will not deal directly with the otherwise important issue of the role of emotions in moral behavior. The emphasis will also be on empathy, as it seems to be the most prototypical moral emotion and is certainly the most widely discussed.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Not unlike in the study of intelligence, if one wants to measure morality one must define what it means to be moral and find measures that approximate this

definition. Traditionally, the field of moral psychology has relied on moral philosophy to answer the definitional problem. Because Kohlberg had such a large influence on the field of moral psychology (nearly single-handedly bringing the issue to the forefront of psychological thinking), the field has had to come to terms with the philosophical biases that came alongside Kohlberg's (e.g., 1969) approach. Among these were the Kantian conceptions concerning the contribution of emotions to moral judgments. Kant believed emotional forces to be sources that tainted the process of moral thinking, primarily because they were antagonistic to the reasoning process. The criticism that emotions are irrational was not new with Kant (Plato, for instance, argued for the irrational nature of emotions in his *Phaedrus*). However, Kant extended this criticism, pointing out the particular problems they posed for moral reasoning and decision-making. Kant characterized emotions as non-moral influences at best, immoral at worst (but see Sherman, 1997). The arguments set forth by Kant have been reshaped by many (e.g., Nagel, 1977), and have had a wide influence across moral psychology and philosophy. Although these criticisms have been challenged by many theorists on various grounds (e.g., Ben Ze'ev, 2000; Sabini & Silver, 1987; Williams, 1973), they continue to exert their influence on both psychologists interested in the moral emotions (e.g., Blasi, 1999) and on popular conceptions of emotions, as evidenced by the jury instructions mentioned above. The idea that emotions are harmful to moral judgment is not a ridiculous one; at first glance, there are many reasons to doubt their possible positive contribution to moral decision-making. At least three objections to emotion-based theories of moral judgment have been offered:

First, emotions are partial. They are notorious for playing favorites, arising at times from causes that have little to do with morality. Frijda (1988) discusses this feature of emotions, aptly labeling it the emotional "law of concern." By this, he means that emotions are more easily aroused for things and people we care about, yet are conspicuously absent from considerations about things we care nothing about. Why does this pose a problem for moral judgments? It is a generally accepted feature of a moral judgment that it be impartial. For example, when evaluating the actions of an individual who stole a car, it should be the case that our opinion would not change if we found out that the car thief in question was our brother. Impartiality is a critical component of justice. Nevertheless, emotions often steer us in the direction of favoring those we care for. It is a matter of little debate that we will feel more motivated to be merciful to a criminal that also happens to be a loved one. Similarly, emotions such as empathy and guilt, which are generally considered motivators of prosocial action, arise more easily if the object of the emotion is someone close to us. This bias presents a problem for moral theorists who maintain that moral judgments should not "play favorites." As Rawls (1973) famously stated, justice judgments should be made behind the hypothetical "veil of ignorance," in which factors such as personal relationships do not affect our conclusions

regarding the justice of an individual or action. The partiality of emotions raises serious questions as to their value for the process of moral reasoning. If emotions are always biased toward things we care about, then shouldn't our goal be to eliminate them entirely from the process of moral judgment? A theory claiming that emotions serve an important function for moral judgment must attempt to resolve the inconsistency between the "law of concern" and the "veil of ignorance."

A second problem with emotions is that they often arise due to the presence of arbitrary factors. Features of the situation that have little or nothing to do with moral reasons may be responsible for inducing an emotion, and the emotion can exert an influence on subsequent moral judgments. For instance, when presented with a stranger in need, I may feel less sympathetic toward him because he is wearing a shirt that reminds me of an old enemy. This capricious nature of emotions, that makes their presence highly erratic, is thus a poor foundation on which to base moral decisions. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the social psychological literature documenting the effects of mood on helping behavior. Events as arbitrary as finding a dime in a payphone, or being exposed to the smell of fresh cookies, place individuals in a more positive mood, and thus make individuals more likely to offer help to a stranger in need (Isen & Levin, 1972). Although most of this literature focuses on the effect of moods on prosocial behavior, moods also influence our judgments of others. For instance, placing someone in a good mood, by something as (contextually) irrelevant as watching a "happy" film in a lab can increase the tendency that the individual will fall prey to the fundamental attribution error (Forgas, 1998). Although descriptively accurate, these studies are disconcerting to the theorist attempting to argue that emotions aid moral reasoning. If watching a funny movie or walking by a bakery with fresh baked goods can influence moral attitudes and behaviors, then in order to be a more accurate judge and moral agent, emotions should be removed entirely from the process of moral deliberations.

Finally, it has been argued that emotions are passively experienced. In other words, emotions are events that happen to us, making their influence on judgment lie outside the realm of voluntary control. As such, their influence over judgments or behavior cannot be viewed as an aid to moral reasoning. Ben Ze'ev (2000) has recently summarized the problem as follows:

1. Responsibility entails free choice; if we are not free to behave in a certain manner, then we are not responsible for this behavior.
2. Free choice entails an intellectual deliberation in which alternatives are considered and the best one is chosen. Without such consideration we cannot clearly understand the possible alternatives and are not responsible for preferring one of them.
3. Since intellectual deliberations are absent from emotions, we cannot be responsible for our emotions (p. 244).

