

Empathy, Understanding, and Judgment

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Abstract

YUJIA SONG: Empathy, Understanding, and Judgment. (Under the direction of Susan Wolf.)

The central questions I'm concerned with in my dissertation are: What is it to understand a person, and what value or significance does it have in our moral life?

Instances of such understanding, misunderstanding, or lamentable lack of attempts at understanding permeate our lives, from our personal relationships (*"Mom, you just don't understand me!"*) to impersonal relationships or interactions (*"I understand the pressure you face to excel academically, but I can't change the grade on your paper"*), from moral situations faced by individuals (*"Put yourself in her shoes before you blame her"*), to social or political problems faced by groups (*"The country's policy makers need to understand the cultural background of the Islamic radicals and their thinking"*).

Yet despite the importance we attach to understanding of persons in our personal and public life, there has not been a satisfying, unified philosophical account that both explicates what this understanding consists in, and illuminates why it plays the role it does in our life. The *Verstehen* tradition rightly sees understanding of the person's subjective point of view as distinctive to understanding human behavior, but more needs to be said about its role in our life. Care ethicists recognize a close connection between understanding and caring; attitudes in a caring person, such as "attunement," "receptivity," and "responsiveness," promote understanding. However, they fall short of telling us what understanding is.

My dissertation is an inquiry into understanding of persons. It intersects with discussions of empathy and (moral) judgment, since there seem to be close affinities

between understanding and empathy on the one hand, but tension between understanding and judging on the other. The first part of my dissertation distinguishes understanding from empathy, drawing on insights from epistemology, hermeneutics, literature and other fields for an analysis of understanding of persons. The second part offers a new way of thinking about a series of topics in moral philosophy having to do with moral judgment, response to wrongdoing, and personal relationships, by highlighting and clarifying the role understanding plays in these aspects of our life.

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Introduction

The central questions I'm concerned with in my dissertation are: What is it to understand a person, and what value or significance does it have in our moral life?

Instances of such understanding, misunderstanding, or lamentable lack of attempts at understanding permeate our lives, from our personal relationships (*"Mom, you just don't understand me!"*) to impersonal relationships or interactions (*"I understand the pressure you face to excel academically, but I can't change the grade on your paper"*), from moral situations faced by individuals (*"Put yourself in her shoes before you blame her"*), to social or political problems faced by groups (*"The country's policy makers need to understand the cultural background of the Islamic radicals and their thinking"*).

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My dissertation is an inquiry into understanding of persons. It intersects with discussions of empathy and (moral) judgment, since there seem to be close affinities

between understanding and empathy on the one hand, but tension between understanding and judging on the other. When the question, “What is it to understand a person?” is raised, a natural thought is it is no other than empathy. Presumably understanding a person consists primarily in understanding what goes on in her *mind* — emotions, beliefs, desires, and so on. But is it true? The first chapter suggests a preliminary answer to this question by way of clearing up some main points of confusion in our thinking about empathy and its role in our moral life. Chapter 2 follows up on the lesson from Chapter 1 — empathy is distinct from understanding — as it explores the question of what it is to understand a person.

In the next three chapters, I discuss the moral value of understanding through its various points of connection with judging.

Chapter 3 tests a potential limit on understanding: are there any people we should *not* try to understand? It may seem that those who commit evil fall into this category, for understanding them detracts from our condemnation of their crimes. I point out that our resistance to understanding evildoers relies largely on unexamined intuitions, e.g., that they are beyond our comprehension, or that understanding them means letting them off the hook. I expose problems in our pre-reflective thinking about evildoers, and argue that refusing to understand them may be itself morally dangerous.

Chapter 4 applies a central idea in Chapter 3 to wrongdoers in general: morally appropriate responses to wrongdoing admit of a wider range than condemnation and retribution. Understanding the offender opens up space for alternative responses that are compatible with our moral judgment of the offense. Forgiveness may be one of them. In this chapter, I defend a reading of the saying, “To understand all is to forgive all,” that captures the essence of understanding as well as forgiveness.

In Chapter 5, I suggest a further way in which understanding facilitates rethinking about our practice of judging. Reflections on the kind of attitude embodied in our

attempts to understand others prompt questions not about what judgment we should make in a situation, but about whether I should make any judgments at all.

Having focused on the ways in which understanding can be morally valuable, I close the inquiry in Chapter 6 with a discussion of possible limits on the value of understanding.

Chapter 1

Empathy, Proper Empathy, and Understanding

1.1 Introduction

Recent developments in the ethics of care and in the research in social and developmental psychology on the relationship between empathy and moral behavior have sparked a renewed interest in the question, what is the role of empathy in morality? The first thought is that it is fundamentally important. We often implore others to “step in our shoes” before they judge. We think that a person who is good at “feeling into” another’s mental world is more likely to be kind and caring. And my own moral education from my parents was based largely on a sort of “training” in empathy, for they would always ask, “How would other people feel if you did this?” Thus, we may say that empathy is a good thing to have, or it is required for acting morally, or it is a moral virtue.

But we quickly realize empathy is not always good. Can’t we have too much empathy for a person, or empathize with the wrong person?¹ The right thing to say then seems to be that empathy *properly* exercised must be good, or that morality requires not empathy *simpliciter*, but *proper* empathy.

This seems like a sensible move, for with “proper empathy,” we can keep all the good things about empathy while escaping its shortcomings. Nevertheless, the task of

¹For a “laundry list” of potential problems with empathy, see Prinz, 2011.

“proper-izing” empathy is not without its own risks. It is my aim in this chapter to show that recent attempts at making this move are misguided. I will examine two such attempts and explain why they are unsatisfactory by dissecting the different senses they attach to “proper empathy” but fail to differentiate. I will sketch out two major roles empathy plays in morality.² It will turn out on my account that although part of what some philosophers want “proper empathy” to do can indeed be done by empathy, the other part is better thought of as the job of understanding.

1.2 Why empathy unconstrained is not good enough

Before I begin, just a few words on what I mean by “empathy.” Although it is usually taken to be a *feeling* congruent to another’s feeling or situation, there is large consensus that empathy, as a way to vicariously experience another’s inner states, involves both an affective and a cognitive aspect.³ Martin Hoffman, a psychologist whose work on empathy and moral development has been highly influential, writes that empathy involves both cognitive awareness of another’s internal states (e.g., thoughts, feelings, perceptions, intentions) and vicarious affective response appropriate to another’s situation (2000). In her paper that explores the implications of empathy for moral theory, Nancy Sherman notes that in experimental and clinical psychology, empathy is typically defined either as an affective response (contagion or vicarious arousal) or a cognitive undertaking (role taking, simulation or imagination) — and the two definitions are combined in many working models (1998, p.86). Alisa Carse, whose account

²I do not think that these two roles exhaust all the work empathy does in morality. One might plausibly think, for example, that a capacity for empathy is necessary for one’s capacity for being moral at all.

³“Empathy” also refers to a capacity to vicariously experience another’s inner states. But here as I contrast it with understanding as a process, I’m treating empathy as an act or process.

of proper empathy I will later examine, takes empathy to be “the ability and disposition to imagine (as best as we can) how others feel, what they fear or hope for, and how they understand themselves and their circumstances (2005, p.170).” Imagining the thoughts and feelings of the other is largely a cognitive undertaking. Carse also cites and endorses the accounts given by Jodi Halpern and Adrian Piper respectively, both of which include a kind of “emotional resonance” as well as the aforementioned imagination as part of empathy (Halpern et al., 2001; Piper, 1991). Lastly, Michael Slote, author of the other account of proper empathy I will look at, bases his notion of empathy primarily on the work of Hoffman (2007). Although he slides into talking of empathy as a feeling, he does acknowledge that more sophisticated forms of empathy involve perspective-taking, association, and other cognitive activities. There is much debate over how we go about taking up another’s perspective, but suffice it to say, insofar as empathy involves perspective-taking, it cannot be a purely affective response.⁴

The way philosophers have attempted to locate empathy in morality has been much influenced by the close connection between empathy and altruistic behavior. Psychologist C.D. Batson’s studies that purport to prove the “empathy-altruism hypothesis” are often cited by philosophers (Batson et al., 1997, 2003; Batson, 1997, e.g.).⁵ According to the hypothesis, the feeling of empathy gives rise to the motivation to promote another’s well-being purely for that person’s sake. Sherman suggests that we need to cultivate empathy in order to cultivate altruistic virtues like benevolence. Carse takes

⁴A more accurate way to put this point is to say *in the context of our discussion*, the kind of empathy that we are interested in and whose role in morality we want to determine is not the lower-level, purely affective empathetic response, but must also involve the higher-level, cognitive activities. But I will not argue for this point here.

⁵Although as Stephen Darwall points out, Batson’s notion of “empathy” is closer to what we would mean by “sympathy,” i.e. concern for another as we apprehend her situation from our own point of view. There has been much confusion, since Hume’s discussion of the subject, over the meaning of the two terms, as well as over the connection between empathy and sympathy.

it one step further, arguing that properly cultivated empathy itself is a moral virtue. Slote goes even further. Assuming that empathy is essential to caring, Slote revamps the ethics of care with a focus on empathy. On his view, empathy properly exercised not only can serve as the standard by which an act is judged right or wrong, but grounds the other key notions in morality such as justice and rights.

But wherever they want to put empathy in morality, philosophers are all alarmed by some pretty serious problems posed by empathy if it is improperly exercised. I will sketch two main problems here.

The first is that we are naturally biased in empathizing with others. As Hume observes, and as empirical studies have confirmed, we tend to empathize more with people who are more similar to us, or closer to us in terms of physical distance or personal relations. But if empathy is to ground our altruistic response, or more generally, any kind of moral response, we must not follow our natural tendencies that bias our empathic engagement, for proper moral response calls for at least a reasonable degree of impartiality. It's unfair to favor our friends, or someone in need of help right in front of our eyes, over those whose plight is much more grave, *just because* we happen to empathize more with the former.

Another problem has to do with maintaining one's sense of the boundaries between the self and the other. Roughly speaking, we could be either too focused on the self or too focused on the other when we empathize. The two extremes of empathic involvement are respectively termed "incuriosity" and "self-effacement," in Carse's terminology.⁶ Carse distinguishes between two types of "incuriosity." The first results from *too little* identification with the other, due to indifferent or negative attitudes towards that person for various reasons. But one could commit the mistake of "incuriosity" even in

⁶Carse's characterization of the two poles of "improper empathy" is in turn adapted from the two poles of "imaginative involvement" identified by Piper.

cases where one is not indifferent or apathetic. Carse suggests that one may project her own experience onto the other in an attempt to empathize, if there is too much identification such that one fails to recognize the difference between her own experience and that of the other person. The other extreme, “self-effacement” or “self-denial,” occurs when one lets the other’s feelings, thoughts, desires, and so on overtake ones own, thus compromising one’s integrity.

1.3 Introducing proper empathy

Since empathy done “improperly” cannot deliver the promises that philosophers hope it will — contributing to the cultivation of altruistic virtues (Sherman), being a moral virtue itself (Carse), or grounding the whole of morality (Slote), there is a strong temptation to “proper-ize” empathy, to put it under certain constraints. I want to focus on two such proposals, one by Carse and the other by Slote. Although both aim at a notion of “proper empathy,” their approaches differ. Carse wants to put empathy under *moral* constraints, whereas Slote seems to appeal to *psychological* standards for his conception of proper empathy.

