Emotional Caring and Moral Apprehension

A basic (and neglected) aspect of moral perception is the ability to see people as mattering. Not just to detect their interests, or to apprehend (“see”) their interests as interests, but to apprehend the significance of their interests, i.e., the constituents of their well-being, and of whether their interests are set back or enhanced.¹ I’ll refer to this phenomenon as ‘moral apprehension’. Psychopaths, according to recent lore,² are impaired in this capacity. What explains people’s ability (and psychopaths’ impairment) in moral apprehension?

I’ll argue that emotional caring, in the sense I will detail, is a plausible candidate. Moral apprehension has features that emotional caring is uniquely able to explain—in contrast (e.g.) to empathy, and to certain ratiocinative processes.

My main task is to articulate and provisionally defend the hypothesis that caring enables and mediates moral apprehension (the caring-apprehension hypothesis). More precisely:

The capacity to care emotionally about other creatures with interests, especially about other human persons, enables and mediates neurotypical human persons’ ability to apprehend the moral significance of such creatures’ well-being.

To defend this, I will first provide accounts of moral apprehension (§1) and of emotional caring (§2). I will then provide a provisional defense of the caring-apprehension hypothesis by appealing to a perceptual theory of emotion, along with evidence from research on psychopaths (§3). Finally (§4), I will explain why my caring-apprehension hypothesis is more plausible than the view that moral apprehension is enabled by empathy.

1 Value-apprehensional experiences

Let us label as value-apprehensional (v-a) those experiences which present others to us as valuable. Consider first their phenomenology. They occur not only with familiar people but with strangers. Sometimes they are responses to changes in the other’s fortune (as when a fellow airline passenger—or stray dog—is in pain). Other times we see others as mattering simply by being present with them—as when, some time into a sustained conversation with a fellow airline passenger, I learn a bit of his story and start to see him as someone whose interests matter. Occasionally this only occurs after I have departed his company for good, and a memory of our contact surfaces. V-a experiences can sometimes occur without much emotional feeling, such as when I hear briefly in the news that someone was murdered. Especially if I’m busy or distracted, I recognize a setback to the welfare of someone who matters, though it leaves my viscera untingled.

¹ This is analogous to the ability not merely to detect faces, or to apprehend them as faces, but to apprehend a faces as handsome (or as smiling, or as a stereotypically female face).

This kind of quasi-perceptual experience has been little studied empirically. However, one young research tradition explores “dehumanization”, the denial of full “humanness” to others. On the leading theory, that of Nick Haslam (2006), there are two folk concepts of humanness: “human nature” (HN), a concept of vitality which distinguishes humans from machines, and the “uniquely human” (UH), a concept of culturedness which distinguishes humans from (nonhuman) animals. The HN concept is the more important for our purposes. HN characteristics involve “cognitive flexibility, emotionality, vital agency, and warmth” (ibid., p. 257). HN (for which a better term might be ‘human animal nature’) could perhaps be coherently precisified as some (disjunctive and/or conjunctive) combination of such notions as animateness, vitality, agency, sentience, etc. Along with HN-attribution, we can expect attribution of basic interests common to all animals, such as bodily integrity, nourishment, absence of pain and malady, and prolonged life. (Feinberg (1984) labels these welfare interests.)

But interest-attribution seems merely a prerequisite to v-a experiences, or at least an aspect of them which is logically prior to other aspects of them. Consider that v-a experiences are welfare-highlighting, welfare-congruent, and intrinsic-value-attributing. At least stereotypically, they highlight the welfare of the other in a favorable way, as intrinsically significant. They highlight the welfare of the other in that they draw the perceiver’s attention to how the other is faring or might fare. They are at least typically welfare-congruent in that they are construals of (prospective) benefits to the other as good, and of (prospective) harms to the other as bad. And these values are usually attributed as intrinsic to the other, possessed in virtue of being a thing with interests (rather than, say, as a thing which matters to someone).

