How the case against empathy overreaches

*This is the author's accepted manuscript as of 12/13/2023. The article is published online at *Philosophical Psychology*. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2023.2296600

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How the Case against Empathy Overreaches

Many people think of empathy as a powerful force for good within society and as a crucial component of moral cognition. Recently, prominent theorists in psychology and philosophy have challenged this viewpoint and mounted a case against empathy. The most compelling versions of this case rely heavily on empirical evidence from psychology and neuroscience. They contend that the inherent partiality and parochialism of empathy undermines its potential to serve moral ends. This paper argues that the argument against empathy overreaches; it makes an unwarranted inference from descriptive evidence about our empathic capacities to normative claims about the proper role of empathy in culture, society, and ethics. The paper concludes with suggestions about how to use insights from the empirical literature to build a more nuanced and contextually sensitive account of the role of empathy in our ethical lives.

Keywords: empathy; moral psychology; philosophy of science

1: Introduction

When Joe Biden and Kamala Harris accepted the nomination for president and vice-president of the United States, they walked onstage against a backdrop of massive screens emblazoned with the words: “The people have chosen empathy” (Biden, 2020). They promised to unite the country, to overcome longstanding rifts between the right and the left, to heal social divides, and to foster the growth of a kinder and more egalitarian society. Empathy was, and continues to be, a crucial part of their vision. This view of empathy as a powerful force for good fits with wider cultural assumptions about it. Many people have a rosy picture of empathy.

Against this optimistic view, prominent theorists in philosophy and psychology have mounted a case *against empathy* (Prinz, 2011; Bloom, 2016a). This goes against the grain of

public understanding. Paul Bloom, perhaps the most strident anti-empathy theorist, acknowledges that saying you are against empathy sounds outlandish—"like announcing you hate kittens" (2016a, p. 15). And yet, the case against empathy is "weirdly convincing" (Singal, 2016).[1]

What exactly is the case against empathy? There are two main versions—a weak and a strong one.[2] The weak version, put forward by Jesse Prinz, says that empathy is not necessary for morality. We can engage in moral judgment, development, and conduct without relying on empathy. This argument seeks to sever the ties between empathy and morality; though it does not actively argue against empathy, it adopts a skeptical stance towards its value. The strong version of the argument against empathy, as articulated by Paul Bloom, goes a step further. It holds that empathy is not only unnecessary for morality; it is actively detrimental and subverts moral ends, due to its inherent partiality and parochialism. We should, on Bloom's view, do what we can to temper our empathic tendencies.

Both versions rely heavily on psychological and neuroscientific evidence. As such, we can understand them as making claims about the relationship between descriptive facts about our psychological capacities and the normative demands of our moral theories. The idea is that an empathy-based moral theory would commit us to a naïve and unrealistic view of our psychological capacities. We ought not adopt such a theory. If we want a moral theory that promotes justice, empathy should not be at the center of it; it is simply not up to the job. This argument offers a much-needed corrective against overly sanguine views about the power of

[1] When I teach Bloom's work, my students, too, find his case against empathy compelling.
[2] Other authors take more measured stances on empathy or critique it from within other traditions. I focus here on critiques that hang on empirical findings from psychology and neuroscience.

empathy. We should take concerns about the partiality and parochialism of empathy seriously. But ultimately, as I argue in this paper, the anti-empathy arguments overreach.

I focus in this paper on the strong version of the case against empathy, as outlined by Paul Bloom, since it serves as an important touchstone in the debate over the value of empathy. I outline the central commitments of this case and then outline a conceptual worry that undermines the inference from the descriptive to the normative as it is found within it. I conclude by suggesting ways we might take insights from this thesis—and from the descriptive evidence on which it is based—as we build a better picture of how to act fairly, justly, and yes, empathically.

2: The strong case against empathy

Various authors have raised critiques of empathy. Feminist scholars have long shown that the politics around expectations to empathize are complicated (see e.g., Ahmed, 2014; Boler, 1999; Verducci, 2000). Similarly, philosophers have urged us to question the norms around empathizing (see e.g., Goldie, 2011; Morton, 2011). Within the field of moral psychology, there is a growing body of work that brings empirical findings from psychology and neuroscience to bear on questions about the role of empathy in moral action and decision-making—and in society more generally (see e.g., Oxley, 2011; Maibom, 2014; Batson, 2016; Breithaupt, 2019). I focus on this tradition of empirically-informed moral psychology because it provides an especially rich forum for engaging with issues at the intersection of science and society. More specifically, I focus on the argument against empathy offered by Paul Bloom (2016a).