Carse constructs what she calls “morally contoured empathy — empathy properly felt and expressed (2005, p.171).” The idea is that moral principles should be incorporated into a conception of “proper empathy” to correct for problems like incuriosity and self-effacement. What sort of principles? Carse argues that the principles should be able to guide us in our judgment of how much we should empathize with another person and how much attention we should give to our own thoughts and feelings. Some of them may be principles of impartiality, which urge the agent to step back and observe the situation from a detached, objective point of view. More importantly, Carse thinks, empathy should be guided by “normatively substantive conceptions of our roles and relationships and their defining moral stakes (ibid.).” These relationship-based

principles allow the agent to remain in a stance of attachment, and yet empathize in accordance with the expectations, responsibilities and obligations that arise from her role or her relationship with the other person.

Slote comes to a conception of proper empathy in a different way. He claims that “[t]he way to correct morally misguided or inadequate empathy is not, I believe, with new and different mechanisms or procedures, but with more or more thoroughgoing empathy (2010, p.52).” If one is fully developed in terms of feeling empathic concern for others, then her empathic engagement would be *just right*, morally speaking. It is not clear what Slote means by “fully developed empathic concern.” All he says is that it is “the kind of empathy that would exist in human circumstances favorable to the overall development of empathy (2007, p.30).” The emphasis on development and his particular focus on Martin Hoffman’s studies in the development of empathy suggest that he may be talking about an ideal in some *psychological* sense: we can extrapolate from the progress that children make as they get better at empathizing to get some idea of what a person *fully* developed in this capacity would be like. Yet at the same time Slote might also be thinking of a moral ideal, for the cultivation of empathy may well incorporate the guidance of moral principles. But given his overall project, this cannot be the case. If he is to ground other moral notions in the notion of “fully developed empathic concern,” then he cannot invoke the former in his analysis of the latter without going in a circle. Therefore, it must be empathy fully developed in some *non-moral* sense.

Slote does not elaborate on what this ideal kind of empathic concern amounts to. I gather from his book and his responses to the critics that it includes the following aspects:

- (a) One who exhibits fully developed empathic concern shows concern for every person who is involved in the situation or will be affected by the agent’s action.

- (b) Such a person is able to correct our natural tendency to empathize more with people we are familiar with or closer to, or whose situations exhibit features that are more salient to us. She would not indiscriminately favor these people at the expense of the more distant others.
- (c) Despite (b), such a person would not have as much empathic concern for distant others as for closer ones. She shows an appropriate level of empathic engagement with distant others, but everything else equal, she would favor those she is closer to or knows better. While Slote wants to be able to account for obligations to people beyond our own group, he also wants to account for a kind of partialism he endorses.
- (d) Such a person would maintain a proper balance between being empathically engaged with others and retaining the capacities, interests, thoughts, and feelings she has as an individual separate from those with whom she empathizes.

To summarize, both Carse and Slote propose an idealized form of empathy: To have proper empathy is to empathize at the right time, with the right people, and to the right degree. This sounds very much like a virtue; on Carse's view, proper empathy is a moral virtue, on a par with other virtues and informed by various moral considerations. On Slote's view, however, the notion of proper empathy must be developed from purely psychological grounds. It in turn yields other moral concepts and principles.

1.4 Diagnosis of accounts of proper empathy

The problem with these attempts at proper-izing empathy is that they confound different normative standards at work. To correct for all the ways in which empathy

could go wrong, we need at least these three sets of standards:⁷

- (1) Constitutive norms: norms internal to empathy, that dictate how successful one is at empathizing with another. The closer one is to observing these norms, the more successful one is in her attempt to empathize. And when one completely violates the norms, she cannot be said to be empathizing at all.

Thus, it is a norm internal to empathy that one should have a fairly accurate idea of the other's inner states (given objective limitations). If A takes her own response to B's situation to be what B is experiencing, instead of imagining how B would respond given B's particular background, personal traits, etc., then A is barely following this norm.⁸ She therefore fares poorly at empathizing.⁹ And in cases where one's idea of the others experience is utterly inaccurate, it seems that we can no longer truly say that she is empathizing with the other.

- (2) Psychological norms: norms that determine whether one is psychologically healthy and fitting for her developmental stage. I do not have a full account of what such norms encompass, but I will mention a couple that are relevant to empathy.

One norm is what Adrian Piper terms the "unity and rational integrity of the self" (734). This involves preserving one's desires, thoughts, values, actions, and so on, against interference from the outside, and maintaining some level of coherence in them. One way the integrity of the self can be compromised is through excessive identification with someone else, where much of the other person's inner states

⁷I do not claim that these three are the *only* norms at work, but I think they are the most relevant to the present discussion.

⁸This is not to say that when A empathizes accurately, she is free from her own perspective – which is of course impossible.

⁹However, projecting our own thoughts and feelings onto the other person does often work well even though it is not strictly speaking the same as taking up the other person's point of view, since we do have much in common.

or experience is taken to be one's own and subsequently drawn out the set of thoughts, feelings, etc. that makes up the self. Alternatively, one may be so focused on the needs, concerns or experiences of others that she has trouble recognizing her own. Sandra Bartky cites a study on flight attendants, who work under considerable pressure of attending to passengers' needs and making them feel comfortable. Juggling between taking care of the passengers and managing their own feelings, the flight attendants in the study are driven to the point of feeling "falseness or emptiness, and estrangement from her own feeling self, even a confusion as to what or whether she is feeling anything at all (1990, p.104)."

Additionally, a psychologically healthy person has the capacity for empathy (in both the affective and cognitive respects), that is, the capacity to go beyond one's own thoughts and feelings, and to experience what it is like to be the other person in that person's situation. This capacity need not be exercised all the time (well, maybe it *should* not be). There are times when we think that one "ought to" exercise this capacity — such as when one's friend is grieving for the death of a family member — but it would not typically be a *psychological* failure if the person does not in fact empathize (although if someone never shows empathy even at occasions that typically trigger empathic response, we have reason to suspect that the person is incapable of empathy).

- (3) Moral norms: without committing ourselves to any particular normative ethical theory, we can still agree on some moral norms, such as that we should help the needy, or that parents should take care of their children. We may also agree on certain moral principles. Impartiality, for instance, requires that the agent consider the interests of all parties involved in a situation rather than pick and choose as she likes.

I want to make two points about the distinction between different norms. First, the norms “internal” to empathy are not moral norms. We’re concerned here not with whether one should empathize, or how much one should empathize, but with how good she is at carrying out the task of empathy, how accurate she is in her understanding of the other’s inner states through empathy. Someone who empathizes well, meaning who is highly accurate in her awareness of what the other is feeling and thinking, may or may not meet relevant moral standards. A father who does an impeccable job empathizing with his son’s craving for junk food may come to endorse it and thus neglect his responsibility as a father to help the child establish a healthy diet (and develop self-control). We can also think of cases in which a person empathizes with a selective few (her friends), but ignores the others (strangers, perhaps) that are also involved in the situation. She would be morally at fault if her response favors the former when morality requires a more fair treatment of the latter. In such cases, the person satisfies the “internal” norms with respect to the ones she does empathize with. Yet she does not violate these norms with respect to the others, for these norms do not dictate with whom she should empathize, but only that she must reach (sufficient) accuracy if she is to empathize.

Secondly, although a breach of the “internal” norms or of psychological norms need not always also be a breach of moral norms, often times it is. And when it is, the moral failure may be a *consequence* of an internal failure in empathy or a failure to maintain one’s psychological wellbeing. One may fail to respond to another’s plight because, having failed to empathize accurately with the other, she forms a wrong idea of what the other is going through. This is an example of a failure to meet moral norms due to a failure to conform to “internal” norms of empathy. We can find an example of moral failure due to a psychological failure in the wife who submits completely to her husband’s wishes and values at the expense of giving up her own. Here there is

no breach of the “internal” norms of empathy, for she can see perfectly, perhaps too perfectly, from her husband’s perspective, and understands his inner states completely. But her empathy with her husband is inappropriate at the psychological level, for she loses herself in the total identification with her husband. And from a moral point of view, this undermining of her integrity constitutes a failure to respect herself, to see herself as equal to her husband, and to regard her own thoughts, feelings, and needs as no less valuable than his.¹⁰

The point is that one can fail to empathize properly in different senses. Sometimes one may be empathizing accurately, but still be considered “improper” because her response to the situation or to other people is *morally* inappropriate. Sometimes one neglects to empathize with those that one has a moral obligation to. We call this too a failure in proper empathy, but there is in fact in this case a *lack* of empathy.

One flaw in Carse’s and Slote’s accounts of proper empathy is now clear. Both are oblivious to the different kinds of norms at work. In the case of Carse, the two poles of empathy — “incuriosity” and “self-effacement” — are judged improper under different sets of norms. Self-effacement is considered improper not because empathy itself is inaccurate, but because it threatens one’s psychological well being, or compromises one’s capacity as an autonomous moral agent. As for incuriosity, the two ways by which it can manifest also fall under different kinds of norms. The kind of incuriosity due to indifference or prejudice is considered improper because one fails to empathize; the failure is a moral failure. The other kind of incuriosity, however, does not denote a lack of empathy, but empathy exercised inaccurately as one projects her own thoughts and feelings on to the person she intends to empathize with. Here, the internal norms

¹⁰What about a wife who wholeheartedly agrees with her husband’s goals and values such that she adopts them as her own and actively takes it upon herself to promote them? I’m hesitant to say that in this case, she has “lost” herself in merging with her husband. What’s the difference between this woman and one who *does* exemplify a case of “self-effacement”?

of empathy are violated. Whether or not any moral norms are violated as well is quite a contingent matter.

Compared to Carse, Slote makes a more serious mistake. Not only does he also confuse these different kinds of norms, but he is wrong to think that his conception of proper empathy relies solely on non-moral (perhaps psychological) norms. Towards the end of section 3 I sketched out a rough picture of what proper empathy amounts to for Slote. The basic idea is that one must have empathy with the right people and to the right degree — not too much or too little relative to everyone else in the situation and to oneself. But moral norms have clearly been smuggled into this picture, for the internal and psychological norms of empathy cannot get us as far as being able to determine the “right people” or the “right degree.” What is “right” is relative to what is an appropriate moral response to a situation, and that is determined by moral norms.

Why is it important to point out this confusion over norms? So that we can be aware of two distinct claims philosophers make. On the one hand, they want to maintain that in certain situations, it is good for the agent to *have empathy*. On the other hand, they also want to claim that if an agent does empathize, it is (morally) proper for her to do it *in the right way*. I will argue in the next section that one proper place for empathy in morality has to do with the value of empathizing itself, independently of whether or not one empathizes accurately (within a reasonable degree of error). But the second claim is worth greater scrutiny. As I will argue in section 6, discussions of proper or improper empathy tend to rest on an implicit assumption that identifies empathy with understanding. That is, empathizing *in the right way* will yield sufficient understanding of the situation and the people involved in it. But if understanding is the real goal, empathy alone will not get us there, no matter how well it is exercised.

1.5 Restoring empathy's place in morality

Why think there's something good about having empathy, even in cases where it is not exercised "properly" enough?¹¹ One thought is this: empathy is morally significant by virtue of the fact that it allows us to step outside of our own point of view, in the sense of directing our attention away from what concerns ourselves to what concerns the other person *as she would attend to it*.¹² This is not to say that in empathizing with someone, we already feel *for* her or are moved to promote her good *for* her sake. Stephen Darwall makes it clear that when we empathize, we are taking the other's perspective, putting ourselves in her position, and sharing the experience of her, but we are not necessarily concerned *for* her, as we would be if we are showing sympathy (1998, pp.263-264).

It is also not to say that empathy is the only means by which we direct our attention away from the self to the other. Again, the distinction between empathy and sympathy is useful here. When one feels sympathy for another person, she is focused on that person's well-being instead of her own, and wishes for things to go better for the other. She need not take up the other's point of view, i.e. empathize with the other. But like in empathy, she steps outside of her personal concerns.