It thus follows that if emotions are truly passive and involuntary, and therefore irrational, their influence upon our evaluations is not based upon true choice. If this is true then emotions are beyond the will and therefore have no intrinsic moral value. Under this characterization, emotions are no different from mindless, automatic reflexes, and we are in no way responsible for decisions made under their presence. Much like signing a contract with a gun to one's head, "emotional duress" undermines moral decision-making.

The upshot of these arguments concerning the nature of emotions is that emotions seem only to act as harmful influences on the process of moral decision-making. It is these features of emotions, combined with generally accepted features of morality, that has led some to dismiss the possibility of their having any positive influence on moral judgment.

It is clear that in some cases, emotions do in fact act in a manner that undermines moral decision-making. However, it is questionable whether the strong position, that emotions can *never* aid, and *always* harm moral judgments, remains valid in light of our understanding of emotions and emotional processes. For the purpose of the remaining discussion, I review here the main objections mentioned above:

- (a) Emotions are always partial, arbitrary, and passive
 - (b) Moral judgments should be impartial, well-grounded, and freely made
- Therefore (c) Emotions are detrimental to moral judgments, and are to be avoided in moral decision-making

It should be emphasized at this point that (a) above is in striking disagreement with much of what we know about emotions. I will attempt to refute this characterization of emotions on empirical grounds by arguing the following: First, we are endowed with the capacity to regulate our emotions, and on many occasions are able to effectively induce or suppress emotional reactions through a variety of tactics, allowing us to recruit emotions when appropriate and lending flexibility to our emotional lives (Gross, 1999). Second, emotions are not vacuous reflexes devoid of rational influence. Rather, emotions reflect our pre-existing concerns, such as our moral beliefs and principles, making them less capricious than may appear. Finally, there is good reason to include emotions in the process of moral reasoning; rather than defeating the reasoning process, emotions can actually aid reasoning by acting as a centralizing agent, focusing our attention and our cognitive resources on the problem at hand. This characteristic of emotions allows us to pay heed to features of a situation that may have escaped us otherwise. In combination, these characteristics make emotions desirable for the process of moral decision-making.

In the next section, I provide a theory of emotive moral judgment, primarily focusing on the emotion of empathy, that takes the above features of emotion

into account. I focus on empathy because it seems the clearest candidate for being a truly moral emotion, and has been implicated by developmental psychologists (e.g., Eisenberg, 1986; Hoffman, 1987), social psychologists (e.g., Batson, 1991), and philosophers (e.g., Blum, 1980) as a component of psychological functioning necessary for individuals to be moral. Although the focus of the paper will be on empathy and not other emotions, I believe the arguments can be extended to emotions more broadly. However, most of the research cited and the examples used are specific to empathy.

EMOTIVE MORAL JUDGMENT: A PROPOSED MODEL

At the turn of the century, the author of an early introductory psychology textbook offered a definition of empathy (or sympathy, as he preferred to call it) that remains widely accepted to this day:

“Sympathy is . . . the experience of feelings, chiefly emotions, similar in kind to those expressed by or known to exist in another person. It . . . sets aside our own personality, and moves us to partake of the pleasure or pain, the happiness or misery, of others.” (Davis, 1900, p. 274)

Consistent with this century-old definition, empathy has been operationalized by most researchers as the degree to which individuals feel emotional or physical distress when encountering a distressed other, as measured by self-report, independent judges, or physiological indicators of distress. The prototypical empathic encounter is one in which individuals are presented with another person that is in pain or suffering, leading to an arousal that, as Hoffman (2000) has stated, is more appropriate to the circumstances of the other than it is to one's own. In other words, empathic arousal is truly “feeling for the other.”

Although various terms for the empathic emotion have been offered, such as sympathy, compassion, or benevolence, we will use the term empathy, both in referring to its arousal component and its motivational component. Cognitive empathy, which has also been referred to as perspective-taking or role taking, is the ability to understand the point of view of another person, and is considered an important achievement of cognitive development. Affective empathy, on the other hand, is the vicarious emotional response (that very often takes place as a result of perspective-taking) that occurs when exposed to the emotions of another. The distinction between cognitive and affective empathy is a useful heuristic for teasing apart the components of empathy, yet the two are difficult to separate in practice. It is certainly the case that one of the most effective methods for inducing affective empathy is by manipulating cognitive empathy (e.g., by giving perspective-taking instructions). It may suffice to say at this point that both definitions are important to our discussion.

Empathy has been implicated as a moral emotion because it generally causes concern for the welfare of others, particularly in situations where others are

suffering. This, after all, is the domain of the moral, that of deciding which actions will benefit the well being of others (and not merely the self). Moral judgments are necessary if our actions are to conform to our moral principles and beliefs. In our discussion we will define moral judgment as the decisions concerning whether or not the immediate situation should be under the jurisdiction of higher-order moral beliefs (Blum, 1994). Individual judgments are the link between moral principles and moral situations. This link is a critical component of morality because a mere knowledge of rational moral principles does not necessarily imply knowledge of when to apply these principles. Individuals must (a) decide that a situation is a moral one, and (b) search for the appropriate moral principle for the situation at hand. It is with this understanding of moral judgment, that of bridging situations with moral principles, that the stage is set for the remainder of this discussion.