Paul Bloom's (2016a) book *Against Empathy* offers perhaps the most publicly prominent articulation of the case against empathy. It is a trade book, aimed for a general audience. Its arguments were recapitulated in venues such as *The New Yorker* (Bloom, 2013)*, The Boston*

Review (Bloom, 2014), and *The New York Times* (Bloom, 2016b). It therefore serves as a good exemplar case for studying issues that arise in the public communication of science. Bloom also writes from the vantage point of a social and developmental psychologist at a prestigious university. His argument rests on findings from empirical social psychology and neuroscience. Focusing on this book, written from this vantage point, allows us to consider the role and authority of science in debates about empathy. Bloom furthermore offers a version of the case against empathy that goes beyond the measured stances of some of his contemporaries. I assess the warrant of such strong claims, given the empirical evidence on which they purportedly rest. Along the way, I reflect on why Bloom's argument gained such prominence and attention.

Bloom's central claim is summed up in the following quotation: "[T]he act of feeling what you think others are feeling . . . is different from being compassionate, from being kind, and most of all, from being good. From a moral standpoint, we're better off without it" (2016a, p. 4). Bloom holds that empathy is not just unnecessary for morality but that we should actively resist it, that we should try to dampen or even eliminate empathy from our psychological repertoires. I begin by dissecting this argument.

To understand Bloom's argument, we have to start with his definition of empathy: "putting yourself in other people's shoes, feeling what you think they are feeling" (2017a, p. 24). Bloom offers variations on this theme at other places in his work—for example, empathy is "the act of feeling what you believe other people feel—experiencing what they experience" (2016a, p. 3); empathy is "the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does" (2016a, p. 16). There are many things that are unclear about these definitions of empathy. Does Bloom mean perspective-taking or emotion sharing or a process that involves both? What work is *belief* doing in this conceptualization of empathy? In what sense is empathy an *act*? What

counts as *experiencing* the world as you think someone else does? Must this experience be emotional? For now, we'll leave these questions aside and get a picture of the overall target of Bloom's anti-empathy thesis.

Bloom's central target is emotional empathy—"feeling what others feel" (Jordan, Amir, & Bloom, 2016, p. 1107). Emotional empathy is typically contrasted with "cognitive empathy," or as Bloom puts it, "the act of understanding other people" (2016a, p. 3). Bloom considers cognitive empathy to be morally neutral—a tool that can be used for good or ill. He is not against it, though he does think it is less powerful than many people take it to be. Bloom also acknowledges that many people use the word "empathy" to refer to "our capacity for caring and love and goodness" (2016a, p. 3). He has no problem with caring, love, and goodness. He just does not think that any of those things are empathy. Importantly, Bloom views empathy as distinct from compassion and concern.

When Bloom says that he is against empathy, what he means is that he is against a specific type of empathy: the emotional type. His case against emotional empathy involves three steps: "First, our moral decisions and actions are powerfully shaped by the force of empathy. Second, this often makes the world worse. And third, we have the capacity to do better" (2016a, p. 9). At each of the three steps, he bolsters his claims with empirical evidence from social psychology and neuroscience. Let's take each of these steps in turn.

2.1: Empathy is a powerful force in the moral domain

Bloom's first claim is a descriptive one about how our psychological capacities tend to operate in the moral realm—in contexts or situations that have to do with morality.[3] This descriptive claim is about the way that things *are*, not the way that they *should be*. Clarifying this is important; Bloom clearly does not think that "moral decisions and actions" that are guided by empathy are moral in the normative sense, as he goes on to argue in step two. To establish the descriptive claim, Bloom cites evidence from social psychology and neuroscience that shows a robust connection between empathy and prosocial behavior (especially the work of Daniel Batson; see e.g., Batson, 2011). He also appeals to the intuitive pull of these findings. Charities, for example, often construct ads that are designed to stimulate your empathy by showing you a picture of a cute child whom you personally can help. Empathy motivates us to open our pocketbooks and give to these children.

The first step in Bloom's argument, therefore, is simply to point to the large and longstanding body of work that seems to show that empathy is powerfully implicated in the moral domain.[4]

2.2: Empathy-driven action and decision-making often makes the world worse

The second part of Bloom's argument is that empathy makes the world worse. Bloom again depends on evidence from social psychology and neuroscience to support this claim. He argues that the experiments showing a robust connection between empathy and altruism (e.g., Batson,

[3] Note that the "we" here is localized to people in WEIRD societies (see e.g., Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). The moral domain is also rather circumscribed here; Bloom's is concerned about fairness or justice rather than care and relational ethics.

[4] Bloom's starting point is different from that of other anti-empathy theorists. Jesse Prinz, for instance, begins by undermining the evidence for a robust connection between empathy and morality. Bloom takes it to be a given. I highlight this divergence because it is indicative of the challenges that arise when interpreting the empirical literature; these issues stem in part from the conceptual and methodological issues that I discuss in Sections 3 and 4 of this paper.