The significance of the non-egocentric feature of empathy lies partly in its contribution to altruistic behavior. The claim is not a very strong one. It is neither that empathy necessarily leads to altruism, nor that altruistic behavior requires empathy. As I have said, following Darwall, there is not a (feeling, action, etc.) "*for* the other" in

¹¹As I noted earlier, the value of empathy itself cannot be considered *entirely* independently from how well it is exercised. Sometimes when one is utterly wrong about the other's inner states, we may think there is no empathy and hence no value in what one is doing. However, depending on the details of the case, there may still be value in ones *trying* to empathize (but failing in empathizing accurately).

¹²Ultimately we cannot escape our own point of view. Our simulation of another's point of view is, after all, *our* simulation of it. But the contrast between remaining in our own point of view (in the ordinary sense) and taking on another's is clear enough.

empathy although one does engage with the other's inner states. But precisely because empathy directs our attention away from the self, it puts us *in a position* where we can readily respond to the other, in ways that are congruent with her needs and interests, for her sake.¹³

More specifically, empathy is central to a particular kind of altruistic behavior: caring. Carse argues that empathy is constitutive of caring relationships: "... successful care-giving demands properly contoured empathic connection as a constitutive virtue; that is, to fail to feel and express proper empathy is to fail to be properly 'caring,' and thus to fail to realize a defining end or *telos* of the role (2005, p.188)." Carse suggests that empathy is valuable (and indeed, indispensable) in such relationships "not only as a crucial epistemic aid, but also *intrinsically* (ibid.)..." I take her to mean that empathy can be valuable apart from the information it conveys to us about the other person. What's intrinsically valuable about it is that often times, part of what it is to care for the other is to attempt to empathize with her and perhaps also to communicate one's empathy. We can think of the care-giver's attempt at empathy as her reaching out to the other to establish a sense of connection. Furthermore, from the point of view of the recipient of care, caring for her involves "being there" *with* her, and, in many cases, caring *about* what she thinks and how she feels. This means that she usually hopes or expects she will be empathized with, and appreciates the care-giver's empathy (or attempt at it) as a gesture of caring.¹⁴

Immediately following the claim I just quoted, Carse goes on to illustrate her point

¹³Why, then, think that caring *requires* empathy? I think empathy supplies two important elements. First, unlike some other altruistic behavior, caring requires that the one-caring establishes and expresses a sense of connection (or attachment?) with the one cared-for. This is similar to the point I'm about to make regarding the role of empathy in close personal relationships. Second, like other altruistic behavior, caring requires that the one-caring have sufficient knowledge about the one cared-for and her situation to provide the kind of care that is needed.

¹⁴Thomas Hill suggested that the connection goes in two ways: while A engages in empathy with B, B asks for or expects empathy before the fact and responds to it afterwards.

with an example, one in which a mother is oblivious to her partner's abuse of her daughter. She writes:

“As the mother, it would, to be sure, be crucial that I ‘wake up’ and see what is going on in my home. Empathic imagination might, as I have suggested, be essential to achieving this urgent epistemic demand. But simple awareness is not enough. What is also vitally needed is felt comprehension of my daughter's suffering, an emotional resonance that conveys to her that I grasp, or am attempting to grasp, the enormity of the psychological injury she has endured through the abuse in its meaning for her — in this case, perhaps, her sense of isolation, fury, despair, or revulsion. In the absence of empathy of this kind, it is unlikely that a connection with her can be restored or that trust can be repaired. A failure of empathic engagement would, in this case, be tantamount to egregious abandonment. It would not suffice as proper maternal care.”

Although Carse clearly stresses the importance of sufficient *understanding* (what is epistemically demanded of the mother) of what the daughter is going through, her main concern here is that the mother's act of empathy itself, or attempt at it, is crucial for the relationship and for her role as a caring mother. Without engaging with her daughter empathically, Carse says, the mother would be unable to restore a *connection* with her daughter, and she would be guilty of “egregious abandonment” of her daughter. The emphasis falls on the sense of connection or attachment that is created and maintained when the mother is empathically engaged with the daughter. The mother effectively conveys to the daughter that she feels with her, stands alongside her. It is not the same as feeling bad for her (in sympathy), or uncritically endorsing how everything seems from her daughter's point of view. I think Carse's idea of associating empathy with caring relationships applies to other personal relationships as well — such as friendships — for the sense of deeply felt connection is also essential to these relationships.

1.6 Empathy and understanding

The “proper” kind of empathy is important in virtue of its role in getting the appropriate moral response to a situation. Sometimes, empathy itself constitutes (part of) the appropriate response. As I have suggested in the previous section, empathizing with another person can be essential to the kind of close personal relationship (or otherwise caring relationship) one has with that person. In a particular situation, what the other person needs may, among other things, include empathic engagement and expression of that engagement from the agent. At other times, the role of empathy is less direct. Carse gives an example of how the mothers of two boys are to respond to their sons, after one of the boys bullied the other and the latter retaliated. She outlines a complex response for each of them. For the mother of Little Luke, who was the victim of bullying, she says the following:

“Little Lukes mother... may rightly see her son to be mired in a state of humiliation and fear, his trust in his own strength and value badly shaken. This judgment might then guide her in seeking to sustain emotional resonance with Little Luke, to convey to him that she grasps the peer pressure and anxiety he feels so he can begin to emerge from his isolation. She might also express calm, tender concern and confidence in him with the aim of helping him to re-establish his confidence in his own value and respect-worthiness. Only later, when she can count on an enhanced sense of sturdiness, independence, and self-possession, might it be effective and appropriate for her to require him to accept responsibility for his own violence, and to expect him to begin to absorb, synthesize, and retain practical suggestions for non-violent self-defense (p.189).”

I want to highlight two points about empathy in the nuanced picture that Carse suggests. First, empathic engagement with the son makes an important part of the mother’s response, alongside other elements of the response such as expressing concern and offering guidance. Each of these elements reflects a different aspect of what is called for of the mother in her relationship with her child. In empathizing, for example, the mother establishes “emotional resonance” with the child, giving him the assurance

that he is not alone and his voice is heard. Second, the other elements of the response depend in part on what the mother comes to understand about her child through empathic engagement. How she is going to help and guide him will depend on what she sees as the best way to address his needs, and empathy provides a good source of information about what he needs.

This illustrates the other role empathy plays with respect to one's moral response in a situation: it contributes to the agent's understanding of the situation by giving her insight into the experience of those involved in it. Thus, independently of whether empathy is itself part of the proper moral response in a situation, it can still shape the response through supplying the agent with information she needs to make sense of the situation in the first place. The constraints that Carse, Slote and others put on empathy are to ensure that empathy plays both roles properly; first, that it is exercised, and second, that it is exercised such that the agent reaches a pretty good understanding of the people involved.

In other words, our interest in proper empathy is in large part an interest in understanding in disguise. If so, it is better served by directly addressing issues in understanding rather than focusing exclusively and narrowly on empathy. To see how a concern with understanding underlies (much of) our thinking about proper empathy, let us look again at what the agent must do to count as achieving proper empathy:

First and foremost, the agent must reach a reasonably high level of accuracy in grasping the inner states of the other. Improper empathy occurs when one misunderstands what the other thinks or feels, thereby violating the norms internal to empathy. And since a major source of empathic inaccuracy lies in too much attention to the self, we are to guard against our tendency to impose our own experiences on to others. "Self-absorption," as Carse calls this phenomenon, is seen as a huge threat to having proper empathy. To overcome it is to check one's prejudices or assumptions about the

other, to refrain from projecting one's own values or expectations on to the other, and essentially, to get at certain *facts* about the inner states of the person one is trying to empathize with. That is to say, proper empathy aims at knowing and understanding the experience of the other.

Moreover, to properly empathize in any situation, according to both Carse and Slote, the agent cannot arbitrarily pick whom to empathize with. Rather, she should empathize with *all* who are involved in the situation. In the example we have discussed, the mother who is too engrossed with her partner fails to notice that he is abusing her daughter. On Carse's view, the mother fails to properly empathize with her daughter as she is oblivious to the latter's struggles and pain, even though she may be empathizing with her partner well enough (perhaps even "too much"). This failure is twofold. As Carse puts it, the mother fails to (i) "resonate in feeling or imagination with her," and (ii) "be curious about the emotions she is expressing in her conduct (p.178)." I think these two parts of the verdict map nicely onto the two roles of empathy outlined earlier in the section. The lack of empathy (with her daughter) on the mother's part is at once a failure of appropriate moral response in itself, and, at least as Carse sees it, an important factor in the mother's distorted view of what is going on in her family. But there is reason to object that empathy is somehow the best way or only way to find out about the abuse. The mother can be more *observant* of the behavior of her partner and of her daughter. She can also talk to her daughter about how things are going for her. The goal is to understand what is happening to the daughter so as to have a full, accurate view of the facts of abuse. It is not just a matter of empathizing less with her partner and more with her daughter.

Slote, on the other hand, has in mind a different set of examples, but what I have to say is quite similar. Recognizing our tendency to empathize more with people we are closer to or more familiar with, Slote suggests that one who empathizes properly

extends empathy to distant others to a degree much more substantial than we normally do. Such an agent is better able to respond to a situation where different parties — some closer or more familiar to her than others — have stakes in the outcome but come with conflicting interests. Here again, the fundamental problem is not that we don't empathize enough with certain people, but rather that our understanding of the situation is flawed.

While “too little” empathy is no good, “too much” of it can also be a problem. The other pole of improper empathy, as Carse sees it, is “self-effacement” or “self-denial,” a state in which one's own thoughts and feelings are overtaken by those of the person she is empathizing with. Too much empathy and too little attention to one's own concerns can be harmful to one's integrity, as in the case of a devoted wife who gives unconditional support to her husband's projects at the expense of her own interests and perhaps even principles. In other cases, self-effacement can undermine one's ability to fulfill the responsibilities she has towards precisely the person she is empathizing with, obligations that are based in her role or her relationship with that person. Recall Carse's example of a father who allows his child to indulge in his excessive desires for unhealthy snacks, as a result of being “overcome” by his empathic feelings of food craving. In doing so, the father neglects his parental duty to take care of his child's health.

However, I think a lot of the problems associated with self-effacement — which “proper empathy” is meant to correct for — have not to do with empathy itself, but with the way the agent uses the knowledge she has gained through empathy. Where the agent is deemed to have “too much” empathy, what she is doing is in fact relying too heavily (even exclusively) on empathy to get an understanding of the situation. In the case of the father, he may be perfectly right about the intensity of his son's desires for fudge — we can say he *understands* how much his son wants it. And this understanding

may be useful when it comes to finding the most effective way to deal with the son's craving.¹⁵ What he fails to do is to put the fact of the son's desires into "perspective." By "putting into perspective," I mean something like making *connections* between that fact and other aspects of the son's life, for example, his health; and discerning the relative *importance* (or in this case, unimportance) of satisfying the son's desires in relation to these other aspects of his life.¹⁶ The case of the devoted wife is similar, in that she also fails to put into perspective her knowledge of the husband's interests. What I mean is that although she understands what his interests are, she does not understand how they relate to other people, or other things important to herself, or how they are to fit in the context of their relationship. Thus, while empathy does supply useful information about the other, the heavy emphasis on empathy can also preclude the agent from coming to a fuller understanding of the other (by way of adopting alternative perspectives, for example). I want to note that one who suffers from self-effacement also has deficient understanding of *herself*, which in turn adds to a faulty judgment about how one is to respond to the other.