In what follows, I describe the dialectical interaction between empathy and moral beliefs, illustrating empathy's function in facilitating higher-order moral judgments (see figure 1 A-D below). Specifically, I will show that in some cases affective arousal and moral beliefs may complement each other (figure 1A), while in others they conflict with each other (figure 1B and 1C), and that at times moral beliefs can even pre-empt the presence of empathic arousal (figure 1D).

1. The informative nature of empathy: Moral signaling

The first part of the model highlights the informative nature of affective arousal. Because moral situations usually center around the presence of some form of victimization, and empathy sensitizes us to the distress of the other, its presence acts as an efficient moral marker. When empathy arises in the presence of a distressed other, the empathic response cues the individual to the possibility that a morally relevant event is taking place. This arousal stimulates the individual to think about the moral principles that may hold appropriate jurisdiction over the current situation. Empathic arousal is thus a "first alert," signaling moral relevance.

The idea that emotions are informative is not new. Schwarz and Clore (1983), (see also Schwarz, 1990), have proposed a model by which individuals use emotions as information for their judgments. When asked to make a judgment, individuals reference their mood and use it as an aid for their subsequent judgment. Usually moods serve as an accurate source of information. For instance, when someone asks you how your day was, your negative mood is a good clue that it didn't go very well. Occasionally, however, moods serve to misinform judgments, because the mood of the individual is due to something that has little to do with the nature of the judgment (such as in the case of experimental mood induction). This is especially true when the individual is not sure why she or he is experiencing a mood. For instance, when individuals are asked to rate their satisfaction with life, individuals who were manipulated to feel good answer more positively

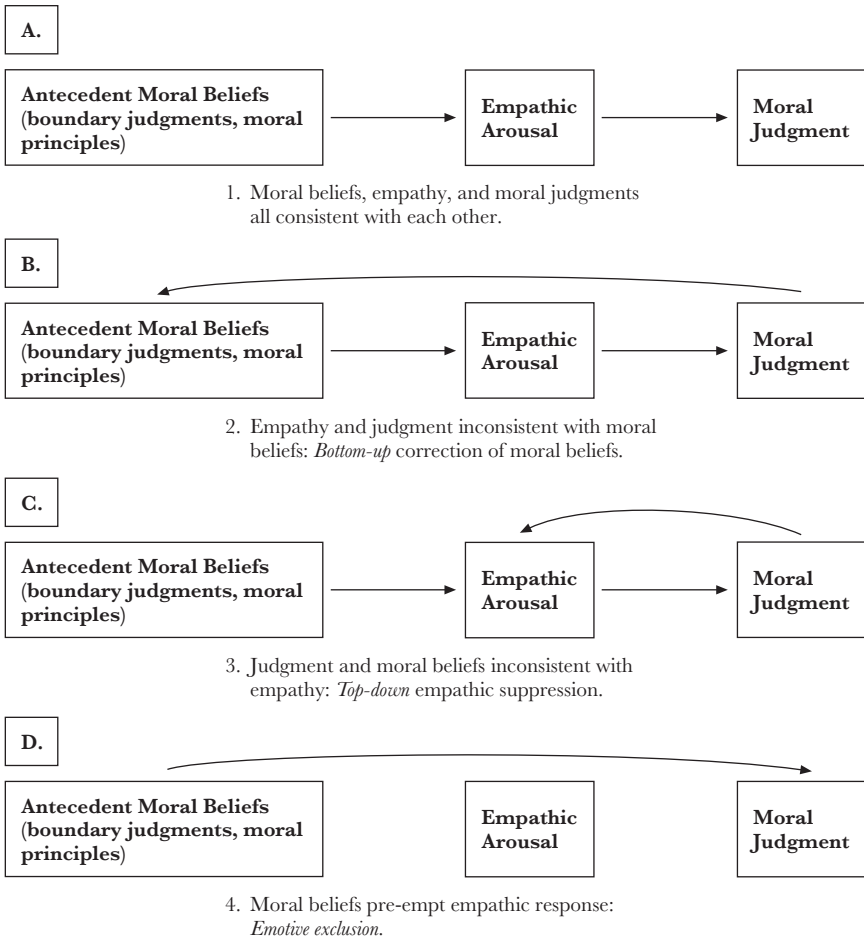


Figure 1. Pathways of moral judgment when presented with a moral situation (i.e., the presence of victimization).

than individuals manipulated to feel sad do. In the case of empathic arousal, however, the source of arousal is more salient than the diffuse affect more characteristic of general mood states, and the empathic arousal may be able to specifically inform the individual that something is wrong. In this case, the individual who is presented with the distress of another individual uses her or his emotional arousal as a source of information, and subsequently makes the appropriate judgments concerning the situation. If this is in fact what occurs, then it should be possible to manipulate emotional arousal and “fool” people into believing that they are experiencing true empathy for a target individual,

when in fact they are not. We would expect judgments to change even though true empathy has not occurred. Individuals would presumably use the ostensible empathic arousal as information that they really did care for the welfare of the target individual. Batson and colleagues (Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995) conducted an experiment demonstrating just this. The experimenters manipulated empathy for a person in need (the target) by using perspective-taking instructions *or* by using false physiological arousal feedback. As expected, in both cases individual judgments were influenced. Both groups reported an increased valuing of the welfare of the target individual. According to the researchers, empathy served to inform the individuals that they cared for the person in need¹.