2 Emotional Caring

Emotional caring is understood in what follows as the disposition to undergo emotions which are congruent with the well-being of another, the one cared-for, where these emotions are directed at the cared-for, and/or at potential threats or aids to the cared-for’s well-being, for the cared-for’s sake. (Hereafter I’ll call this ‘caring’ for short, and the emotions in which the disposition manifests, ‘caring emotions’.) Let us consider in turn how caring emotions are, like all emotions, [i] welfare-congruent and [ii] welfare-highlighting, but are a special class of emotions in being [iii] other-focused and [iv] in being non-instrumentally welfare-congruent.

The intentionality of emotion. Numerous competing theories of emotion tend to agree that emotions are about things. They are intentional. Canonical examples of emotions—joy, sadness, regret, and so on—at least typically take an object. Various emotions have objects in various senses (de Sousa 2010, §3). Often emotions target an actual particular object in the

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3 There is, of course, another class of more uniquely human (UH) needs or interests in social intercourse and in the satisfaction of person-relative, desire-based interests, including goals and desires for oneself. (Feinberg (1984) labels these ulterior interests.) ‘Emotional caring’ might aptly name the affective disposition typically attendant to both sorts of attribution, although HN-attributions seem necessarily less of a matter of respecting people as (e.g.) rational or planning agents, and leaving a greater portion of the experience for a ‘heartwarmed’ feeling.

4 On some views of emotion, intentionality is essential to emotions (e.g., Prinz 2004). On such a view, non-intentional affective states always count as some other sort of passion such as a mood or a felt bodily state (such as felt warmth, tenseness, or fatigue.
organism’s environment (e.g., ‘fear of the bear’, ‘disgust at Tommy’s drool’, etc.). And seemingly all emotions have a *formal object*—a property implicitly ascribed to the emotion to its particular object, in virtue of which the emotion is (or isn’t) intelligible (ibid. §4). For example, fear seems to ascribe danger; disgust, contamination; sadness, loss.

More generally, the following conjecture seems plausible, at least about more primitive emotions:

**Interest-Detection Conjecture (IDC):** A large plurality of the emotions humans and animals feel—and an even larger plurality of their more intense emotions—are appraisals or construals of organism-environment relations, having environmental changes relevant to the interests of the organism (especially her more basic interests) as their formal objects.⁵

**Other-focus.** Typically emotions deploy toward their objects on behalf of the organism experiencing the emotion. That is, they are *focused* on the self in that particular objects are being construed as fearsome/dangerous, disgusting/contaminated, etc. *to* or *vis-à-vis* the self, i.e., relative to the interests of the emoting organism. But emotions can sometimes be focused on the interests of other organisms (*other-focused*).⁶ Sometimes this is the result of “empathic” processes, such as the automatic mechanisms of motor mimicry or emotional contagion or the more deliberate processes of imagining the other’s perspective. But it also seems possible to undergo an other-focused emotion non-empathically, e.g., being sad for someone in a harmed state despite being unable to imagine her experiences very vividly or mimic her in any way (say, upon hearing that your friend of a different gender has serious medical problems with a gender-specific body part).

**Welfare-congruence.** An emotion is congruent with someone’s welfare to the extent that the formal object of the emotion felt matches or corresponds to the overall condition of the cared-for (‘s welfare). For example, if fear’s formal object is danger, and Harriet is in danger, then someone feeling a welfare-congruent emotion for Harriet would feel fear.⁷ Plausibly, caring emotions are those which are congruent with what one perceives as the other’s welfare condition; but I will suppress this detail for simplicity in the rest of this discussion.

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⁵ So much is true of what Prinz (2004) labels ‘state emotions’. Less importantly for our purposes, another class of emotions, which he labels ‘attitudinal emotions’, are dispositions to experience emotion states toward some cognitively stored type of representation. E.g., ‘Jamir has a (disposition to) fear of spiders. It is this type of emotion which can sometimes take as objects not concrete particular entities, but, for example, propositions (e.g., ‘Jamir is angry that Obama was reelected’).

