

Paying Empathy Its Due

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Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty says, "When I make a word do a lot of work like that...I always pay it extra."¹ In one sense, I think that Susan Verducci's conceptualization makes empathy work too hard, and in another sense, not hard enough. More concretely, I question whether this conceptualization may (1) conflate two distinct phenomena, empathy and projection, and (2) misidentify as "necessarily projective" the experience of intense receptivity or attunement to objects, other nonhuman entities, and those humans with whom intersubjectivity cannot be established. I think that Verducci is correct in saying that there is a relation between empathy and morality, but I fear that she has conceptualized empathy in such a way as to constrain unnecessarily how we might think about possibilities for moral response.

Verducci reasons that because "no subjective reality may be apprehended from objects," when a person thinks that she is empathizing with an object, she is actually projecting her own "reality" onto that object. I certainly agree that subjective reality cannot be apprehended from objects, but this line of reasoning seems to assume that the only quality that can be apprehended, or at least that the only one which is worth apprehending, is "subjective reality," and that the only alternative to such apprehension is projection. Likewise with relations between humans: The only alternative to intersubjectivity is projection.

Examples do not constitute an argument, of course. I offer the following merely to illustrate a quality and depth of receptivity that differs from projection. In her biography of the geneticist Barbara McClintock, Evelyn Fox Keller asks:

What is it in an individual scientist's relation to nature that facilitates the kind of seeing that eventually leads to productive discourse? What enabled McClintock to see further and deeper into the mysteries of genetics than her colleagues? [McClintock's] answer is simple. Over and over again she tells us one must have the time to look, the patience to "hear what the material has to say to you," the openness to "let it come to you." Above all, one must have "a feeling for the organism."²

Temple Grandin, who is also a scientist, has a relation to nature similar to that experienced by McClintock.³ Grandin has written extensively on the humane treatment of cattle and is famous for designing a "squeeze chute" which is now widely used in the cattle industry; this chute dramatically reduces stress and fear among cows. In an article about Grandin's life and work, Oliver Sacks speaks of her "immediate intuitive recognition of animal moods and signs," her "possession" by animals' feelings, and her ability to feel cows' distress "in her bones."⁴ Describing how she designs her cattle restraint and management systems, Grandin begins by saying that she can produce "simulations" in her mind, and then concludes, "or, I turn myself into an animal, and feel what it would feel entering the chute."⁵

The people of many of the different indigenous cultures in North America seem to have a similar depth of attunement with plants and animals, as well as with

physical objects and phenomena. Mathew King, a spiritual leader among the Lakota describes such attunement: “The world is an open Bible for us. We Indians have studied it for millions and millions of years.... Even the rocks are alive. When we use them in our sweat ceremony we talk to them and they talk back to us.”⁶

Perhaps a word other than “empathy” should be used in connection with these examples, but I do not believe that they are instances of projection. When a person projects, she typically imagines how *she* would feel if she were in the same situation as another. In the examples above, the people involved do not imagine how they would feel, but rather what it would feel like to be something else. Further, when a person projects she is likely to misapprehend significantly the object, animal, or phenomenon at hand. Little children, who tend to project a lot, will, for example, reprimand or strike the fallen tree branch on which they have scuffed a shin, thinking that these are just punishments for mean and hurtful branches: The child responds as if tree branches are subject to the same rules as she. In contrast — while it could be just a lucky coincidence — the special attunement of the individuals in these examples seems to have provided them important insights into the entities or phenomena to which they are attuned. McClintock’s remarkable attentiveness to maize helped her to discover the chromosomal basis of genetics, while Grandin’s special attunement enabled her to build a chute that was comforting to cattle. And long before we had words such as “ecosystem” or college courses in environmental science, American Indians’ ability to commune with nature enabled them to understand the interdependence of physical and biological phenomena.

These examples are quite dramatic, of course. While lacking the drama, it appears that aesthetic experience involves a similar kind of receptivity or attunement that is distinct from projection. The terms often used to describe how we experience art are suggestive. A mural or a vase may touch us deeply or speak to us. A painting or a quilt may jar or disturb. A poem or sculpture may move or elevate. A film or mosaic may exhilarate or drain. These expressions speak to the experience of being unsettled. When we are unsettled by art in the ways mentioned here, it is because we do not project; we do not stamp onto the art the categories and frameworks that normally order our experiences. Clearly, however, neither does the object stamp itself onto us. As described by Dewey:

[Receptivity] involves surrender. But adequate yielding of the self is possible only through a controlled activity that may well be intense.... When we are only passive to a scene, it overwhelms us and, for lack of answering activity, we do not perceive that which bears us down. We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to *take in*.⁷

Where human relations are concerned, Verducci’s account appears to deny the experience of attunement or receptivity to humans with whom intersubjectivity is not possible. I question what it might mean to establish intersubjectivity with infants, and I suspect that such a meeting of the minds cannot be reached with students who suffer from certain kinds of brain injuries and neurological disorders. Yet, in our efforts to understand these individuals, we do not of necessity project our own subjective reality onto them. As Nel Noddings points out, in responding to a fussy baby we do not normally project ourselves and ask, “How would I feel if I were wet to the ribs?”⁸

In certain cases, efforts to achieve intersubjectivity through, for example, conversation or dialogue, will not only fail, but may actually be at odds with responding appropriately to others' needs. Attunement with others enables us to know when it is time to *stop* pursuing intersubjectivity with them, to recognize that, in a given situation, our effort will likely exacerbate another's frustration or hurt feelings. Again, maybe there is a better word than empathy to describe the attunement or receptivity that enables one to know when backing-off is the most appropriate move, but it seems to involve neither intersubjectivity nor projection, let alone the objectification of a human being.

As I read her, one of Verducci's concerns is that the experience usually called "empathy" can be implicated in immoral or otherwise problematic conduct. This leads her to conclude that there are different "empathies." On her account, there is a moral empathy that is intersubjective and an immoral empathy that is projective, as well as some other unnamed empathies. I wonder, though, what is to be gained by distinguishing a specifically moral kind of empathy. This question is suggested in part by Verducci's recognition that the different empathies she names are "phenomenologically difficult to distinguish," and in part by Dewey's argument that there is not a clear and fast line that distinguishes a specifically moral realm: "At any moment conceptions which once seemed to belong exclusively to the biological realm may assume moral import.... Any restriction of moral knowledge and judgments to a definite realm necessarily limits our perception of moral significance."⁹

It seems to me that there are ways to conceptualize empathy that accommodate Verducci's concern without positing an array of different empathies. One alternative is to view empathy as a capacity that does not necessarily lead to moral response, but that makes moral response possible:

When we see more and hear more, it is not only that we lurch, if only for a moment, out of the familiar and taken-for-granted but that new avenues for choosing and for action may open in our experience; we may gain a sudden sense of new beginnings, that is, we may take an initiative in the light of possibility.¹⁰

1. Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Lookingglass* (New York: Gosset and Dunlap, 1974), 239.

2. Evelyn Fox Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1983), 198.

3. Oliver Sacks, "An Anthropologist on Mars," *The New Yorker* 69 (27 December 1993/3 January 1994): 106-25.

4. *Ibid.*, 116, 85.

5. *Ibid.*, 85.

6. Steve Wall and Harvey Arden, eds., *Wisdomkeepers: Meetings with Native American Spiritual Elders* (Hillsboro, Ore: Beyond Words, 1990), 31.

7. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), 53.

8. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 31.

9. John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life* (New York: Irvington, 1960), 144.

10. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 123.