2. Moral beliefs and the presence of empathy

Not only does empathy serve to inform moral judgments, the very presence of empathy is contingent upon a background “set” of previously formed moral beliefs and attitudes. This is one of the primary challenges to Kant’s assumption that emotions are capricious and undependable. The literature is beginning to paint a consistent picture concerning some of the specific cognitive antecedents of empathic arousal, and it is to these that I now turn.

Cognitive antecedents of empathic arousal. Various beliefs held by the individual influence the very presence of affective arousal. For instance, finding a phone number in the pocket of your spouse’s jacket may lead to intense jealousy if you suspect him of cheating, but to mere curiosity if you do not. Similarly, the presence of moral emotions is affected by the individual’s moral beliefs. Because of this, emotional reactions can be reliable informers of the moral priorities of an individual, significantly weakening the claim that emotional reactions are merely non-cognitive, reflexive responses.

Although empathy has cognitive “pre-requisites,” most investigators have tended to focus on the effects of empathy on subsequent behavior and judgment rather than on its antecedents. Yet there are empirically established cognitive distinctions that seem to function as moderators for the empathic response and that hint at the interaction between affect and moral judgment.

(a) Similarity. Cueing similarity between self and other may be sufficient to produce an empathic response in subjects (Batson, Turk, Shaw & Klein, 1995; Feshbach & Roe, 1968). However, the converse is also true. Empathy is more difficult to elicit for different others, causing Hoffman (1987) to refer to this as a potential “empathic bias.” In fact, there are harsh real-world examples showing the importance of this factor. The technique of dehumanizing others by making their differences salient, for example, has been powerfully demonstrated in wartime propaganda (posters and films) in which wartime enemies are visually depicted as inhuman monsters and vicious killers, thus eliminating the capacity to experience empathy when faced with the pain or death of one’s enemies.

It is not clear exactly why individuals display this bias. One possible explanation comes from evolutionary arguments for the existence of the empathic response (e.g. Hoffman, 1981; Buck & Ginsburg, 1997). These theorists have appealed to the mechanism of kin selection as favoring the presence of an altruistic mechanism that would serve to protect the interests of those that share our genes. This would explain why individuals with similar characteristics to ours are more viable candidates for empathic arousal. Another possible explanation is that the roots of empathy are in early infancy when the boundaries between self and other are diffuse (Hoffman, 1987). According to some theorists, empathy in adults continues to work through the mechanism of "self-other merging" (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, & Luce, 1997; but see Batson et al., 1997). This may explain why it is easier to experience empathy for similar others. It is probably easier to lose sight of self-other boundaries with others that are more like the self than with others that are not at all like the self.

(b) Attribution of blame. Secondly, individuals are less likely to feel empathy for targets to which they have attributed blame for their predicament, and conversely, more empathy for targets they perceive as innocent. That attribution is at work in moral judgment has been empirically documented by a number of researchers (e.g., Weiner, 1980). That it may work in empathic responsiveness has also been shown (Betancourt, 1991). Betancourt found that participants presented with a story about a needy student, who had missed classes and was therefore experiencing difficulties in school, felt more empathic emotions when they believed the reasons for the absence to be outside of the target's control (i.e., because of an accident that caused an extended hospitalization) than when they perceived the causes to be controllable (i.e., because the target had gone out of town with some friends to have fun). This process seems to work in reverse as well, inducing empathy for a target lowers the prevalence of an individual's falling prey to the actor-observer bias, the tendency to make more dispositional causal attributions for the negative behavior of actors, and more situational attributions for our own negative behaviors (Gould & Sigall, 1977).

Why is this important? If an individual attributes blame to a group for their own predicament (i.e., the homeless, victims of AIDS), these attributions may influence whether or not the individual experiences empathy for particular individuals within the group. Take the (horrific) position that victims of rape are to blame for the violation they experience because of the way they dress. If an individual believes this about rape victims, when presented with a rape victim, he will be less likely to experience empathy. This, in effect, "stacks the deck" against the victim by pre-empting any emotional reactions. Conversely, if an individual believes that rape victims have no responsibility for their predicament, the empathic response occurs, as normal, when presented with a rape victim.

(c) Perspective-taking. Perspective-taking, or role taking, as it is sometimes called, seems to enable individuals to bypass the above moderators. By engaging the individual in the process of imagining themselves in the shoes of another,

perceived similarities increase and attributions change. For instance, one of the ways empathy works is through motor mimicry (Wispé, 1991). Individuals tend to imitate the muscular features of another's emotional displays. By coordinating one's musculature in the same way as that of the target, one actually feels a similar emotional response. It follows that the empathic response should occur more easily when there are vivid distress cues available. Thus, reading about a target in distress seems to be less efficient than seeing them in distress, because of the absence of these cues. Perspective-taking may increase the amount of salient features of the target, features that may not be physically present, by evoking vivid images of the target in distress. Thus, imagining the pain of a starving child may be enough to initiate an empathic response even when the child is not present. Furthermore, perspective-taking may also work in one of two distinct ways, thus increasing its availability: by causing individuals to imagine themselves in the target's position or by causing them to imagine how the other may be feeling. These two types of perspective-taking have different affective consequences—imagining how one would feel seems to evoke more distress than imagining how the other feels (Batson, Early, & Salvarini, 1997).