2011) are limited because they involve scenarios where helping is unequivocally good and there are no competing demands. In the real world, however, we are often faced with situations that are not so simple, where helping one individual comes at a cost to another. Consider the example of the child who needs an expensive medical intervention. Empathy motivates us to help that individual child at the expense of others who need treatment but are outside the empathic "spotlight." The problem is that empathy is innumerate—it favors the one over the many.[5] It is also biased. We tend to turn the empathic spotlight on those who are familiar to us, close to us, or already within our in-group. This makes the world worse. It leads us to act in ways that "no rational person would endorse" (Bloom, 2016a, p. 87). Another way of putting this is that the effects of empathy stand in conflict with the moral principles of fairness and justice. If we want to act in accordance with those principles, we should avoid empathy.

Evidence for the partiality and parochialism of empathy is worrying. Important questions remain, though, about how we should interpret this evidence: Are the problems that Bloom identifies *inherently* about empathy, as he suggests? Or are they independent of it? Many of the studies Bloom cites are not directly about empathy, taken in the emotional sense that he has in mind. Many are about the effects of minimally identifying individuals by giving them a number. Does such an identification really stimulate emotional empathy? Is the problem about empathy, and if so, empathy in what sense?

Social psychologists are working to address these questions. Recent findings show that empathy effects are independent of intergroup bias effects that lead to partiality and parochialism (Lambert & Jackson, 2021; see also Weisz & Cikara, 2021; Zaki & Cikara, 2015). How we read these findings depends on how we conceptualize and measure empathy. They nonetheless

[5] This is a well-recognized phenomenon, known as the "identifiable victim effect" (Jenni & Loewenstein,1997; Small & Loewenstein, 2003). It is debatable whether the effect is primarily due to empathy.

suggest plausible alternative explanations—for example, that contextual factors lead to failures of empathy. Empathy is not itself responsible for those failures.

2.3: Reasoning enables us to do better

Bloom concludes his argument with a suggestion about how to overcome the vagaries of empathy. He contends that we should tamp down our empathic capacities as much as we can (despite the unfortunate impossibility of excising it from our brains) and rely instead on reason. Bloom thinks reason is not susceptible to bias because it "relies on observation and on principles of logic" (2016a, p. 51). One can reason badly. But bad reasoning stems from extrinsic errors, not from the process of reasoning itself (Bloom, 2016a).

It is outside the scope of this paper to provide a full discussion of this point but I am skeptical that reasoning is as immune from bias as Bloom suggests. The principles of logic, like mathematical proofs, may indeed be free from bias. But we still must decide when and how to apply them. Observation, too, may seem objective and free from bias; we go out and see for ourselves what the world is like. But, as a long tradition of work in both philosophy and psychology shows, our background assumptions shape what we see and how we see it.[6] Given that the aim is to create a moral system that humans can adhere to, we should give reason at least as much scrutiny as empathy.

2.4: Summary

[6] Bloom responds to some of the classic attacks on reason from psychology and neuroscience in Chapter 6 of *Against Empathy.* I have in mind a different tradition of work—perspectival and feminist philosophy of science (e.g., Longino, 1990; Daston & Galison, 2007; see Anderson, 2000 for a review). As Kukar (2018) notes, Bloom neglects many of the existing debates about empathy, reason, and emotion.

The strong version of the anti-empathy argument targets a particular form of empathy, "emotional empathy" or the capacity to feel what others feel. It contends that this capacity operates too powerfully in moral contexts, leading us away from the truly moral course. In the next section, I ask how we should understand and evaluate this argument.

3: Empathy concepts and measures

Bloom's case against empathy uses descriptive evidence from psychology and neuroscience to make a normative claim about the role empathy *should* occupy in society. The claim can be stated as follows: Empathy is *inherently* susceptible to various unsavory psychological biases. Therefore, we should not rely on it for moral judgment, development, or conduct. In this section, I raise a conceptual issue that undermines this inference from the descriptive to the normative. The concept of empathy that Bloom adopts is apt for some projects in social psychology and neuroscience; it is not, however, apt for ethical or practical projects. This is not to say that the scientific and ethical concepts, as I will refer to them here, should be divorced from one another. But bridging the two is not as straightforward as it might seem.

3.1: What is empathy? The debate over concepts

There is a longstanding and widely recognized dispute over what empathy is. A recent review counted 43 different definitions of empathy (Cuff at al., 2016). The authors of the review propose a new, unified definition, thereby making the tally 44. The social neuroscientists Frederique de Vignemont and Tania Singer lament that there are "probably nearly as many definitions of empathy as people working on the topic" (2006, p. 35).