So far, I have argued that our interest in proper empathy derives from an interest in understanding. But this would not be a problem for those advocating a notion of proper empathy if empathy is *the* way to understand others. Yet, I think empathy is not always sufficient or necessary for understanding. It may be insufficient or unreliable, for as we have seen in the above discussion of self-effacement, one's grasp of the others

¹⁵For example, the son may be more receptive to a "No" when the father acknowledges, rather than dismisses, the intensity of the son's desires, and expresses that he can understand it.

¹⁶My suggested "re-description" of this scenario in terms of failures of understanding may not be very convincing. An alternative is to say that the problem, though not in empathy, is also not in understanding, but in the father's judgment or deliberation, in that he gives too much weight to his understanding of the son's desires, but not enough weight to other parts of his understanding. But even if this alternative view is correct, my negative claim that the problem is not one of improper empathy remains true. Also, I think there are plenty of cases where self-effacement is problematic *because of* failures of understanding.

experience through empathy gives one an incomplete and one-sided view of the other. And since one takes the point of view of the other while empathizing, one may be blind to the actual condition of that person if the latter has a rather distorted picture of herself.¹⁷ One may be upset and not realize it, or one may think she is perfectly accepting of homosexuals while her actions speak otherwise. Empathy tells us *what it is like* to think or feel like the other person, but it alone does not also inform us of *what it is* for one to think or feel that way. It is only when one steps back from empathic engagement and reflects on the vicarious experience that she can come to understand the person more accurately.

Empathy is not always necessary for understanding either. When we see a child fall from his bike and hear him cry, we understand that he is in pain and needs our help. Here, observation and some past experience of similar situations may suffice for understanding.¹⁸ There are even cases where the experience of empathizing may detract from achieving an understanding we can rely on to respond appropriately to the situation. Think of the judge who is assessing the case of a ruthless murderer who finds pleasure in killing. Or a relief worker who is helping the earthquake victims start a new life. The necessity relation, therefore, depends on the type of situation at hand. This can be true even though a *full* understanding of someone most likely requires empathy. Think of the complaints we often hear from our friends, parents, or significant others: “You don’t understand how I feel,” or “You don’t understand what I’m going through.”

¹⁷The image of a person with mental illness comes to mind when we think of someone with a “distorted” picture of herself. I do not wish to restrict the class of people to those afflicted with mental illness. One may be unaware of certain facts about herself, or self-deceived about them, without being mentally ill. Limited or partially false self-understanding is common, or even an inescapable human condition.

¹⁸One may object that even though in such cases empathy is not necessary, the ability to make the connection between what one observes and what it shows about the inner states of the other hinges on one’s capacity for empathy. How did we learn of such a connection in the first few encounters with a situation like that when we had no prior experience to draw upon? It seems that empathy is the answer.

They are complaints that we are not empathizing with them, or empathizing enough with them.

1.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have proposed a more refined account of the role of empathy in morality. I have pointed out that the accounts of “proper empathy” by Carse and Slote are confused and misguided, for both fail to recognize the ambiguity in the notion of proper empathy, and subsequently try to pack too much into what empathy can achieve if properly exercised. An implicit assumption that Carse and Slote rely on (and perhaps many of us also hold) is that when we empathize properly, we will have a good understanding of the people to whom we are responding, an understanding that will enable us to respond in morally appropriately ways. This assumption, as we have seen, is false.

This does not mean, however, that the project of “proper-izing” empathy is therefore doomed. There is certainly much to be said about the ability to empathize with the right people, to the right degree, and under the right circumstances. Cultivating that ability may well be an important task of every moral agent. What I’m cautioning against is a tendency to put too much weight on empathy as a factor that contributes to moral action. A proper account of proper empathy will not only have to be more precise about the sense(s) in which empathy is considered proper; it must also have a clear view about the limitations of empathy, even when it is exercised properly.

Chapter 2

Understanding a Person

Human beings are obscure to each other. . .

Iris Murdoch (1998, p. 326)

2.1 Introduction

Our discussion in the last chapter leads to some preliminary results about the relation between empathy and understanding, I have argued that the two are not equivalent. On the one hand, empathy is insufficient for understanding, for it is quite possible for one to empathize correctly with someone and yet fail to understand her adequately. On the other hand, it seems that sometimes we can understand someone partially without empathizing, and partial understanding may be all we need in a particular situation. Nevertheless, it still seems true that we need empathy to understand a person *fully*. But I have not said much about what understanding is; the way I reached these results was by appealing to our intuitions about when someone can be said to understand. Without an account of what it is to understand a person, my diagnosis of the proposals for “proper empathy” would not be that informative. That is, if I think that the negligent mother’s empathy with her daughter or the indulgent father’s empathy with his son does not quite amount to what they in fact need for moral action, simply claiming

that they need to *understand* their children does not tell us much. The interesting and crucial question is, what is this understanding? An answer to this question will not only give further support to my claims regarding the relation between empathy and understanding, but will also help us explain its role in morality, which I have claimed to be mistakenly attributed to proper empathy by some philosophers.

This chapter aims to give an account of understanding of a person. Before I proceed, I want to first make three remarks about this aim. First, it appears that in the examples of the negligent mother and the indulgent father the understanding they need is that of *a part* of their respective child: in the case of the mother, understanding of her daughter's experience of the abuse, and in the case of the father, understanding of his son's craving for junk food. And more generally, most moral situations call for understanding of *some part* of the persons involved, but not of the persons as a whole. Why then should I restrict my discussion to understanding of persons, rather than to different sorts of understandings that take different parts of persons as objects? My answer is rather simple. It seems to me that our understanding of some part of a person often turns on at least some understanding of the whole person. So it's probably more fruitful to look at understanding of the person as a whole, and construe understanding of a part in terms of that of the whole.

The second point is that what we are interested in, when we say understanding of persons, is not understanding of human beings in general, but that of particular individuals. This is not to say that we should not invoke our general knowledge of human beings to understand a particular person, or that we cannot learn something general about human beings from an individual human. Much of what we can and do understand about a person derives from our knowledge of what human beings in general are like. Our knowledge in fields like psychology can be a useful resource for understanding someone's behavior. This is not a problem for understanding the

particular person as long as we remain sensitive to the possibility of her falling outside of the expectations we form based on general rules we take to be applicable in her case.¹ Thus, to understand a person, we must first of all see her as more than a placeholder for something more general. As Neil Cooper puts it, “The very tendency to abstract and to simplify, which is so important to theoretical understanding, can hamper the understanding of people. For people are not mass-produced replicas of one another, but individuals with distinctive hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, loves and aversions (394).”² To fully appreciate the person in her concreteness and complexity, then, we must be always prepared to have our own categories and ways of thinking challenged by her reality.³

¹Although we are to guard against our tendency to appeal to stereotypes, it does not mean that we must approach the task of understanding with no assumptions whatsoever. Not only is that highly improbable, but as Hans-Georg Gadamer argues, the process of understanding can get off the ground only with beliefs we already hold, unexamined or even false they may be. He describes the process of understanding as one which the subject’s tentative understanding of the object is repeatedly checked against the object, and thus repeatedly refined and modified (Gadamer, 1989, p. 237). He suggests that rather than ignore or dismiss our prejudices (in the broader sense of “preconceived opinions”), we should be constantly aware of their presence and their content. Thus, false assumptions about a person based on her membership in a group become a problem only if we remain uncritical of them and refuse to keep our minds open to new information that the person may reveal to us.

²Cooper, 2000.

³Roger Hausheer makes a similar point on Schleiermacher’s view about understanding people as particulars: “The consequence of the irreducible singularity of each and every human individual, of the fact that he cannot be dissolved without remainder into the universal and the general, is that understanding, and *only* understanding, can afford us a mode of ingress into the innermost being and particularity, the concrete meaning and truth, of another human being or group of human beings, [sic] And when we encounter another person we must not automatically assimilate his words, expressions, gestures, his whole range of expressive symbols which are the very embodiment of his entire world of thought, feeling and as aspiration to the familiar and well-worn concepts and categories of our own world. Just as every man must express his humanity in his own way and in his own peculiar combination of its potentialities, in such a way that his own individuality is a practical task on which he is ceaselessly engaged until death supervenes, and not something to be discovered by an objective science or a gift that falls inexplicably into his lap, so understanding must always set itself the task of discerning, grasping, ‘entering into’, that which is unique and particular in each and ever persons solution to the perennial problem of human existence. In every encounter with others it is our task to explore and appreciate their unique, authentic singularity and to see the validity and universal significance of his being ‘thus not otherwise’ (Hausheer, 1996, pp.62-63).”

And finally, it seems that the phenomenon of understanding (persons) is commonplace. There is the close friend who has known me for many years and understands me better than anyone else. There is the student who requests a grade change on his paper, trying hard to get me to understand the enormous challenges and pressure he faces in excelling academically. Sometimes we are urged to understand strangers too. In an opinion piece on the alleged sexual assault of a Guinean housekeeper by a French politician, the author urges us to look further than the facts reported in the media to understand where the accuser is coming from. The author reports that the Guineans interviewed expressed disapproval of the deception used by the accuser to get asylum in America. “But given the poverty and systemic violence in their country,” he adds, “they understand the circumstances in which such deception could occur and we should, too.”⁴ We may wonder if these and the examples of the mother and the father are disparate cases of understanding in need of different accounts of what understanding is. It is true that what we mean by a term may vary across different contexts, so the mere fact that we label all these cases as examples of *understanding* does not make it true that they indeed exemplify the same thing. My suspicion is that there is indeed a single, unified notion of understanding that is at work in all these cases. I cannot prove that this is so, but I shall proceed on the assumption that it is, and see whether I can come up with a characterization of a single notion that can accommodate all these cases.

2.2 What is understanding?

Let us begin with a broader question: what is it to understand *anything* at all, not just individual persons, but, say, the theory of relativity, autism, the Mars Curiosity rover, Picasso’s paintings, or Shakespeare’s plays? Granted these subject matters differ

⁴McGovern, “Before You Judge, Stand in Her Shoes.” *New York Times*. 5 July, 2011.

from one another in many ways, we seem to have a distinctive kind of cognitive achievement when we arrive at understanding. What looks to us like a mystery or puzzle before is no longer so. When we understand something, perhaps with a feeling of “Aha! I got it!” we have moved from a state of confusion or “darkness” to clarity. Following this line of thought, let us take as a first approximation to the sort of cognitive achievement understanding is to be this: “To understand something means to have related it to ourselves in such a way that we discover in it an answer to our own questions” as Jean Grondin writes, based on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics.⁵ The subject matter becomes all clear to me now that I understand it (fully), for I will no longer be puzzled or confused by any question I (or anyone else) might raise about it. This all makes good sense, but I think it needs some further unpacking.

Knowledge

A first thought that comes to mind, when we think of the state where we can answer any questions about the subject matter, is that it is a state where we *know* a lot of things (or even *everything*) about it. For example, a researcher who studies autism may be said to understand it if she is able to answer questions like, What are the symptoms of autism? What is the cause of it? What treatments are available? What is the prevalence of autism in the population? For this and other subject matters as well, we can imagine having a database of information stored in our minds, which supplies answers to such questions. Call this database the collection of our propositional knowledge about the subject matter, where propositional knowledge is roughly defined as justified true belief. It certainly seems true that knowledge is *necessary* for understanding of a subject matter, for it seems impossible for one to understand something and yet get all the facts wrong about it. It is debatable *how much* knowledge is necessary, for it is quite plausible for one to get some facts (peripheral ones, perhaps) wrong and yet

⁵Grondin, 1994, p.116.

understand no less than another who knows more.⁶

But is propositional knowledge about a subject matter *sufficient* for understanding it? We would hesitate to say so. Consider how the science teacher would test whether students have understood Newton's Second Law of Motion.⁷ Being able to recall and state it, $F = ma$, shows that the student knows the law, in the sense of having propositional knowledge of it. But this alone far from demonstrates the student's *understanding* of it. To test for understanding, the teacher would have to assign further tasks, asking the students, for example, to explain what the formula means, explain various natural phenomena using the law, or design an experiment to test it. The distinction between merely having propositional knowledge of something and understanding it can be applied to other kinds of object too. I can memorize the Constitution without understanding the meaning and significance of the First Amendment, or better still, I might also be able to memorize the statements expressing the meaning and significance (suppose we do have such knowledge, which I doubt) of the First Amendment but fail to understand them. Or I can know the plot of a novel, down to every detail in it, without understanding the work.