Experimental manipulations of empathy often rely on perspective-taking instructions in order to achieve empathic arousal (e.g., Batson et al., 1988; Betancourt, 1991). Given this, it comes as no surprise that cognitive-developmental moral theorists have recognized the importance of perspective-taking for moral judgments. However, cognitive-developmentalists pay little attention to the affective consequences of perspective-taking, focusing rather on the cognitive operations implied by the ability to see the world from the perspective on the other, and the implications of this skill for moral reasoning.

Having elaborated on the various features of the empathic response will now set the stage for understanding how the cognitive moderators of empathy are used by individuals to serve moral goals.

Moral distinctions and emotive exclusion. As was mentioned above, it is easiest for one to feel empathy for a similar other. That much may be relatively automatic. What is not, however, is how the individual defines what is similar. Individuals have the capacity to engage in active constructions of categories that invariably include some things as candidates for empathic arousal and exclude others. Individuals draw various boundaries; some social, some religious, some even biological, which effectively define who or what is like them and who or what is not. If empathy is more easily aroused when presented with similar others, it is possible to attenuate or accentuate the empathic response through the cognitive mechanism of defining moral boundaries.

Interestingly, many of these "boundary-defining" judgments originate in moral distinctions. The abortion debate is a concrete example of such a distinction. Those that believe in the sanctity of prenatal life consider the fetus to be a person, much like them, with the fundamental features necessary to classify it as "human." When presented with a scenario in which the fetus is harmed or

“victimized”, the individual experiences empathic arousal and its corresponding motivational consequences (motivation to make a moral judgment and to take action). However, in the case of the pro-choice advocate who has defined a fetus as an organism that has not yet met the necessary conditions to be considered human, the empathic response is pre-empted.

Framing entities as “similar” in any way can therefore serve as a means of moral change, mediated by the emotional response. We see attempts at this in the persuasive messages of those that are against abortion. As mentioned above, by referring to the fetus as an “unborn child” or “baby,” proponents of the pro-life position are, in effect, priming similarities. The same is true of proponents of the pro-choice position who refer to the unborn as “fetus” or “tissue”—both rather cold, technical terms which do not prime similarity. Changes in moral motivation may take place through the process of emotive exclusion or inclusion of individuals or things, a process taken up very often through traditional forms of social communication, such as political and religious rhetoric. Whether or not individuals are motivated to make specific moral judgments, then, is a changeable feature if one considers the antecedent belief systems that are at work in the mental set of the individual. This may be the reason animal lovers cringe at the sight of a slaughtered cow while avid carnivores don’t flinch. If the beliefs differ, emotive responses are affected. Moral beliefs may hedge emotive forces before they even occur (see figure 1D), a point that those who view emotions as conflicting with judgment do not seem to take into account.

The notion that one must define who is included in a moral framework is not a new one. Shweder and his colleagues, for instance, have pointed out that defining who is a person is a distinction that all moral codes must make:

“Every moral code has some kind of more or less inclusive definition of who must abide by the standards of natural law and is entitled to just treatment and protection from harm. What is discretionary, however, are the category boundaries of the ‘person’ or ‘moral agent.’ . . . [F]or example whether such entities as corporations, fetuses, cows or dogs should receive protection from harm . . .” (Shweder, Mahapatra & Miller, 1987 p. 149)

Batson (1998) has also noted that people can feel empathy for a wide range of individuals, including nonhumans. Given this fact, it becomes clear how individuals in non-Western cultures can be motivated to follow moral precepts that Westerners find hard to relate to. Through social communication, nearly anything can acquire candidacy for the empathic response. Hence, a moral code that includes cows as fundamentally sacred and thus morally important allows the empathic response to occur when the individual is presented with a victimized cow. The same goes for a moral code that defines dead ancestors as entities that may suffer as a cause of one’s actions, leading individual in some cultures to perform elaborate rituals so as not to offend their ancestors. These actions (protecting sacred animals, and being careful not to offend ancestors or spirits)

are just as moral to the individuals that engage in them as the mandate not to murder is to our culture.

Given the discretionary nature of boundary definitions in a moral code and their effect on emotive forces, it may be possible to measure moral belief-systems on a continuum from those that include everything in the world as morally relevant (i.e., one that draws no boundaries, or perhaps one large boundary) such as radical pantheism, to belief-systems that draw very rigid boundaries and include only a sub-set of human beings as morally important, such as extreme racists (who view members of their race as the only ones deserving of moral considerations).² This type of classification may confer greater predictive power to measures of moral reasoning.

In summary, empathic responses may differ in accordance with the antecedent belief systems at work in the individual, limiting the empathic response to only those entities included in a moral code. When an individual changes her or his moral belief, that same individual's pattern of emotional reactions and their influence upon future judgments changes as well.