Although many scholars suggest that the conceptual dispute poses problems for research and practice, the overwhelming attitude towards it is one of exasperation. It is tempting to dismiss the dispute as merely terminological, as Bloom does: "I *hate* terminological arguments—nothing important rests on the specific words we use so long as we understand one another" (2016a, p. 40). There is a sense in which this statement is trivially true, as anyone who speaks more than one language recognizes. It does not matter whether I use the word "*fork"* or "*Gabel*" to refer to the pointy pronged thing one eats with, so long as I am in the right context with fellow language users (the USA or Germany, respectively). But as experts in translation know, things are rarely so simple. Words often express subtly different concepts with different meanings. Issues of understanding arise even when we are speaking the same language but reside in different cultural contexts. Consider expressions of praise and respect in the US versus the UK. British people take the phrase, "with the greatest respect," to be usually derogatory, meaning "I think you are an idiot." Americans interpret this same phrase positively, to mean "I am listening to you" (Cheung, 2019). Context matters. Misunderstandings arise even when we are using the same words.

I suggest that the concept of empathy raises issues like those at the intersection between British and American English. The issue is not merely terminological but rather, conceptual. When talking about empathy, we find ourselves at a junction where different traditions of language use collide. The work on empathy that I discuss here stands at the confluence of three conceptual rivers: (1) the scientific; (2) the ethical; and (3) the everyday. To understand how scientific work bears upon ethical and the everyday projects, we must bridge these conceptual rivers. My aim here is to identify specific problems with existing attempts to navigate these waters—especially Bloom's—and to propose a better way forward.

3.2: Scientific projects, scientific concepts

Recall that the concept of empathy at work in Bloom's argument is "emotional empathy": "feeling what others feel" (Jordan, Amir, and Bloom, 2016, p. 1107). This concept is rooted in a specific tradition of work in social psychology and neuroscience. It is supposed to track a particular psychological capacity, identifiable within the brain and distinguishable from other capacities such as cognitive empathy, concern, and compassion. Emotional empathy, as I argue in this section, is a predominately scientific concept, meaning that it is shaped by the demands of research projects in social psychology and neuroscience.[7] It emerged to fit the needs of scientists investigating empathy—and especially the demands of measurement. Although it is apt for such projects, challenges arise when we try to put it to other uses.

Measurement is an integral part of scientific practice. As Cartwright and Runhardt write, "Properly defined and properly executed scientific measurements provide us with a precise picture of the things we study and give us the kind of information from which we can build scientific laws, models, and principles" (2014, p. 265). This quotation points to two central aims of measurement: (1) to obtain reliable and generalizable knowledge about a process; and (2) to intervene. The science of empathy deploys measurement to fulfill both aims. We see this in both historical and contemporary work on empathy.

Historically, scientific investigations of empathy emerged in two interlocking fields: psychotherapy and social psychology. In psychotherapy, Carl Rogers and Rosalind Dymond developed early measures of empathy because they hypothesized that it served as a necessary component of effective interpersonal interaction in the clinical encounter and the social domain

[7] My claim here is not a historical one; "empathy" did not start out as a scientific construct (see Lanzoni, 2018).

more broadly (see Cottrell & Dymond, 1949; Dymond, 1949; Rogers, 1957). More relevant to the concerns of this paper, though, are measures developed for research on the situational and motivational determinants of helping behavior. The aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust drove this research. So too did events occurring on a more local level—for example, the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese, which was witnessed by 38 people. The central questions motivating this research were: How could people be so cruel to each other? When and why do they step in to help? How can we motivate them to help more readily? Empathy seemed like a prime candidate for research in this area, the idea being that it might guard against cruelty or move one to help even in costly situations.

These same central considerations motivate much contemporary work on empathy. The question is, as Batson puts it: How can we "facilitate the development of more caring individuals and a more compassionate, humane society" (1991, p. 4)? Is empathy the key ingredient? Measures of empathy are crucial for this project because they tell us about the systems we are intervening on. How, then, do we develop measures of empathy? Although there are several measures of empathy on offer, I focus on questionnaire measures developed and deployed in social psychology. These measures are the dominant ones in use today.[8]

Measurement in psychology typically begins with a process of operationalization. Operationalization involves specifying how theoretical entities can be detected in experimental settings.[9] The canonical account of how to operationalize in psychology comes from Cronbach and Meehl's (1955) work on construct validation. The process of construct validation is

[8] The tools of social and cognitive neuroscience are growing in importance within this field. These tools are often used in tandem with questionnaire measures, suggesting that the two forms of measurement are not independent from one another. Delving into these neuroscientific measures and how they interact with questionnaires is unfortunately outside the scope of this paper.

[9] The account of operationalization that I provide here is informed by the work of philosophers of science, especially Alexandrova (2012, 2017, 2018); Alexandrova & Haybron (2016); Vessonen (2017, 2019, 2020, 2021), and Tal (2013).

supposed to convey the degree to which the operational construct—the construct that the measure targets—tracks the theoretical construct of interest.