The above considerations suggest two other points concerning understanding. First, it is closely related to being able to *apply, use*, or in other ways *act* with what one understands, in addition to having certain *beliefs* about the subject matter. Second and this seems to be what underlies the application, use, or other kinds of action involving ones understanding when one understands something, the information she has about it *makes sense* to her in some way. I will take up the second point first.

Appreciation of Relations

⁶The series of articles in the "Symposium on Jonathan Kvanvig's The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding" from *Epistemic Value* have an interesting discussion on the degree to which understanding is "factive," i.e., tracking truth.

⁷This example is from Grimm, 2012.

Given the differences in potential subject matters of understanding, it is hard to pin down exactly what it is for any subject matter to “make sense” to one. Figuring out why the Mars rover moved this way rather than that upon hitting a bump is part of what goes into making sense of the rover, whereas figuring out the “moral of the story” in *Macbeth* is part of making sense of the play.⁸ Perhaps what is common in the two cases is that the “sense” comes about as a result of “sorting through” and organizing the pieces of knowledge one has acquired. How is that so?

Epistemologists and other philosophers who write on understanding often talk of “perceiving” or “grasping” *connections* among the pieces of knowledge that one possesses. Jonathan Kvanvig, for example, asserts that “understanding requires, and knowledge does not, an internal grasping or appreciation of how the various elements in a body of information are related to each other in terms of explanatory, logical, probabilistic, and other kinds of relations that coherentists have thought constitute justification (2003, pp.192-193).” In the case of the rover, part of one’s understanding then consists in an appreciation of the explanatory relations in the body of information concerning, e.g., the rover’s movements at various times, its positions, the landscape it is moving on, the functions of its various parts, and so on. Understanding Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* involves (but is not limited to) grasping the logical relations between the statements he makes.

⁸Notice that one may have an answer to such questions like, Why did the Mars rover move this way, or what is the meaning of *Macbeth*, without being able to articulate it, or even have it in the form of a (justified, true) belief stored in her mind. Conversely, as we saw earlier, one may be able to rattle out answers to such questions without actually understanding the subject matter. So the “first approximation” of the notion of understanding can only be approximate, but it is still helpful for teasing out what more there is to understanding, other than knowledge. Although one could theoretically have a database of answers to various questions about a subject matter, i.e., possess a collection of propositional knowledge of it (thus apparently fitting the definition of understanding according to the “first approximation” without actually having understanding), I think what the “first approximation” is *intended* to bring out is that understanding gives one the ability to *come up* with answers to any questions, and this ability in turn relies on some kind of “sense” that one has made of the information she has about the subject matter.

Another kind of relation in terms of which we can make sense of the information is the part-whole relation. Wayne Riggs, though employing the same vocabulary of “grasping” and “appreciation,” emphasizes the relations between individual pieces of information and the whole body they make up: “The kind of understanding I have in mind is the appreciation or grasp of order, pattern, and how things ‘hang together’. Understanding has a multitude of appropriate objects, among them complicated machines, people, subject disciplines, mathematical proofs, and so on. Understanding something like this requires a deep appreciation, grasp, or awareness of how its parts fit together, what role each one plays in the context of the whole, and of the role it plays in the larger scheme of things (2003, p.217).” Catherine Elgin makes a similar point in her discussion of scientific theories as embodying an understanding of the world.⁹ While the components of a theory are connected to each other through explanatory, logical and other kinds of relations, they must also be unified and integrated into the theory such that changes in some components might drastically alter the theory itself, and individual components make sense to us only within the larger context of the theory as a whole.

Another way of capturing this element of grasping of relations within one’s collection of information is to say that understanding involves apprehending the *structure* of one’s knowledge. Neil Cooper likens this feature of understanding to navigation, calling understanding the “geography of knowledge.”¹⁰ Linda Zagzebski also argues that understanding involves representing the subject matter by way of “maps, graphs, diagrams, and threedimensional models,” all of which do not mirror individual facts about the subject matter, but the structure in it (2001, p.241).

But it still remains to be seen how the “sense” we make of a play or a painting,

⁹Elgin, 2006.

¹⁰Cooper, 1994, p.4.

could be tied to organization of information about the work. Perhaps understanding in such cases, as *interpretation*, is better thought of as something other than organizing information. Nevertheless, I think there is something to be said about appreciating the meaning of subject matters like these and grasping relations. Take the play, *Macbeth*. To understand this play, the reader must understand both what the story is, and what it is about. The sequence of events that take place in the story, from the prophecy by the witches, to Macbeth's murder of King Duncan, to Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking, and so on and so forth, is pieced together by connecting up the actions of characters with their beliefs, desires, intentions, feelings, etc. as expressed in their speeches. Furthermore, we could say that the meaning of the story, or what the story is about, is contained in a "pattern" or "patterns" exhibited through the unfolding of the story. For example, we may think that what ties together Macbeth's actions over the course of the play is his ambition; the story exhibits a pattern of the life that is dominated by an unbridled quest for power. Once we discern this and other "patterns," we seem to be in the neighborhood of understanding the play.

Performance

Let us now turn to the other point I made earlier about understanding: that it is closely related to *applying*, *using*, or in other ways *acting* with what one understands. The "first approximation" of the notion of understanding is itself characterized in terms of what we can *do* once we have understanding – we can come up with answers to questions we might ask about the subject matter. While understanding cannot be *reduced* to practical abilities or skills (for it is primarily a *cognitive* achievement), it seems right to say that they result from understanding. Noël Carroll characterizes one main difference between understanding and knowing in this way: "understanding is meant to mark our capacity to manipulate what we know and apply it with a sense of intelligibility – not simply to have access to abstract propositions and concepts, but to

employ them intelligibly and appropriately (1998, 143).”

In fact, one’s “employment” is the only source of data that allows us to determine the degree of her understanding. Take the teachers point of view again: to test whether students have actually understood a topic and not just memorized it, the teacher need to devise questions that test how well students can *perform* tasks with those beliefs: solving a problem, defending a view, explaining a phenomenon, and so on.¹¹ Wayne Riggs gives another example of understanding as demonstrated through performance: “. . . consider someone who understands, say, a complicated machine. Such a person will display a number of typical features. She will typically have a lot of knowledge about what different parts of the machine do, what the controls are for, etc. But anyone who reads the manual can get this information. Her *understanding* of the machine is captured by other things. For example, she might be able to predict erratic behaviour based on the sounds coming from the machine; or she might know just how hard one can push this machine past its specifications, versus that other one over there. Anyone who is blessed with an experienced and talented car mechanic has seen just these abilities being displayed (2003, pp.220-221).” Note, however, understanding a car need not always lead to actions that make a car better; someone who understands a car might well decide to turn it dysfunctional and easily succeed. And strictly speaking, since only the *ability* to perform accompanies understanding, one could understand something without her understanding manifesting itself through actions one way or another.

To sum up, we can translate the first approximation of a conception of understanding into something less abstract: understanding a subject matter, X, (a) is based on knowledge of facts pertaining to X; (b) involves an appreciation of relations between

¹¹In “What is Understanding?” from *Teaching for Understanding: Linking Research with Practice*, David Perkins reflects on the assessment methods teachers use to arrive at a view about understanding in general.

items of this knowledge such that the items fit together in a (more or less) unified and coherent whole; and (c) results in an ability to perform tasks involving X.

I want to note that I'm referring to understanding here as a product, end state, or achievement. The *process* of understanding is, in one sense, the structuring of what one knows or the "working-out" of the relations between pieces of one's knowledge. In another sense, though, there is a range of possible processes that facilitate or lead to understanding, processes that may involve gathering information about the subject matter, or organizing the information, or both. These processes can vary from subject matter to subject matter, and from person to person (as "understanders"). The processes leading up to understanding of a painting may include *looking* at it in various ways (moving closer or farther back, focusing on a few details or taking in the entire canvas, inspecting brush movements, etc.) and *reflecting* on our reactions to it. But these processes would not be so useful when we try to understand geometry, or the game of chess, or a complicated machine such as a computer. These subject matters require more hands-on experience with them: solving problems in geometry, playing chess, taking apart the machine, and so on. We tend to converge on certain processes for a particular kind of subject matter, but they may work better for some individuals rather than others.

Another point I want to make about this conception of understanding is that it offers an explanation for the fact that understanding comes in degrees. Roughly, the *depth* of understanding varies with how well one organizes what she knows, while the *breadth* varies with how much information she has about the subject matter.¹² This is not a strict formulation because how deeply one understands something is not completely independent from what one knows about it. And when we say someone has a broader

¹²What is the measure for how well one organizes her knowledge? Kvanvig suggests that it is a matter of degree of coherence. I wonder if there are other dimensions to it.

understanding of something, we do not just mean that she has more knowledge, but also that she grasps a greater number of relations correspondingly.

2.3 Understanding a person

Our discussion above yields a model for understanding when the subject matter is a person. To understand a person, we could say, it “means to have related the person to ourselves in such a way that we discover in it an answer to our questions about the person.” Fleshing it out more, we get this: understanding a person A, (a) is based on knowledge of facts pertaining to A; (b) involves an appreciation of relations between items of this knowledge such that the items fit together in a (more or less) unified and coherent whole; and (c) is accompanied by an ability to perform tasks involving A. This is admittedly rather vague. What sorts of “facts pertaining to A” are we looking at? How does the “grasping of relations” play out in the case of a person? And what does it mean to “perform tasks involving a person”? I will elaborate on each of these three elements.

Knowledge

For understanding of a person, what do we have to know about her? It is not hard to draw up a list — physical attributes; temperaments, emotions and feelings; beliefs, desires, reasons, intentions, goals, interests, likes and dislikes; skills, talents, abilities and disabilities, achievements and failures; ways of thinking — of people, things, and the self; character and personality traits; values, concerns and principles; social roles, financial status, profession, and relationships; cultural, social, political, and historical background, etc.

Ideally, a full understanding would require full knowledge of the person. But *full* understanding is hardly a realistic or even useful goal, and as we have seen, it’s possible to understand well enough without knowing a whole a lot about the subject matter. So

the more interesting question is, what are the facts *central* to what the person is like, such that knowing them is more likely to contribute to our understanding?

It seems to me that when we think of understanding, we are mostly concerned with these three questions – Why did A do that? What kind of person is A? What kind of experience is she going through? The questions are interrelated, for after all they are all questions about what A really is, or as I'll call it, the reality of A.¹³ Central to an answer to the first question would be knowledge of A's reasons, her beliefs and desires that ground those reasons, her dispositions that make intelligible those beliefs and desires, the context in which she acted, and the circumstances under which she came to acquire those dispositions of hers. The second question calls for an answer involving knowledge of A's character and personality traits. This answer overlaps somewhat with the previous one, for why one acts in a certain way is in part a function of the kind of person she is. As for the third question, it asks for knowledge of things like A's feelings and emotions, or other kinds of psychological states that comprise her experience. It could be a brief state of feeling pain, or a complex mixture of persisting states like feelings of despair and helplessness alongside suicidal urges as she copes with the loss of a child.