3. Swift moral judgments

When an individual feels empathy, the empathic arousal leads to motivation to make a judgment. This process can flow relatively smoothly, perhaps even automatically. Damasio (1994), in fact, has argued that emotions in general help speed up the decision-making process, by limiting the number of possible alternatives available to the individual. This is particularly true for moral situations if the situation is under the clear jurisdiction of an easily applied moral principle. For instance, an individual may not give a second thought to decrying the actions of a young man who trips an elderly woman, leaving the woman with clear, vivid signs of injury, such as a bloody nose. In this case, the immediate empathic arousal (caused by seeing an innocent victim in distress) leads to a judgment, which then prescribes an action.³ The clear moral mandate that one should not trip innocent elderly people offers no objection. Again, because of the relative moral clarity of the situation, the judgment seems (or is) fully automatic.

There are cases, however, in which one must engage in more elaborate reasoning in order to make a similar judgment. For instance, suppose an individual believes that injustices in society are due to structural inequalities that lay relatively outside of any one individual's control. Suppose this same person is confronted with a homeless individual, who is evidently suffering from the cold weather but who also appears very drunk, who happens to ask the individual for money. Suppose further, that this initiates an empathic response in the individual. In this instance, the individual may have to make more complex attributions concerning the innocence of the distressed target. The individual may question whether the empathic response is justifiable, but may realize that their beliefs concerning

the injustice of society allow them to feel sympathy for the homeless individual, and indeed require the individual to help the person in need. In this case, although more cognitive effort (checking for consistency with moral beliefs) is involved, the individual still makes the moral judgment with relative ease. In the absence of gross inconsistencies, these actions may again seem automatic, although they remain under the jurisdiction of moral beliefs. Situations that cause inconsistencies between moral beliefs and experienced empathy are more informative and are useful for uncovering the underlying processes involved in emotive moral judgments. It is to these situations that I turn next.

In spite of the above-mentioned moderators and precursors of the empathic response, we know that the empathic response can occur relatively automatically (i.e., outside of our conscious control). As Hodges and Wegner (1997) have stated: "Sometimes, empathy just happens. We take another person's viewpoint and experience that person's world without trying at all. Automatically, we find ourselves disheartened as we lament the other person's misfortune, or hear ourselves spontaneously cheering as we rejoice in that person's victories (p. 311)." They then go on to cite evidence that points to the ease with which empathic arousal occurs in individuals, even at times when it might be unwelcome. The "automatic" activation of empathy across many situations has led Hoffman (2000) to conclude that the empathic response may be overextended, occurring more frequently than is sometimes needed. For Hoffman, it is this feature of empathy, its "overextension," that allows it to be a foundation on which moral principles can be taught to children by their caretakers, through the use of inductive discipline techniques (in which parents use the child's natural inclinations toward feeling empathy and guilt as an internal source of moral constraint by pointing out to the consequences of the child's actions for others).

The idea that empathy occurs reliably, frequently, and predictably in situations of moral relevance is important to point out when it comes to understanding how emotions can be considered a positive influence upon moral judgment. As was mentioned above, some moral theorists have criticized emotion-based theories of morality because, according to them, emotions are not reliable enough to motivate morality when it is needed (e.g., Nagel, 1977). Lest it seem that empathic arousal is itself a necessary and sufficient condition for moral judgments, we shall offer reasons below why this is clearly not the case—empathy is not morality. However, judgments motivated by empathy are largely coextensive with those prescribed by most moral principles. This symmetry clouds the independent contributions offered by both sources.

4. Top-Down and Bottom-up effects

Bottom-up correction of moral principles. The frequency with which empathic arousal occurs may lead to situations in which an individual feels empathy for something

or someone that is outside one's moral boundaries (i.e., a murderer, or a member of another species). These "strong situations" do not occur without affecting an individual's belief system. When presented with these internally inconsistent affective experiences, individuals are faced with one of two possibilities: Either they change their attitudes or beliefs to reconcile with their emotional response or they attempt to regulate their emotional response in order to maintain consistency with their moral principles. The first of these is a "bottom-up" correction, in which the lower-level emotional experience is able to effect change upon a superordinate principle (see figure 1B). The second is a "top-down" correction, in which the principles themselves cause the individual to regulate their emotional response (see figure 1C).

In cases where individuals are induced to feel empathy for a person that is outside their moral boundaries they may resort to altering their belief systems. This idea is supported by research conducted by Batson and colleagues (Batson, et al., 1997) who induced empathy in individuals for members of stigmatized groups (people with AIDS and the homeless). They found that although participants reported relative dislike of members in those groups before feeling empathy for them, when following up, individuals reported greater liking for the group for whose member they had felt empathy. In other words, feeling empathy for a member of a group they previously disliked actually changed their opinions about the groups. This is not surprising when one considers that in many instances affective experiences can be so powerful that they lead us to question some of our most fundamental beliefs. As Haste (1990) has noted "In resolving a moral crisis, an affective experience is made sense of by being rationally reconstructed in moral terms, which eventually results in the individual taking a wider perspective on the social, moral, and sometimes political issues and becoming motivated to greater involvement (p. 334)." In fact, Haste goes on to give an example of this type of experience by citing the case of Sandra. Sandra's dialogue is worth quoting in detail because it highlights some important points:

Sandra: I'm a vegetarian. It started when I went to France. I lived in a butcher's for two weeks. It was then that I realized how you kill things and cook things and that it was a matter of conscience whether I should eat meat or not. I don't eat any at all now. That's the biggest conscience thing I've ever done.