Let's say that we are interested in hunger (one of Cronbach and Meehl's classic examples). To measure hunger, we might choose to operationalize it as "elapsed time since feeding." This means that within the context of the experimental setting, hunger just *is* elapsed time since feeing. However, as Cronbach and Meehl write:

> "A theorist trying to relate behavior to 'hunger' almost certainly invests the term with meanings other than the operation 'elapsed-time-since-feeding.' If he is concerned with hunger as a tissue need, he will not accept time lapse as *equivalent* to his construct because it fails to consider, among other things, energy expenditure of the animal" (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955, p. 284).

This quote shows that how we operationalize constructs depends on the question we want to ask. For some research questions, "elapsed time since feeding" is perfectly adequate; for others, such as the investigation of hunger as a tissue need, it is not. Of course, there are many other meanings imbued in "hunger" that "elapsed time since feeding" does not capture, such as the feeling of being hungry even when one has just eaten. The point is that that the operational concepts, even when important for scientific projects, do not capture everything there is to say about the theoretical concept of interest. By design, they isolate a small sliver of the theoretical concept of interest.

The same process of operationalization applies to the measurement of empathy. To gain traction on the theoretical concept of interest, which is broad and rich, we must operationalize it.[10] Operational concepts of empathy must, as a matter of procedure, be more narrowly defined

[10] I go on to discuss the everyday concept in Section 4.3.

and tightly specified than the theoretical concept of interest. If we look at commonly used empathy scales, we can see this process of operationalization in play. Mark Davis' Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) is one of the most widely used measures of empathy (Davis, 1980; 1983). The IRI is a self-report questionnaire that measures dispositional empathy using a series of items rated on a Likert scale and coded either positively or negatively. It is a multidimensional scale, meaning that it is supposed to capture multiple components of empathy, including (1) perspective taking, (2) fantasy, (3) empathic concern, and (4) personal distress. Scholars working within the field are often interested in how responses differ between the sub-scales—for instance, in questions about whether empathic concern *or* personal distress differentially predict helping behaviors. Using various statistical methods, authors can pull apart the different dimensions of "empathy" to obtain a picture of how individual components relate to particular behaviors. The items that the sub-scales capture reflect operationalizations of "empathy" in the sense that each one isolates a small component of the theoretical construct of interest. The scale as a whole is supposed to capture the theoretical construct more holistically, though it is also interesting to consider what this scale includes and what it leaves out; the choice of sub-scales and items within them reflect theorists' assumptions about what constitutes empathy, and what does not, as I will discuss in more detail in Section 4.

Where do we find "emotional empathy" then? Emotional empathy has been operationalized in various ways, largely because researchers are interested in various emotions. Research on empathy in moral psychology tends to focus on negative emotions such as pain and distress (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987; Singer et al., 2004). This choice is understandable: authors are typically interested how people respond to individuals in pain. It remains an open question whether empathy for positive emotions tracks the same construct or is distinct (Morelli,

Lieberman, & Zaki, 2015). Construals of "emotional empathy" furthermore include different ideas about underlying processes (e.g., contagion, imagination).

The IRI, as Jordan, Amir, and Bloom (2016) point out, does not isolate emotional empathy—at least not in the sense that they have in mind. Emotional responses are mixed into many of the scales through references to "feeling." The fantasy scale includes the item: "I really get involved with the feelings of the character in a novel." The perspective taking scale, which one might think is more cognitively-oriented, includes the item: "Before criticizing someone, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place." These items are infused with emotion but also with other elements of the broader theoretical construct of empathy. To try to get a purer read on the influence of emotional empathy, taken in their sense of "sharing the inferred feelings of a target," Jordan, Amir, and Bloom (2016) construct two new sub-scales to be administered alongside the traditional IRI: the empathy sub-scale and the behavioral contagion sub-scale. The empathy subscale reflects the operational definition of "empathy" of interest to Bloom and colleagues: emotional empathy. It enables them to engage with questions such as: What other processes does emotional empathy tend to cluster with? What types of behavior does it predict?

We now have some idea of how operationalization proceeds in the case of empathy. There are multiple operationalizations on offer, which reflect different ideas about what empathy is. Some authors view empathy as a multidimensional construct. We can count Davis in this camp. Other authors, even those using this same scale, view some components but not others as reflecting the true empathy. Many authors take the "empathic concern" sub-scale to capture empathy proper.[11] Others consider the empathic concern sub-scale to be a measure of concern absent empathy (Jordan, Amir, & Bloom, 2016), or to be a flawed measure because it fails to

[11] Batson (1991; 2011), for example, takes "empathy" to be equivalent to empathic concern.

isolate empathy from concern (Prinz, 2011). They consider the (emotional) empathy sub-scale to be reflective of empathy proper (Jordan, Amir, and Bloom, 2016). It's important to note that within each of these projects, what counts as "empathy" *simpliciter* is determined by a particular operationalization of it. Empathy, for the purposes of Jordan, Amir, and Bloom's study just *is* "the tendency to feel what those around them are feeling" (2016, p. 1108). It just *is* whatever the scale captures. For others, empathy just *is* empathic concern. We must be aware of this when reading the literature; although authors refer to "empathy" in the titles of their papers, they are not all talking about the same thing.