There is, however, a key determinant of which facts would be considered central to understanding a person: what the person herself takes to be central. For ones point of view is also a significant part of her reality, and when she takes an apparently trivial fact to be important for her, it is no longer peripheral relative to her reality. This point can be generalized. Since ones point of view is significant to her reality, then what she takes to be the answer to the three questions above must also be part of our knowledge

¹³I'm borrowing this use of the term, "reality," from Iris Murdoch. It seems to me that what I call "understanding" of a person may be very close to what Murdoch means by "vision," and what Lawrence Blum (inspired by Murdochs work) calls "perception" (Blum, 1991). Both also seem to use "perception"/"vision" and "understanding" interchangeably.

of her if we are to understand her well.

Appreciation of Relations

In structuring our knowledge of a person, it is particularly important to discern the explanatory and part-whole relations in the bits of knowledge we have. We come to make sense of, say, someone's behavior, when we can explain it in terms of other facts about the person, and this usually requires that we "piece together" bits of knowledge to form a unified whole.¹⁴ In our understanding of a person, the part-whole relations can manifest themselves at different levels. The person can be seen both as a *whole* in herself, and as a *part* of a bigger picture.

One way to see a person as a whole is to assume that her thoughts, feelings, actions, and so on fit into a coherent system. In Cooper's words, it is "to discern the pattern in a life, the consistency in a character, or the mythical 'type' which the person appears to exemplify (1994, p.24)." R. W. Hepburn also stresses the place of "pattern" in a person's life. But he seems to focus on the pattern the person takes *herself* to be realizing in her life, rather than the pattern that her life might exhibit to observers. He gives a vivid example of how our life events are different but related to the "pattern" of our life. Speaking of the autobiography of the poet and critic Edwin Muir, the first version of which was called *The Story and the Fable*, he says, "Significantly titled; for Muir contrasts the 'story' of his life (the bare narration of events), with its 'fable' – a slowly developing, often elusive, cluster of personal symbols, compounded of childhood memories, foci of aspiration, discoveries in literature, with reference to which his whole life is orientated, and his autobiography knitted into a natural unity, a unity different

¹⁴Susan Wolf points out that there can be danger in trying too hard to "unify" what one knows. Those suffering from certain mental problems can lack coherence in their thoughts and actions. Even ordinary people can often be inconsistent with themselves. Although this does not mean that we should abandon our project of making sense of someone (by making coherent what we know about her), it reminds us that we should always keep our minds open and be aware of the limits we face in trying to understand someone.

from any conventional articulation into a life's phases (1956, p.15).” It is possible that the pattern one person discerns from someone’s life differs from that picked out by another observer, or that envisaged by the person herself. It may be that we are all correct, or one or more of us are wrong. When the person herself is wrong, her view on the pattern of her life is still significant to our understanding of her (and of the pattern), for it not only reveals important information about the kind of person she is, but has also played an essential role in shaping the actual pattern that her life turns out to exhibit.

Another way to make out part-whole relations, I think, is to see the person as the subject of an ongoing narrative such that her present experience is to be made sense of in light of her past experiences.¹⁵ On the other hand, to see the person herself as a *part* means to situate the person in some context. The context could be the relationship between her and another person, or between her and the community to which she belongs, or between her and the historical period she lives in, and so on. In the example of the newspaper opinion piece, the author argues that we cannot understand the kind of person the accuser is without knowing something about the kind of society she lived in.

Performance

In the case of a person, as in the case of other subject matters, understanding is accompanied by abilities to perform both cognitive and practical tasks.¹⁶ When we understand someone, we are able to explain and predict her behavior with relatively high accuracy, as well as make sound judgments of her or her actions. What we are

¹⁵As I mentioned before, our understanding of some aspect(s) of a person and our understanding of her as a whole shape each other. While we may come to better understand, say, a person’s actions in a particular situation in light of what we know about her character, our understanding of her character may at the same time be revised based on what her actions in the recent incident reveal about her.

¹⁶The line between the two kinds seems fuzzy.

also able to do is to interact with her in ways that are responsive to her reality.

In *Good and Evil*, Raimond Gaita cites a story by Primo Levi from his book, *This is Man*. Charles, an inmate at the concentration camp in Auschwitz, showed “the tenderness of a mother” when he helped another inmate, Ladmaker, who had become “a poor wreck of a man” in Levi’s words because of his diseases. When Ladmaker fell from his bed one night, Charles cleaned him and carried him to the bed that he had also cleaned and remade. As Gaita sees it, Charles’ act of altruism, and especially the *manner* in which he helped Ladmaker, demonstrated a deep understanding of Ladmaker’s suffering.

This example might lead one to think that once we understand someone (well enough), we will inevitably act in morally appropriate ways in relation to her. And this connection between understanding and moral action would be solid proof that understanding is morally valuable. But we need to be careful here thinking about what actually went on in the example. Did Charles understanding of Ladmakers suffering give him knowledge of how he was to respond to Ladmaker? Yes. But did it, by itself, dispose him to help Ladmaer? No. Its quite possible that the others in the room who saw Ladmakers fall also understood his situation, but they did nothing. One may object that this only shows they didnt *really* understand Ladmakers suffering. For if they had, they would have understood how awful it must be to be in his situation, how vulnerable he felt, and how much he needed a helping hand. Then they would have acted as Charles did. But we can imagine a cruel camp guard, who could understand all this and yet subject Ladmaker to even more humiliation and torture, enjoying it for precisely the reason that he understood how much worse life would be for Ladmaker. This goes to show that understanding a person does not necessarily lead us to act one way or another, though it certainly informs us how we are to act in relation to her. This is in line with our discussion of performance in the last section. Someone who

understands a car well may do good or bad to the car, and do a great job either way precisely because of his understanding of it.

In the rest of this section, I want to revisit the two issues I considered in the last section: (i) the distinction between the process(es) of understanding and understanding as a product, and (ii) degrees of understanding.

Regarding the first, I think it is certainly helpful for tidying up our thinking about understanding persons to always keep in mind the distinction. What understanding is as the product – call it a mental grasp of the reality of the person – must stay fixed, while there can be many routes to it. Depending on ones relationship with the person she is trying to understand, some processes are available options to her but others are not. For instance, I can come to understand my roommate through talking with her and her other friends, observing her reactions to certain things, and engaging in joint activities with her. But I could do none of these if I were to try to understand Socrates, in which case the processes I would most likely rely on are reading Platos dialogues and imagining how Socrates lived. One thing worth noting about the processes of understanding is that no matter what process(es) we choose, our understanding would be seriously flawed if we failed to take on different points of view, including our own and that of the person we try to understand. This is because that persons point of view is itself a central element of her reality, but at the same time, it could well be mistaken about that reality. This is a lesson from the first chapter.

On to the second issue. While the degree of our understanding of a person is roughly a function of how much we know about her and how well we structure our knowledge, the task of understanding is complicated by the fact that persons are constantly changing. It does not help that they are already infinitely complex. There is hence always much room for improvement in our understanding of someone. We can further add to this picture the fact that we are constantly changing too. Just as we often gain more

insight when we return to books and films we read or saw years ago, our understanding of others will grow as we grow.

2.4 Other conceptions of understanding

Now we are in a position to examine common views of understanding and explain why they have such intuitive appeal. I will start with the set of views that place empathy at the center of understanding.

Understanding as empathy

As we have seen in the last chapter, philosophers interested in the role of empathy in morality tend to exaggerate its epistemic contribution. Michael Slote, notably, seems to think that correctly exercised empathy (with the right people, at the right time, etc.) will put us in a position to take the right action. The implicit assumption is that when we empathize correctly (with the right people), we thereby understand them well enough to respond in morally appropriate ways.¹⁷

But it is not just these philosophers who confuse understanding with empathy (or at least construe understanding in terms of empathy). Other moral philosophers do too, and our ordinary usage of understanding sometimes suggests equivalence of the two.¹⁸ In philosophical discussions of wrongdoing, the issue of understanding the wrongdoer

¹⁷Alisa Carse does distinguish between empathy and understanding, stating that the former contributes to the latter. Her views on empathy are thus more plausible than Slote's, but she tends to attribute a bigger role to empathy in its contribution to understanding than it actually has, as we have seen in her discussion of examples of "improper empathy." She makes this mistake because, I think, she does not have a clear conception of understanding to work with.

¹⁸Psychologists seem to slide quickly from "understanding" to "empathy" too. In their article, "Why Do Friends Understand Each Other Better Than Strangers Do?" Colvin, Vogt and Ickes answer the question posed in the title in terms of "empathic accuracy" of another's inner states. A similar move is made in another article, "Managing Empathic Accuracy in Close Relationships," by Ickes and Simpson. Whereas the article begins with the French Proverb, "To understand all is to forgive all," and the English epigram, "To understand all is to forgive nothing," and promises a way to make sense of both, it switches to a discussion of empathic accuracy from the second paragraph onwards.

is often raised, but never quite elucidated. The discussions typically turn on a distinction between a “shallow” understanding and a “deep” one, where the former involves knowing facts about the wrongful act and explaining it in terms of reasons, and the latter some sort of “empathic understanding,” “identification,” or “imaginative projection” into the wrongdoer’s point of view.¹⁹ This tendency to fall back on empathy in explaining understanding may in part be influenced by our everyday usage of the term, “understand.” We do seem to tend to emphasize the understanding of one’s internal experience when we talk of understanding. “You just don’t understand” is a common complaint we hear, which typically means that we are failing to see things from the other person’s point of view. When I say, “I understand what you are going through,” the implication seems to be that I can imagine what it must be like for you to be struggling in the difficult situation, and how frustrated and anxious you must be because I can vicariously experience your feelings as well. Or when we think that one is too harsh in his judgment of his father, we ask him to try to understand his father by “stepping into his shoes.”

If understanding is the mental grasp of a person’s reality, it becomes clear why we are inclined to take understanding to be (primarily) empathy even though what we implicitly look for is something like the mental grasp of one’s reality. On this account of understanding, our understanding of a person is first of all based on knowledge about her, and in particular, propositional knowledge of various facts about her and acquaintance knowledge of her subjective experience. Our subjective experience constitutes a significant part of our reality. Especially from our own point of view, it may seem as if

¹⁹See, for example, Pamela Hieronymis “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness,” and Paul Formosa’s “Understanding Evil Acts.” Adam Morton, in his discussion of how we could come to understand evildoers, follows a common view that we can have “intuitive understanding” of an evil act only if we can imagine ourselves doing it. This is not exactly empathy yet, but since the goal is to understand how the person turned to evil, I suppose imagining ourselves doing it is a means to approximate the internal experience of the evildoer. Thus it is very close to empathy, if not the same as it.

it is all there is to the reality of us. So it is quite natural to emphasize knowledge of it when we talk of understanding someone, with the implication that empathy is what we are looking for since it is what yields that knowledge. Furthermore, understanding involves appreciation of how bits of information about the person fit together, and again when we privilege her point of view in considering what makes up the reality of her, we would be led to construe the appreciation as that of how *she* takes everything about her to fit together. To understand a particular action of hers, then, would involve relating it to her beliefs, desires, personality and other things in the same way that she herself makes sense of it. Here again, empathy is called for.