⁶ This heavily depends on Prinz (2004, Chs. 1, 3). But it is also strikingly compatible with opposed, much more cognitivist accounts emotion, e.g., Roberts (2003) and even Nussbaum (2001), among others.

⁷ An interesting distinction, relatively unimportant here, is between other-focused emotions [i] whose particular object is a feature of the other’s environment, and those [ii] whose particular object is the other herself (perhaps in conjunction with features of her environment).

⁸ Interesting questions I cannot address here pertain to whether a given emotional reaction to someone’s welfare condition counts as congruent if it matches only some aspects of the welfare condition, or is only partially accurate or precise, or is mixed with some emotions which are non-congruent or incongruent with the person’s welfare.
Emotional caring seems to manifest in emotions on at least four dimensions. Suppose that Sam cares emotionally for Harriet. If this emotional caring disposition is as full-fledged as is common, it will involve emotions along at least four dimensions—the first two involving positive emotional valence, the latter two, negative.

The following table provides some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>c</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>positive emotions toward positive situations</td>
<td>presence-emotions</td>
<td>negative emotions toward negative situations</td>
<td>absence-emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joy and satisfaction when H is flourishing</td>
<td>delight at being presented with H or at being in H’s presence</td>
<td>frustration over H’s misfortunes</td>
<td>grief at the loss of H subsequent nostalgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pride in H’s successes</td>
<td></td>
<td>disappointment over H’s failures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relief when H escapes danger unharmed</td>
<td></td>
<td>anger at agents who heedlessly bring H misfortune</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fear when the H is in danger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>concern when H is endangered or suffering</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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It is up for debate whether all four dimensions are essential to emotional caring. If S only experiences positive emotions toward H’s successes ((a)), but doesn’t sympathize when H is under duress ((c)), S at least cares about H much less than the case where she is disposed to each of (a)-(d). I provisionally suggest that (a) and (c) be assumed necessary for emotional caring, and that we leave the open whether (b) or (d) are also are essential to emotional caring. But (a)-(d) seem to characterize the most thorough cares and also in a sense the most consistent cares.

**Non-instrumentality & pseudo-caring.** Even a robustly welfare-congruent emotional disposition (meeting conditions (a)-(d)) might not be a genuine care if the emotions are not regularly felt *for the other’s sake*. To see this, consider a Pompous Golfer who is disposed to feel emotions congruent with his caddy’s well-being: joy for his caddy when the latter is feeling well-rested, disappointment for his caddy when the latter’s knee is injured, and so on. But, suppose, these emotions are only instrumentally directed at the caddy’s well-being, so directed only insofar as these are themselves potential threats or aids to the golfer’s own well-being (specifically, to his success on the green). This does not seem enough to qualify the disposition

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9 This list borrows many of its items from Jaworska (2007), p. 560.

10 We might use the term ‘partial care’ for dispositions where only (a) or (c), but not both, are met, implying, plausibly, that at least the conjunction of (a) and (c) are necessary for full emotional caring about a thing.

11 Others who make this point include Darwall (1998) and Helm (2010).
as a genuine care. The interest of the other, or a setback or advancement of it, must be felt as truly significant.\(^\text{12}\)

### 3 How caring might enable moral apprehension

By now we have observed that both v-a experiences and caring emotions straightforwardly share the property of congruence with the welfare of others. We haven’t yet explained v-a experiences’ properties of being welfare-highlighting and being intrinsic-value-attributing. Also, we need to explore the relationship between caring and moral apprehension: is the relationship causal and/or constitutive? Which is dependent on which?