I want to underscore that narrowing concepts in the process of operationalization is not a problem; it's an important part of engaging in scientific investigation, especially *at particular stages*. But the concept of empathy that is apt for these scientific projects corresponds only partially with the theoretical construct of interest, which may be rich, complex, and multiply determined. "Emotional empathy" as it is used within Bloom's version of the anti-empathy argument, reflects an operational concept. Recognizing this helps us to understand the challenges that arise when making inferences from the descriptive evidence to the normative claims. Before I turn to this point, however, there is another sense in which "emotional empathy" is a scientific concept. It's worth saying a few words about this before moving on to the next section.

Empathy researchers often defend the distinctions they make between "emotional empathy" and other capacities as "empirically-based" (see e.g., Bloom, 2017b). When they say that these capacities are "empirically-based," they tend to mean that they are informed by the results of experimental projects using precisely the kinds of methodologies that I've described.[12]

[12] The claim that the distinctions are "empirically-based" also sometimes carries with it an implication that the processes tracked by the distinctions are really *real*—that they reflect real divisions in nature. Interrogating this assumption is outside the scope of this paper.

Empirical findings play a role in shaping the conceptual landscape. This suggests that there is a complex process of iteration between scientific concepts and the findings of studies conducted using those concepts, of the sort described by Chang (2004). Investigating this iterative process is the subject for another paper.

4: From the Science to the Ethics of Empathy

A crucial step in Bloom's anti-empathy arguments is to equate "empathy" with "emotional empathy."[13] As I noted in Section 2, the argument begins with a conceptual move—stating that "empathy" refers only to the emotional type and distinguishing it from "cognitive empathy," "compassion," and "concern." Bloom (2017b) also states that these distinctions are "empirically-based," meaning that they are shaped by empirical results. He views empathy (emotional type) as a discrete psychological capacity (Jordan, Amir, & Bloom, 2016; Bloom, 2016; Bloom, 2017a). It is this capacity that he is against.

As I noted in Section 3, it is reasonable to equate "empathy" with "emotional empathy" when we are engaged in a scientific project that untangles the processes involved in a theoretical target of interest. Such a project involves narrowing the theoretical target of interest down so that we may engage in measurement. The question at hand now is: Is it reasonable to equate empathy with its operational construct, emotional empathy, when we are engaged in other kinds of projects—namely, projects that integrate scientific findings into a coherent whole or apply them to ethical and practical problems? I now outline three interconnected challenges that arise when moving from the science to the ethics of empathy: (1) Theory-avoidance and the application of

[13] This is also a crucial step in the weak version of the anti-empathy argument as put forward by Prinz.

research; (2) Integrating findings into a coherent whole; and (3) Public understanding and communication of science.

4.1: Theory-avoidance and the application of research

The first challenge arises because once operationalized, it is tempting to view constructs as objective, value-free, and perhaps more *real* than the alternatives. The risk here is that we forget about the theoretical input at the outset of the research.

Let's return to the procedure of construct validation that we discussed in Section 3. The first step is to define the construct to be measured. At this stage, researchers engage in conceptual work, "invoking anything from philosophical theories to untutored dictionary definitions" (Alexandrova & Haybron, 2016, p. 1100). This conceptual work allows researchers to define the terrain and map out the scope of their investigation. The second step involves selecting a measure—choosing what type of procedure is most apt (e.g., questionnaire, task, test), the scoring method, and how to represent the construct in question (Alexandrova & Haybron, 2016; see also Cartwright & Runhardt, 2014). The third step is construct validation, the process that Cronbach and Meehl (1955) describe, where scientists check whether the results of the test—the behaviors that people exhibit, their answers to the questionnaire—accord with other things known about the object in question. The result is a "coherentist" picture of measurement, where the concept in question and the procedures for detecting it are settled iteratively (Alexandrova & Haybron, 2016).

As Alexandrova and Haybron (2016) argue, this is a reasonable way of developing measures in the psychological and social sciences. But difficulties arise when we forget about the theoretical work that goes in at the outset. The statistical and correlational work that occurs at the

later stages of the process of construct validation overshadows the theoretical and normative decisions that scientists make. This can make measures look objective and value-free when they are actually tailored to the specific demands of relevant practical or ethical projects. Alexandrova (2012, 2017, 2018) demonstrates how this happens in the case of well-being. Some operationalizations and measures of well-being are value-apt for projects assessing childhood well-being; others are value-apt for national well-being; and still others are apt for assessing well-being among individuals facing chronic illness (see also Alexandrova, 2017). Crucially, this does not mean that the operationalizations and measures that are value-apt for one project are appropriate for the others.