Besides the weight we assign to the subjective experience and point of view of a person in constituting her reality, another reason why we tend to mistake empathy for understanding has to do with the fact that empathy reveals to us the more opaque part of a person, her internal experience. Complacent as we usually are, we are quick to assume that we understand someone enough through observing what she does and hearing what she says. A lot of information about her is readily available to us as long as we care to notice. When we urge someone to *really* try to understand another, we are effectively asking her to start “noticing” the part of the other that is much less straightforwardly obvious. Even though we may well *mean* to urge her to grasp the reality of the person as a whole, the focus often falls on that person’s internal experience, and hence on empathy, because that is typically missing from what one might already have grasped. But since one’s subjective experience does not exhaust the reality of her, nor does her point of view necessarily supply us the right way of structuring our knowledge of her, empathy falls short of understanding. One might think perhaps that at least in cases where the subject matter of understanding is part of a persons subjective experience (e.g., her pain, or her love of good burgers), we can substitute empathy for understanding. I doubt we can. In such cases as in other

cases where the subject matter is the whole person, empathy is only one of a range of *processes* we can use to achieve understanding. Perhaps empathy is almost always an indispensable process, but it is at least logically, if not also empirically, possible for one to achieve understanding – even of another's subjective experience – without empathy.

Understanding as explanation

Another familiar view takes understanding to be the ability to explain one's actions. While some, as we just saw, identify "shallow" understanding with this ability, it is also common for philosophers and nonphilosophers alike to treat understanding as none other than being able to explain a person's actions, if only more thoroughly than what is assumed to be sufficient for "shallow" understanding. Here's a typical example of what we think about when we think about understanding someone. In a paper that explores the relation between understanding, judging, and mercy, Samantha Vice explains in one section titled, "Understanding Another," what understanding a person amounts to. She begins the section as follows:

In this section, I wish to render as plausible as possible the claim that understanding another dissipates both the urge to condemn and the appropriateness of doing so. The starting point is the thought that providing a full explanation and evaluation of a person's action requires knowledge of the particularities of her character and situation. The idea is that knowledge of such particulars will lead to mercy rather than harshness towards the person, even when our judgement of the worth of the action remains negative. What then are these 'particularities', that in trying to explain a person's action would bring us to judge her more leniently, and how do they generate mercy (96-97)?"

It's true that in this context, Vice is interested in understanding a person's action rather than understanding a person. But the fact that she does not feel the need to distinguish "understanding another" from being able to "explain another's action" underlines an unspoken assumption that the two are, if not the same thing, at least closely related. The assumption is unspoken because it is so obvious; we as readers

are expected to follow along with ease as she goes from talking about “understanding another” to elaborating on what we need to explain the person’s action.

The intuition that understanding is a matter of being able to explain one’s actions does contain some truth about understanding: when we understand a person, we are able to perform certain actions in relation to her, including giving explanations of her actions (and thoughts, feelings, etc.). Since this ability correlates with the degree of one’s understanding, and more importantly, since we can only gauge one’s understanding on the basis of her actions, it is easy for us to mistakenly take the ability to explain a person’s actions to be the whole of understanding.

2.5 Understanding and morality

Before I close this chapter, I want to mention yet another intuition we have about understanding persons, the intuition that it is morally important. I believe we are very much right to think so. The next few chapters will take up the task of explicating the value of understanding. For now, I want to make three brief observations about how understanding might be valuable, given the resources afforded by the account of understanding I have sketched in this chapter.

First, since understanding a person is accompanied by the ability to perform tasks involving that person, a greater understanding allows us to respond in ways that are more sensitive to the other’s experience, needs, circumstances, and so on. It does not guarantee right action; but other things equal, a father who has a better understanding of his son’s craving for junk food is better able to communicate with the child about the importance of eating healthy, and help him exercise self-control and establish good eating habits. A greater understanding does not just lead to a more nuanced approach as one carries out her moral decision. It also introduces a greater degree of creativity in one’s consideration of what to do, as she now sees a wider range of possible responses to

another. This idea may give us a clue to how we might move beyond stock responses to wrongdoing, such as condemnation and retribution, to alternatives like reconciliation and forgiveness.

Second, apart from the connection understanding has to action, we might think that there is something valuable in itself in the attention to and uncovering of the reality of other persons. To Iris Murdoch, to achieve a clear vision of other persons is of the utmost importance to our moral development, which she sees as essentially a task of transcending our egocentric take on all matters and coming to see things (including persons) as they really are. I think we could go further with this idea, assuming that there is something special about the reality of persons, of all things. While it is important for us — insofar as we are to be moral agents proper — to see others as they really are (i.e., to understand them), it seems that it is also important for other persons to be seen clearly. If this is true, then understanding of persons can be valuable even independently of morally good actions it may give rise to.

And lastly, although there are many possible routes to understanding, successes in one's attempts at understanding are usually connected to qualities or dispositions in one that are themselves morally admirable. Blum gives an example of someone who accurately perceives an act as an affront to another's dignity. He suggests that her perception may be "connected to a more pervasive characteristic of her moral sensitivities — namely, that she is more deeply concerned about and tuned in to issues of dignity in people's lives than are most persons (1991, p.713)." This "more pervasive characteristic" is itself morally commendable, and is reflected in one's understanding of what this other person has suffered. We might also think that a willingness to understand another is another such characteristic. When we are grateful for a good friend's deep understanding of us, we are grateful for, among other things, her willingness to listen to us and accept that we have a great many imperfections.

Chapter 3

A Case for Understanding Evildoers

3.1 Introduction

I remember a conversation a few years ago when a friend told me he was reading Hitler's autobiography, *Mein Kampf*. It made me uneasy, the idea that he was reading a first-hand account of what was inside the head of the paradigm example of evil. As much as I could see the *intellectual* value of being exposed to a point of view that seemed entirely alien to most of us, I could not shake off the feeling that such exposure was nevertheless *morally* suspect. And as much as I was convinced of the importance to try to understand people in our lives - friends, family, coworkers, and sometimes even strangers — I was taken aback at the idea of understanding someone like Hitler.

But I'm not alone. When we hear about serial killers, mass murderers, rapists, dictators who willfully kill and torture their own people, terrorists who set off bombs in train stations, and others like them, many of us recoil at the thought of knowing "their side of the story." The intuition seems to be not just that there's no point trying to understand these people who commit atrocious acts, or that they are incomprehensible, but we *should not* try to understand them.

Is there a limit on whom we should or should not understand, morally speaking? More specifically, must we avoid trying to understand evildoers? This is the question I will explore in this chapter. I shall argue that the resistance many have against

understanding evildoers rests on shaky grounds, and in particular, on confusion over what it means to understand a person. Although attempts at understanding evildoers can go wrong and compromise proper judgment of their acts, dismissing them out of hand is no less serious a mistake.

3.2 Who is evil?

When we claim that there are just some people - those who have done evil — whom we shouldn't try to understand, we assume we know how to pick them out. Surely, we are familiar with the archetypes: Hitler and the SS officers, dictators who oppress and kill their own people, ruthless murderers and rapists, and terrorists who drop bombs on buses. But evildoers don't come with the label, "evil," on them. Rather, we classify them as such. How do we do it?

Is it that they belong to a group completely different from the rest of us, the decent human beings? Is it the group of evil people? But an evildoer is not necessarily an evil person. A one-time, singular evil deed is a sufficient condition for one to be considered an evildoer, but what makes someone an evil person is a character that is formed by, and in turn generates or reinforces, repeated acts of (or attempts at) evil. As Claudia Card puts it, an evil person is someone with "persistent and effective evil motives or intentions (or both) (2002, p.21)" or "persistent gross negligence or recklessness (p.22)," both of which lead to evil acts. The distinction between evildoers and evil people tends to be overlooked. As we recoil from a deed we see as evil, we tend to recoil from the person as if he were the embodiment of evil rather than someone who has committed a very serious wrong. Most evildoers, however, are not evil people. Collapsing the two categories would, as Adam Morton suggests, exaggerate the differences between ourselves (decent human beings) and evildoers (Morton, 2004).

How do we determine who is an evildoer?¹ A natural place to look is what the person has done. An evil act is an extremely serious case of wrongdoing. There are different ways of marking out the kind of acts that goes beyond being *wrong*, to being *evil*. Take Claudia Card's definition, for example. For Card, an act is evil when it harms the victim in such a way as to render the victim's life "intolerable." She lists some basic conditions that make a person's life tolerable: "uncontaminated food, water, and air; sleep; freedom from severe and prolonged pain and from debilitating fear; affective ties with other human beings; the ability to make choices and act on them; and a sense of one's own worth as a person (2002, p.16)." What is fundamental to us, then, is a minimum level of physical and psychological well-being, autonomy, and dignity. It would be wrong to compromise any of these conditions in a person, but it would be evil to destroy them.² However, the degree or scale of the harm inflicted on others is not enough to make an act evil. We are appalled not just by the sheer number of deaths brought about by the murderer or the severe living conditions forced by the dictator on his subjects. We are appalled by the complete disregard for the victims, whether it

¹Perhaps those we take to be unsuitable objects for understanding are evil *people* rather than evildoers. I doubt this is the case, for usually one evil deed seems to be enough to invoke our resistance to understanding the perpetrator. But suppose it is the case that our resistance is really targeted at evil *people*, much of what I have to say in this section (identifying evildoers) and the next (perceived dangers of understanding evildoers) still applies.

²I find it useful to think of our attitude towards the fundamental conditions by way of the humanity formula of Kant's Categorical Imperative (though I do not want to or need to discuss Kant's views on evil). It is morally wrong to treat a person not as an end but only as a means. It would be evil (on the view I hold, not Kant's view) to destroy (or at least severely impair) the conditions for one's being a person at all. In other words, it would be evil not just to treat someone *as if* she were not a person or an end-in-itself, but to actually reduce her to less than a person. I want to note, though, we have to interpret personhood loosely, if we want to extend protection against evil to all human beings and not just those with fully developed rational capacities.

Card also suggests a notion of diabolical evil: "knowingly and culpably seeking others' moral corruption, putting them into situations where in order to survive they must, by their own choices, risk their own moral deterioration or moral death (p.212)." This kind of evil acts seem to be worse than the others. For the "fundamental" condition of a tolerable life that is being destroyed here is autonomy, which can be said to be distinctively human — what the victims lose in such cases seems to be the ability to act in accordance with the principles they are deeply committed to.

be in the form of a calculated decision to harm them or wanton negligence.³

But even if we can decide on common features that constitute an evil act — note that correctly recognizing some of the features, such as the person’s intention, already requires some understanding of his beliefs, values, and so on — evildoers come to exhibit these features in many varied ways. Morton gives a nice summary of different possible routes to evil:

“There are four obvious kinds of evil personalities. There are people who just do not have the normal barriers against atrocity. The extreme examples might be a violent sociopath, the kind of person once called a psychopath. Then there are people who have undergone a process that has taught them ways around the barriers, that they can activate when needed. The model is violentization. The third kind is people who have acquired beliefs from their cultures which neutralize the barriers. The prime examples are ethnic prejudices and moral beliefs which too easily give permission for atrocity. And the fourth kind is people who invent for themselves beliefs and ways of thinking that facilitate transgression. Dangerous fantasies of one’s own superiority, or self-created ideology, will do the job here (2004, p.66).”

We are familiar with murders committed by sociopaths. Terrorists seem to fall into the third category, as they are typically driven by their commitment to religious or political ideologies that are valued above anything else. Racist beliefs, when carried to the extreme and exalted as the highest ideals, can drive their followers down a similar path to evil. Some of the SS officers seem to be of the third kind. As Hannah Arendt writes, they tried to deflect their guilt by thinking of themselves as victims, focusing their attention not on the Jews who suffered or died at their hands, but instead on themselves - they were having it so much worse because their duties required such difficult tasks as torturing and killing innocent human beings (1994, p.106).