**Welfare-highlighting.** Two features of the construing aspects of emotions are relevant to highlighting welfare-relevant features of objects.\(^\text{13}\) First, emotions modulate attention. In an emotion event, attention is focused on the particular object of the emotion (often so as to make the object and/or experience memorable). Second, they prepare the organism for certain actions, making it more likely that the organism will come to have certain motivations (roughly, e.g.: fear: flight; anger: fight; disgust: retraction and cleansing; sadness: retrieval of lost item; etc.).\(^\text{14}\)

It would be unsurprising if these features were kept in the case of other-focused emotion. To say that in v-a experiences the other’s welfare is highlighted just is to say that within the experience the other’s welfare condition becomes the focus of our attention. And straightforwardly we can also expect concomitant prosocial motivation.\(^\text{15}\)

**Intrinsic value attribution.** Our account of v-a experiences presupposes that interests are attributed beforehand (value-apprehension is apprehending the significance of the interests attributed). There is no conceptual guarantee that the attribution of interests would be assigned positive value. However, we have just noted the intrinsic value-attributing nature of true caring emotions. This can make sense of the intrinsic value-attributing nature of v-a experiences, if we assume that some class of others’ interests are unconditioned elicitors of caring emotions (in neurotypical children, say). The attention-directing, other-focused, motivating, often phenomenologically intense (“hot”) construal of the other person’s interest can be thought to frame and shape the perceptual tendencies of the attribution of significance to others (and to certain key features, e.g., sentience), both at a time and over time. Additionally, comparisons to

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\(^\text{12}\) Someone might worry that this trivializes the caring-apprehension hypothesis into the claim that to be able to apprehend someone’s welfare as significant, one must be able to apprehend someone’s welfare as significant. But the claim is really more like this: in order to apprehend someone’s welfare as significant, one must be able to feel someone’s welfare as significant. The apprehensional experience doesn’t typically just happen all its own without the attention-directing, motivating, construal of the other person’s interest. That is, the relevant ability is emotional. Appeal to the emotional ability allows us to say further things about the nature of intrinsic value-attribute, even if substantive, linguistic elucidations of the emotional experience are somewhat elusive.

\(^\text{13}\) Again, I am here largely dependent on Prinz (2004, Chs. 1, 8).

\(^\text{14}\) In fact, on some psychologists’ theories of emotion, one or both of these features are essential to emotion. But we need not make such contentious claims here.

\(^\text{15}\) Cf. the detailed research of Batson (2011).
the self—such as by identifying common characteristics or through imagining the other’s perspective—may well figure in the explanation of some v-a experiences.

**Dependence relation.** If the relation between our two constructs is a causal one, which is the cause of the other? Answer: only interpreting v-a as dependent on caring emotion events—either causally and/or ontologically—seems to explain least one finding.\(^{16}\)

Psychopaths seem impaired in moral apprehension. Evidence comes from R.J.R. Blair’s 1995 study in which the justifications psychopaths offered for why certain harms (e.g. hitting) are not “OK” is was that they were prohibited by certain rules. This differs from the standard response across many ages and cultures (including even autistic children!): that they are wrong in virtue of being harmful to the victim. One plausible explanation of this is that psychopaths don’t typically see harms to others as intrinsically bad events.\(^{17}\) Psychopathy is characterized by shallow affect (incl. attenuated guilt and, and attenuated attachments to others (Hare 1993)), which plausibly also impairs their capacities for emotional caring. The caring-apprehension hypothesis proposes a causal link: that psychopaths’ blunted affect during development impairs their developing a capacity to apprehend harms to others as mattering.\(^{18}\)

At least some v-a experiences are constituted by experiences of caring emotions. One reason to think the caring emotion more ontologically basic (as constituting) the v-a experience is simply that the general account of emotions I’ve offered suggests that they routinely play a perceptual role, “construing” items in the environment as having various properties.