Similar problems arise in the case of empathy, where the overall logic of empirical studies also follows the procedure of construct validation. Researchers go into the process with different ideas about what empathy *is*, what it relates to, and how to measure it. These different ideas become codified in measures themselves and it becomes all too easy to forget about the theoretical frameworks that initially structured them. Empathy research, like well-being research, is value-laden—it is infused with social, political, and moral values and aspirations. The statistical and methodological operations in play, however, can make it appear value-free and objective. This creates difficulties when we attempt to apply the research sensitively to real world problems. For example, some measures and operationalizations are apt for projects that assess empathy in medical practitioners. Others are apt for research projects on the connection between empathy and prosocial behavior. When measures and operationalizations are tailored for domains that are far apart—for example, medicine and moral psychology—it is relatively easy to keep track of considerations about value-aptness (although there have been lapses, see Pedersen, 2009). When measures and operationalizations are supposed to be appropriate for the same

domain but embody subtle differences in theoretical commitments and value aptness, keeping track becomes more challenging.

4.2: Integrating findings

The second challenge is about integrating the literature on empathy into a coherent whole. As I noted in Section 3, empathy researchers in psychology and neuroscience work with a multiplicity of operationalizations and measures. Some of these operationalizations and measures may be tracking the same target; others may not.[14]

The multiplicity of operationalizations poses challenges in and of itself. Namely, it makes it difficult for researchers working within the field to read the literature and communicate with one another. Keeping track of operationalizations and their targets is hard. This problem of keeping track of operationalizations arises in other areas with contested concepts and categories (examples include "species," "gene," and "emotion"). In this regard, the challenges that empathy researchers face are not unique. Insofar as empathy poses any special challenges on this front, it is because the term carries immediate political, social, and ethical weight. The weightiness and relevance of "empathy" contributes to the problem by making arguments over the concept—and yes, the term—especially fierce. Everyone wants to claim that their "empathy" is the right empathy (Coplan, 2011).[15]

Still, this challenge is surmountable, at least for those working within the discipline. Overcoming this challenge requires humility about one's own approach. Researchers must acknowledge that others are working within conceptual and theoretical landscapes different from

[14] Issues of integration akin to the ones I raise here have been addressed extensively by philosophers of science (see especially Sullivan, 2009; 2010; 2017).
[15] There may be important sociological factors driving this trend as well. Projects that have "empathy" in the title may be perceived as sexier than projects that do not.

theirs in ways both subtle and profound. Overcoming the challenges of integration also requires attention to detail. Researchers must look closely not only at stated definitions but also at the specific methods in use when research studies claim to be about "empathy." They must be sensitive to points of correspondence as well as even small lapses in correspondence. The field of empathy research is becoming increasingly aware of this need for humility and attention to detail; I would urge continued focus on these virtues.

There may be other aims that cannot be as easily achieved simply by keeping track of operationalizations. In Section 3, I described operationalization as an important part of scientific research, *at particular stages*. We begin with a theoretical construct of interest and then break it down into parts. We do this because our aim is to understand which features predict which behaviors. But there are other stages of scientific research that have different demands. Researchers also want to integrate findings into a coherent whole, to construct a picture of how narrow capacities and processes work together. A further aim is to relate this picture back to the theoretical construct of interest. We additionally want to understand how findings obtained in the lab relate to the operation of processes of interest out in the wild.[16]

Equating the operational construct, "emotional empathy," with "empathy" poses more significant challenges here. At this stage of research, we need concepts of different scope. We need both operational constructs and broader theoretical constructs that help us to bring findings obtained using the operational constructs together (for related concerns see Betzler, in press). Equating the operational terms with the overarching theoretical terms confuses this project. Projects that take empathy as a broader "umbrella" term or a multidimensional construct serve this aim more effectively (e.g., Zaki, 2014, 2017).

[16] This raises issues of external and ecological validity, which I leave aside here.

4.3: Public understanding and communication of science

The third challenge is about science communication—about conveying the results of scientific investigations to the wider public. Related to this challenge are issues about applying scientific findings to social and political problems. Questions that arise here include: What is the scope of the case against empathy? How should the cases against empathy factor into public policy and ethical debates?

Anti-empathy theorists clearly want to reach audiences outside of psychology. As I noted earlier, many of Bloom's clearest articulations of his case against empathy are published in popular outlets. In these works, Bloom states that he is specifically against the narrow sense of empathy—"emotional empathy"—but he frequently draws upon examples from everyday life to illustrate his points. This suggests that the problems with empathy are pervasive. It also suggests that these problems are specifically due to the impact of emotional empathy, narrowly construed.