Interviewer: What was the situation that made you change your mind?

Sandra: The fact that they cooked meat on the outside and it's burnt and you cut it open and it just sort of bleeds. That put me off for a start and that wasn't really anything to do with conscience, it was the actual idea of it.

This highlights the bottom-up correctional feature of emotive moral judgment. The immediate affective response that occurred when Sandra was faced with a bleeding steak caused her to make a correction in her moral beliefs. As she stated, the empathic experience (i.e., that of feeling distress for the slaughtered

animal) was not a “matter of conscience” in and of itself. Likewise, it is important to note that emotional experiences themselves are not moral judgments. However, Sandra felt the need to reconcile the affective experience with her moral beliefs. It was this experience that resulted in the motivation that drove her to change her eating habits and her views concerning animals.

Top-down empathic suppression. Affective “dissonance” is not always sufficient to change moral beliefs, however. Many times moral beliefs are held so strongly that the empathic arousal is seen as intrusive and unwanted. In this case, the individual experiencing empathy may attempt to engage in “empathic suppression” (a term I will reserve for empathy that has already occurred, but that is met with an attempt to eliminate it through the use of regulatory processes). For example, when a racist, for whatever reason, feels empathy for a member of another race, and their beliefs concerning the superiority of their race are strong enough, they may attempt to regulate their empathic response in order to avoid the motivational consequences. Empathic suppression can have disastrous moral consequences. Rudolph Hoess, the Nazi leader of the Auschwitz camp during the holocaust, engaged in a continuous effort to regulate the empathy he felt for the Jewish prisoners in order that he may accomplish his duties more effectively (Hoess, 1960; as cited in Blasi, 1999). In suppressing empathic arousal by changing attributions concerning a victim or by focusing on differences, the motivational consequences to help those suffering are also eliminated, enabling horrific acts to take place with little or no internal constraint.

Empathic suppression does not always have negative moral consequences, however. In many instances, it may be necessary to control emotions of sympathy for a target because doing otherwise might interfere with the attainment of a higher-order moral goal. For instance, feeling intense empathy for a child molester, who was mistreated severely as a child, may interfere with the desire to punish or constrain the individual, even when we believe that such action may be the morally appropriate one.

Research conducted by Batson and his colleagues (Batson, Klein, Highberger & Shaw, 1995; Batson et al., 1999) has indirectly illustrated the importance of regulating the empathic response in certain situations. They found that inducing empathy for a target group member caused individuals to distribute resources unequally to the individual in need, neglecting the remaining members of the group, thus violating the principle of justice (operationalized as acting in a manner that would equally distribute resources among all members of a group). Empathy is not always on the side of moral principles. It may in fact cause us to violate moral principles in certain situations. It is for this reason that the ability to regulate our empathic response may be a necessary component of the moral character.

Other regulatory mechanisms. Gross (1999) has presented a framework for understanding emotional regulation, in which he outlines the various regulatory tactics available to the individual. Although Gross does not focus specifically on the moral emotions, many of the strategies he outlines are efficient sources of empathic

regulation. Along with the regulatory cognitive mechanisms of changing attributions, focusing on similarities or differences, and choosing whether or not to perspective-take, individuals can select situations that will be less likely to induce empathy, thus avoiding the possible emotional consequences of empathy before even experiencing it. Shaw and colleagues (Shaw, Batson, & Todd, 1994), for instance, have shown that individuals are prone to select situations with smaller motivational consequences when the motivation will be of some cost. When individuals were given a choice of watching a high-empathy video (an emotional portrayal of a person in need) or a low-empathy video (a more objective portrayal of a person in need), participants led to believe that they would be asked to help at the end of the video chose to view the low-empathy video in order to avoid the motivational consequences of the high-empathy video. The efficiency by which individuals can regulate the empathic response should be evident at this point. The knowledge that we can be, in some way, in control of the emotions we experience speaks directly to the issue of responsibility for the effects of those emotions upon our judgments. We are not condemned to be recipients of emotional effects contrary to our will, as Kant and others have claimed.

It should be mentioned at this point that the intentional regulation of our emotional experiences might seem inauthentic. If one has to try hard to suppress disgust in order to like one's colleague, for instance, the effort involved brings the sincerity of the liking into question. However, the ability to regulate emotion does not necessarily compromise the sincerity of the felt emotion. For instance, an individual who no longer drinks when at a bar because of the frequency with which he gets angry with the other patrons when drunk is effectively regulating his anger sincerely. Likewise, as mentioned above, by changing one's worldview to include members of all races as equal human beings, an individual is more likely to feel sincere empathy for individuals that belong to another race. In both instances, the felt emotion has all the qualities one would expect of a sincere emotional episode. Indeed, this is true of most regulation that is focused on the antecedents of emotion. If this were not the case, emotional regulation would be a very ineffective tactic. This is critical, as the ability to regulate emotion is important when speaking to the Kantian objections that emotions are detrimental to moral judgments because they are *always* arbitrary, partial and passive. Emotional regulation is what gives us the ability to defeat the partial, passive, and arbitrary nature of emotions when necessary, in order to fulfill a moral goal. It is important that the regulated emotion be as authentic as any other kind of emotion.