Other v-a experiences, at least in mature adults, may not be constituted—or even caused—by any token caring emotion event. For it is plausible that, over time, an independent system gets set up and shaped by caring emotion events whereby one associates and then apprehends various harms and benefits to others as with negative and positive value, respectively. The c-a hypothesis can thus be understood, on its weakest interpretation, as a developmental hypothesis,

\(^{16}\) And two others: Second, developmental evidence for the c-a hypothesis includes the observation that even young toddlers have a capacity for other-directed, welfare-congruent emotional responses, and these apparently precede the development a self-other distinction (Hoffman 2000). At this stage, the child’s emotions are construing distress in others as aversive even though they lack a concept of other individuals, and so, presumably, of others’ interests. There seems no need to postulate a further apprehensional capacity emerging even earlier. For once a child attains a notion of others as distinct seats of experience, this would enhance their interest-attribute capacity; the child’s aversion to the other’s distress plausibly becomes more other-directed and (at least in more vivid cases) non-instrumental.

Third, the phenomenology of value-apprehension is simply more powerful where caring emotions are clearly involved. Even where v-a occurs emotionlessly (e.g., one quickly hears of a catastrophe in the news), it often doesn’t seem to “sink in” until we consider it vividly enough to become emotionally affected.

\(^{17}\) Replicated a few times (but too few—e.g., Blair et al. 1995, Blair 1997, Blair et al. 1997, Blair 2001), this result matches anecdotal accounts of psychopaths demonstrating an incapacity to see harms to others as negative (cf. Hare 1993, Elliott 1996).

\(^{18}\) Blair et al. (2005) argue that some aspect of psychopaths’ failure to sympathize with victims are symptoms of more basic deficiencies in emotional conditioning to negative stimuli and as well as impaired apprehension of, and abnormally subtle autonomic responses to, fearful and sad facial expressions and vocal affect. Blair’s results regarding impaired recognition of fear & sadness faces suggest that psychopaths’ impairment to emotional caring would be primarily on the side of negative emotions toward harms to others. (The problem, then, is in interest- attribution as well as in the apprehension of the significance of interests.) The extent to which psychopaths display positive emotions toward welfare-improvements in others, from what I can find in the literature, remains to be seen.
holding only that emotional caring is necessary for setting up moral apprehension at some point in development.

4 Caring vs. other contenders

‘Empathy’ is a term which has been overused for a wide variety of affective and cognitive processes since its introduction into English in 1909. On some permissive uses, ‘empathy’ encompasses the disposition here labeled emotional caring; my only quarrel is to emphasize that it is plausibly the other-directed, welfare-congruent, non-instrumental emotions which construe others as valuable and set up a further shortcut perceptual tendency of moral apprehension. But other accounts of empathy differ in various ways. The account which both is clear and distinguishes empathy from emotional caring is one on which ‘empathy’ refers to feeling what one takes another person to be feeling.19 A bit more rigorously, an empathic affective or other emotional state is a recapitulation of what one perceives as another’s affective state. Empathizing is the process of coming to and/or the having of an empathic state. ‘Empathy’ refers to either the process of empathizing or to the state of being in an empathic state.

An empathy-apprehension hypothesis would suggest that the ability to recapitulate someone else’s affect enables and mediates moral apprehension. Such a view faces at least four problems: empathy may not be non-instrumental or even other-directed, and instances of empathizing are neither sufficient nor necessary for instances of moral apprehension. Moreover, it is not clear what necessary or crucial role empathic capacity would play itself in setting up moral apprehensional capacity.20

First, an empathic emotion may or may not be experienced for the other’s sake. Second and relatedly, it may or may not even have the other as its personal object. It is now common for psychologists to distinguish mere distress in reaction to another’s distress (often called “personal distress”) from distress for the other (sometimes called sympathetic distress).21 The former is understood as self-oriented, the latter other-oriented; i.e., the former distress’s personal object is the self, the latter’s, the other.22 People feeling self-oriented distress at the distress of others apparently are often more motivated to escape the situation than to help, perhaps resulting from a

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19 I owe this conception to Prinz (2011). ‘Takes’ could either be a matter of unconscious perception (as with emotional contagion) or the result of a sustained imaginative engagement (as with perspective-taking).

Compare Darwall (1998), Haidt (2003), and especially Eisenberg & Strayer (1987), who provide another nice overview of definitional issues pertaining to empathy.