The problem is: The empirical data are not sufficiently strong to support this claim. It's not clear that the problems in everyday cases are due to the operation specifically of emotion-sharing, or that people are even emotion-sharing in the first place. Consider one of Bloom's favored examples: The baby in the well. In 1987, Jessica McClure, known as "Baby Jessica" fell into a well in Texas. People gave prodigiously to a single individual within a single community. Bloom (2013) argues that this case illustrates the problems with empathy: empathy motivates people to give disproportionate help to identifiable individuals. It may be the case that Bloom is right and that emotional empathy is the main driver of helping here. But it's also possible that helping is motivated by attention, salience, proximity or any number of other factors. Helping may even be driven by a kind of rule: an injunction to help when you can. In real-world cases,

it's likely that multiple factors—emotional and cognitive—drive helping.[17] In short, it is difficult to see how exactly the empirical literature, which isolates individual components using clever but contrived measures, bears on such a case. We need to be more modest about how the problems with empathy as a capacity apply outside the context of the laboratory. Furthermore, interpretations of the empathy literature vary widely—another reason for modesty.

A final issue is about the extent to which the concept of empathy employed by the anti-empathy theorists—emotional empathy—matches up with the one that has cultural currency in the world today. Bloom claims that his definition of empathy is the most "typical" way of understanding it (2016a; Prinz 2011, who uses a similar construct, also claims typicality). He suggests that this is the way most philosophers, psychologists, and even laypeople understand empathy. I am skeptical that this is the case. First, the high level of conceptual diversity within the psychological and philosophical literatures undermines claims to typicality there. Second, it is difficult to establish that there even *is* an everyday definition of empathy. Dictionary definitions capture the richness and breadth of the everyday concept nicely. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines empathy as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner; also: the capacity for this." Recent survey work shows that laypeople's definitions of empathy are multifactorial (Hall, Schwartz, & Duong, 2021).[18]

What, then, are the typicality claims doing? One function is to enhance the sense that arguments against empathy are plausible and socially relevant. Typicality claims signal that the

[17] Lori Gruen (2014) makes a similar point in her analysis of the empirical literature.
[18] Interestingly, lay definitions rarely track with personal distress, which is one of the main constructs of interest in the moral psychology literature.

anti-empathy arguments are about the version of empathy that many (or most) people have in mind. But this is not the case. Bloom (and others) explicitly state that their target is a narrow one: emotional empathy, understood as a capacity. Furthermore, the most compelling parts of the anti-empathy arguments are those where their authors are careful about the narrowness of their target—when they outline the specific failings of emotional empathy as a capacity. We should take these findings seriously as we build them into our understanding of ethics of empathy. But we must be careful not to elide the distinction between narrow projects, with narrow applications, and an overarching project against empathy as a cultural value.

5: Conclusion: Building a Better Bridge

Let's return to the image that we started out with: Joe Biden and Kamala Harris standing onstage against a backdrop of screens that read, "The people have chosen empathy." What does it mean to say that the people have chosen empathy? What are Biden and Harris invoking when they call on empathy? It is pretty clear that what they have in mind does not correspond with Bloom's emotional empathy. They may be equating empathy with love or kindness or decency. Or they may mean something closer to what psychologists call "cognitive empathy"—the ability to understand other people's thoughts and perspectives. My hunch is that their use of empathy mixes together many of these things just as the dictionary definition does.

I started out with this image because it showcases the view that empathy is a force for good and a guiding value within our society. Some theorists even speak of "empathic policy." The arguments against empathy, as levelled by Paul Bloom and others, seem to undermine the project of developing empathic policy. At very least, they suggest that we should pause before prioritizing empathy.

In this paper, I have demonstrated that the scope of the argument against empathy is narrower than it might appear at first glance. It is about empathy taken as a specific cognitive capacity. The empirical literature showing the limitations of this capacity is important and ought to be taken seriously. But there remain open questions about how this cognitive capacity operates in tandem with other social and cognitive capacities both inside and outside the laboratory. The empirical literature showing the limits of the narrow capacity sense of empathy does not undermine the value of empathy as a multifaceted cultural value. Simply being *against empathy* does not follow.

The question is, how should we fit the worrying findings about the limits of empathy in the capacity sense into our wider cultural and ethical theories of empathy? How can we bridge conceptual differences both within and beyond the empathy literature? As is the case across many interdisciplinary pursuits, we must cultivate an attitude of humility and the ability to 'live in one another's world'—an ability that some theorists might be inclined to call "empathy" (Efstathiou & Mirmalek, 2014, p. 243-44; Efstathiou, 2016). Cultivating these attitudes enables us to recognize the scope of our own findings and how they relate to other perspectives. Beyond this, we must keep the aims of our particular projects, and theoretical backdrops within which they are situated, at the forefront of our minds. Rather than asking, "What is empathy?" we ought to ask, "What is the *right* concept of empathy for our purposes and how does it serve them?"

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9022 words