It should be noted that neither a propensity to experience empathy, nor an ability to regulate empathy is sufficient for moral judgment to occur. On the contrary, we have seen that empathy can sometimes lead an individual to violate a moral principle, and the ability to regulate empathy may also have disastrous moral consequences. On the other hand, the capacity to experience empathy and the ability to regulate it efficiently are necessary in order to be a moral

individual. Theorists who have made efforts to equate emotional competence with a moral character (e.g.; Goleman, 1995; Saarni, 1999) must recognize that emotional competency is most likely a value-free set of skills, ensuring neither that the person will have a good *or* bad moral character (see Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, in press; Pizarro & Salovey, in press).

SUMMARY: THE MORAL JUDGMENT OF A VULCAN

We are now prepared to answer the charges that emotions are nothing but influences that damage the process of moral judgment. Emotions, although partial at times, are open to a host of regulatory strategies that enable the individual to induce or suppress appropriate emotional reactions when necessary—not merely when presented with an object of our concern. Cognitive strategies, such as taking the perspective of others, are among the most effective tools for inducing the empathic response in ourselves, for instance. As for arbitrariness, we have seen that our underlying beliefs moderate the very presence of emotion, making our emotional reactions a reflection of previous cognitive deliberations. Additionally, although emotions do in fact arise at times for arbitrary reasons, our ability to regulate these emotions is to a large degree what makes us responsible for our emotional reactions, making us active agents in our emotional lives. This is important in answering the final charge, that we are merely passive recipients of reflexive emotional responses. On the contrary, as we have seen, the control we have over our emotional reactions allows us to utilize their influence to serve our higher-order moral beliefs, as an “energy source” of moral judgment and action.

If the information presented above is accurate, it is informative to paint a portrait of the moral life of an individual who is incapable of experiencing emotion. It is important to mention at this point, that an individual without an emotional system is most likely able to make the same moral judgments as a normal individual. However, an individual capable of affective arousal has a number of advantages when it comes to everyday moral events. While one may posit a human being lacking affect, it is perhaps easiest to use the example of the Vulcan, a fictional creature brought to us by the creators of *Star Trek*. The Vulcan is a reasoning machine, yet is incapable of feeling emotion. To the Vulcan, all decisions are based on rational deliberation, and emotions are considered enemies of this process (one might characterize the Vulcan as the ultimate Kantian moral agent). What would moral judgments look like in this individual?

First, while the Vulcan might be capable of making accurate moral judgments based on the application of principles, the Vulcan may not always know when a moral event is taking place. By not feeling the pain of others around her, the Vulcan may not be cued into the occurrence of victimization, and thus never even initiate the reasoning process. This point is important; the Vulcan would show no deficit in moral reasoning as measured in a Kohlbergian moral interview,

and would perhaps outperform a human. However, in everyday situations, the Vulcan lacks the moral signaling, discussed above, which is offered by the empathic response.

Second, the Vulcan, even if aware of a moral situation, will find it easier to ignore the event. Because there is no negative arousal from the vicarious emotion, the Vulcan has little internal motivation to center his or her attention onto the situation at hand. Certainly, the Vulcan may be able to focus her attention, but this would have to occur without the built-in advantage the human being possesses in the form of the focusing power of emotions. Additionally, because emotions enable us to focus intensely on the problem at hand, once the Vulcan does focus her attention, she may be more easily distracted during the reasoning process, finding it easier to put the situation on hold. A human being would find it hard, once feeling an intense empathic experience, to ignore a situation or stop short of making a judgment.

Finally, the Vulcan would not experience any of the above-mentioned bottom-up corrections of moral principles, because the need to make affect and cognition consistent would never arise. This feature of moral change would simply be non-existent. In summary, although our Vulcan may be capable of making “correct” moral judgments, her moral life would still look very different from that of a normally functioning human being.

David Pizarro

Department of Psychology

Yale University

P.O. Box 208205

New Haven, CT 06520

USA

E-mail: david.pizarro@yale.edu

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NOTES

¹ At first glance, it seems that if emotions are so easily induced in a lab, then it can only serve to strengthen the Kantian position that emotions are capricious—in this case because they are easily manipulated. This is not necessarily the case, however. In the study of perception, when participants are brought into a lab and “fooled” by perceptual illusions this does not illustrate that eyesight, for instance, is a poor guide in normal environments. Rather, by fooling participants, investigators gain insight into the normal functioning of perceptual processes that are vital for everyday functioning. Similarly, by manipulating emotional arousal in a lab, investigators gain insight into the emotional processes that, in normal situations, serve a very adaptive function.

² For instance, the paradoxical attitudes of Ku Klux Klan members who are loving and kind individuals to “their own” yet are able to inflict harm upon members of other races with little principled or emotive constraint are prototypical examples of this phenomenon.

³ The empathy—judgment link does not always lead to action. The motivational power of judgments, made under the influence of empathic arousal or not, is defeasible. There are various features of a situation that may inhibit behavior in spite of a judgment having been made. It is most likely the case, however, that empathic arousal increases the chances of action, given the action tendency associated with it.

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