20 Related criticisms of empathy can be found in Prinz (2011a,b), Battaly (2011), Nichols (2004), Oxley (2011).

21 For an overview, see Decety & Lamm (2009). Batson calls this “personal distress” (2011, p. 19).

22 E.g., Hoffman (2000, pp. 67-71) highlights cases of children of about 7 to 12 months old who, lacking a fully developed distinction between self and other, respond to others’ distress in the same way as they do to their own distress.
self-oriented emotional experience. This difference illustrates the importance of being able to experience emotions, even ones congruent with the other’s well-being, [i] with her and/or someone in her situation as personal object, [ii] for her sake.

Third, empathy is probably not sufficient for moral apprehension (in a particular instance). People can plausibly undergo affective empathic states toward another’s suffering—even with full knowledge that they are suffering—without apprehending the disvalue of their suffering. Sadists are a prime example of this. At least on a non-sadistic layman’s conception of sadism, a sadist’s affective empathy with someone suffering is one of the very things that enables him to enjoy the pain and distress of the one suffering. Sadism has not yet received much empirical study, but a preliminary result confirms this (Harenski et al. 2012).

Fourth, it is fairly clear that empathy is not necessary for moral apprehension (in a particular instance). E.g., when a neurotypical parent sees her toddler horrifically cry from the pain of a small wood splinter piercing, she does not herself feel that kind of pain, or any physical pain at all, and she may not be sad or afraid. Yet in a typical case her attention is directed more toward the child’s welfare than toward anything else, welfare the significance of which little else seems more salient. This is also true for cases where we see that someone is harmed but they do not experience any emotion (as where one is knocked unconscious from behind).

Of course, it wouldn’t be surprising if empathy were a component of the package of affective abilities which are necessary for developing moral apprehensional capacity, or that that package were to frequently utilize empathic abilities. First, empathy is probably exerts causal influence in both the buildup and in the manifestation of caring dispositions (call this the caring-empathy hypothesis). A disposition to feel emotions congruent with someone’s well-being will often happen to manifest in the very same emotion which that person is herself experiencing. And, plausibly, occurrent caring emotions often get reinforced by empathic mechanisms of emotional, facial, and motor mimicry as well as perspective-taking. Second, it would certainly be unsurprising if recapitulating someone’s emotion (whether as a result of contagion, simulation-derived emotion, or of perspective-taking) would help create a caring disposition in one (i.e., it’s plausible that empathy engenders caring: the empathy-caring hypothesis). Being

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23 cf. Haidt 2003, p. 862; Batson 2011, pp. 62ff. Hoffman (2000, Ch. 8) would attribute many of these instances to over-arousal in the empathizer (but cf. Batson (2011 pp. 64-5) for doubts about the over-arousal hypothesis). This is potentially related to the phenomenon known as “compassion fatigue” in the health professions.

Other explanations of why a particular adult’s distress is self- rather than other-oriented might include: generally self-oriented motivational tendencies, being in a depressed mood, or lack of perceived commonality with the other (Decety & Lamm 2009).


around someone sad and resentful can engender a mimicked, parallel disappointed indignation, for example.  

Works Cited


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26 If the caring-apprehension hypothesis enjoys plausibility, it might be further explored both empirically and philosophically. One application is for philosophers to move away from thinking of moral perception in valuational terms (of the apprehension of the significance of welfare), rather than deontic terms (of observing, say, the wrongness of acts, whether pro tanto or all-in). Welfare is centrally important in any plausible moral theory, and a moral-psychological account of the apprehension of its value may well resolve disputes in moral theory and moral epistemology.

There are also many remaining empirical questions:

- What are the best ways to measure emotional caring conceived as a holistic emotional disposition?
- How does other-directed, welfare-congruent emotion become non-instrumental?
- How might we exercise control over our caring dispositions?
- Is interest-attribution a prerequisite of emotional caring?
- How do children come to interest-attribute?
- How might value-apprehension be measured?
- To what extent does value-apprehension occur in the absence of emotion?