³Morton’s examples of evildoers include middle-level bureaucrats who mindlessly minister the enactment of policies of an organization that will destroy or cripple many lives, as well as the head of a drug company who, out of the single motive of earning profits, decides to keep the prices of a breakthrough anti-cancer drug artificially high at the expense of many patients’ lives.

Morton's list is not exhaustive (it's not meant to be), but it is enough to show that we cannot assume there is a single, fixed response that applies to all evildoers. How we respond to a sociopath must clearly be different from how we respond to a religious fanatic. What this means for the issue of understanding is a couple of things. First, if evildoers come in so many different shapes, the intuition that we must resist understanding any of them is weakened. Not all of them are "crazy," or "monsters," or devoid of humanity, or utterly different from us, or intent on destroying lives, all of which seem to at one point or another lurk behind our resistance to understanding evildoers.⁴ Sure, we would be unduly simplifying things to now say that they are *just like* us. The point is only that they are not all as different from us as we initially thought.

The second point is more general. The possible differences in evildoers should cast doubts on our "disqualifying" individuals meeting a certain description from our attempts of understanding (even on the questionable assumption that we have an overwhelming reason to not try to understand people who fit this description). We cannot know beforehand whether there will be individual differences that warrant a change in how we view and treat them in particular cases.

I do not mean to have shown the project of identifying evildoers prior to understanding them is therefore doomed. Rather, I take myself to have shown that pinpointing the individuals whom we "surely must not try to understand" is not as straightforward as it seems. I have also suggested that in order to determine whether someone is an

⁴It is still possible to find a reason general enough to cover all cases, in support of this intuition. But some of the commonly cited reasons such as those I just mentioned have to be ruled out. Or one could respond by narrowing the range of people deemed unsuitable for understanding, whether by redrawing the boundaries of "evil" or by focusing on those evildoers who share certain additional characteristics. I'm not sure how successful this attempt may be, for if the criteria for picking out this new group of people are not specific enough, we might well encounter too much variation within the group; but as we make the criteria more specific, we might also need to begin to understand someone (beyond the basic facts surrounding the act) to determine if we should understand him.

evildoer (and hence not to be understood), we already have to understand some things about him. After all, the least we have to know to see someone as an evildoer include facts about what he did and its consequences, and seeing the facts as constituting an act of evil.

This does not necessarily make it self-undermining to claim that we should not try to understand evildoers. For the claim need not be interpreted literally as advocating *no understanding whatsoever* of evildoers, but only no understanding of them *beyond a particular level*. In fact, this seems to be closer to how the claim is meant to be taken. The burden falls on the supporters of this claim to specify the line between the “minimal,” “shallow” level of understanding that is acceptable of evildoers, and “deep” understanding.

3.3 Sympathy and understanding

Suppose we get past the stage of assuming evildoers are just monsters. Understanding them still seems the wrong thing to do. For presumably when we understand a person better, we naturally come to sympathize with the person, but surely this is wrong if the person has gone on a shooting rampage and appears not the least remorseful in front of the judge. This is a powerful intuition. We have all experienced times when we “warm up” to the people who wronged us after we begin to understand them more. If being sympathetic is already morally inappropriate in ordinary cases, it can only be worse in the case of evildoers.

There is a lot packed into the view that to understand evildoers is to sympathize with them, and therefore wrong. First, one could mean two different things by the purported relation between understanding and sympathy:

- (a) An attempt to understand an evildoer necessarily *involves* sympathy for him, and
- (b) An attempt to understand an evildoer inevitably *leads to* sympathy for him.

Second, it is assumed that sympathy is an inappropriate response to evildoers. The idea is that we generally agree there is a set of morally appropriate emotional responses to evil acts and evildoers; anger, resentment, and hatred are apt responses because they convey our *condemnation* of the act.⁵ Sympathy, which is feeling bad for the person, should be reserved only for the victims. Besides, it would be wrong to think of the act as anything less serious — especially when it is a transgression of this degree — which a sympathetic person is prone to do.⁶

Now that we have a clearer idea of the assumptions, the question is, are they true? In what follows, I will show that the assumptions rest on mistaken views of understanding, empathy, and sympathy.

Regarding (a), there are at least two ways to read it. One might think that because the kind of understanding at issue is “sympathetic understanding,” sympathy must be part of what it takes to understand an evildoer. Or one might take a more extreme position, according to which to try to understand an evildoer at all, that is, to even consider an evildoer as a target for understanding, is an expression of sympathy.

There is a sense in which our understanding of persons, including evildoers, is “sympathetic”: we refrain from imposing (usually negative) preconceived opinions on the person, open ourselves to alternative interpretations of an act, and are willing to opt for the more positive interpretation in cases of genuine uncertainty. It is “sympathetic” in the sense of being willing to give the person — in this case, the evildoer — “benefit of the doubt.” But if this is what sympathetic understanding amounts to, it need not involve sympathy. Often, “sympathetic understanding” is taken to mean understanding

⁵Morton suggests that the “visceral revulsion” we feel towards evil acts marks one of the three basic features of evil that distinguishes it from other kinds of wrongness (2004, p.13).

⁶Formosa discusses a similar objection, which states that “understanding evil undermines our hatred of perpetrators of evil and, as perpetrators of evil do not deserve anything better than our hatred, we should not try to understand their acts (74).” I suspect that the feeling of sympathy is what underlies the diminishing of hatred.

(motives, reasons, etc.) from that person's point of view. But in such cases, "sympathetic understanding" is a misnomer for what is actually *empathetic* (or empathic) understanding - seeing how it made sense from the perspective of that person, say, the evildoer, to do what he did. Does sympathy come into the picture here? I do not think so, for sympathy is a feeling we have *for another*. It is *our* reaction, from *our* point of view, towards the unfortunate situation he is in. Being empathetic, on the other hand, is a matter of adopting the other person's point of view. Thus, insofar as we are engaged in empathetic understanding, we cannot at the same time also feel sympathetic for the person. Feeling sympathetic might be a consequence of empathetic understanding, but not a part of it.

Yet, couldn't we say that for us to even take up the task of understanding at all is to first be sympathetic to the evildoer? We wouldn't want to understand a person if we didn't care (even just a little) about him, but caring about him involves positive attitudes towards him, such as sympathy. And why would we want to understand an evildoer if not because we believe there's still something good about him such that he still deserves at least some sympathy?

It makes sense that we cannot be *indifferent* to a person if we are trying to understand him, and sometimes we may do it precisely because we care about someone — in the sense of being invested in promoting his welfare. But we need not care about a person in this strong sense to be motivated to understand; we simply need to take an interest in him. Thus, all we need to take up the task of understanding is to care about the person in the (weak) sense of being interested in him, where that interest can be accompanied by positive attitudes or negative ones. As to the question of why anyone would want to understand evildoers, it seems to me that there could be any number of reasons for it. If the question is whether anyone could have *moral* grounds for understanding evildoers, my answer is affirmative, and I think it does not depend

on the assumption that we will ultimately find something good in the evildoer. The idea is parallel to the thought that humane treatment of evildoers does not depend on their having any redeeming qualities — I will say more about this in the next section.

Let us now consider (b), that an attempt to understand an evildoer will inevitably lead to feelings of sympathy for him. We may think (b) is true because it is highly likely that once we start looking into E's life, we will find something that makes him appear less wicked — perhaps the murderer was abused as a child, or perhaps the ruthless SS officer was a loving father and husband. Especially if we are to take seriously the role of circumstances in shaping an individual's choice, as commentators on evil emphasize — we are apt to feel sorry for the evildoer because he was caught in unfortunate circumstances.

My first response is to say that we cannot assume from the outset that we will indeed find out facts about E that will elicit sympathetic feelings. As we learn more about him, our emotional response may change accordingly, but until we understand that much, we cannot know in which direction our response will change. Paul Formosa gives an example of how our attitudes towards an evildoer could turn all the more negative with better understanding: “For example, I may understand that it was greed that drove a man to commit evil, but this in no way lessens my hatred of him. Indeed, it may actually increase it if, for example, I find out that he was already very wealthy and was simply greedily seeking even more money (2007, p.74).”

Still, one might insist, such cases are few and far between. Most of the time we are likely to find something that is likely to counteract our negative reactions. Despite what the person did, he may have some merits: The SS officer, as I have mentioned, might be a good husband and father; the priest who sexually abused young children might have been kind and generous to his neighbors. Just as common is our discovering the influence of past traumatic experiences on the kind of person the evildoer has turned

out to be. Whether it is learning about the “redeeming” qualities in the evildoer or about his unfortunate past, we will be moved, but isn’t it wrong to be moved by an evildoer?

I’m not entirely sure. Before we draw any conclusions about how we will certainly (or most likely) feel when we better understand an evildoer, let us take stock of what happens in the process of understanding him. As we learn more about this person and begin to see more clearly how he got to the point of doing evil and what factors contributed to it, we begin to understand what he is really like. He is not a monster or a killing machine, but shares interests and qualities with the rest of us. And while he has done grave wrong to his victims, it is often also true that he has been a victim himself.

In the absence of mitigating circumstances, the additional facts that inform our understanding of him do not make his act any less intolerable. Nor should we hesitate to voice our hatred and outrage because of them. Nevertheless, they do serve to remind us that as much as we are right to feel the range of hostile emotions in the wake of the evil act, we should not get carried away. While we do want to keep *some* distance from evildoers (keeping in sight that they *have done* evil), it is dangerous to stretch that distance to the point where we see ourselves as standing against them as belonging to a fundamentally different group, to which we are superior. As Morton cautions, when we set the evildoers apart from us this way, it becomes easier for us to regard and treat them in ways that are morally unacceptable, and perhaps even, ironically, not unlike how the evildoers regard and treat their victims: “They often think their victims deserve what they get, that they are worthless scum, inferior beings, or dangerously alien. They often think, in fact, that their victims are evil (2004, p.6).” But once we give up the black-and-white picture in favor of a more complex view of the evildoer, it becomes an open question as to whether our emotional responses to him could not also

admit of a greater complexity. For example, if he grew up in an abusive household, struggled with poverty, and endured years of ridicule and bullying at school, can we not feel sympathetic for the victim that he once was, as long as we stay firm in our denunciation of the evil that he now did? The qualification is important, and it is indeed a fine line between responding to an evil in humane ways and being too soft on him.

Before I close this section, I would like to borrow Frank Palmer's discussion of *Macbeth* to illustrate how I think empathy, sympathy, and understanding can come together in our response to an evildoer without detracting from our condemnation of him.

In the fictional world of villains and heroes, we are not just invited to witness their crimes or feats, but given access to what goes on in their minds. Frank Palmer's description of our acquaintance with the characters, including the evil ones among them, seems right: "We are acquainted with the horror of Macbeth's passage into evil, not merely because we witness it as spectators, but because we also make the journey with him. He is not the distant and indistinct figure we might read about in a newspaper, but a man whose doubts, fears, desires, ambition, and sense of guilt we are invited to share (1992, p.216)." According to Palmer, it is precisely because of our ability to see things from "the inside" as we follow Macbeth's passage into evil that we can truly understand the horror of the evil he commits. He emphasizes that our empathy with Macbeth deepens our understanding of him and his act, but we are not swayed in the least from our judgment that he has committed a very serious moral wrong, and that he is responsible for it. Here is what Palmer says of what we understand of Macbeth:

"If the essence of drama is conflict, that conflict is achieved here partly by the portrayal of Macbeth, not as a monster or fiend from hell, but as a man among men, whose capacity for evil is dependent upon his capacity for good. And herein lies the tragedy: that Macbeth is not a puppet manipulated by

the witches, but a man who freely consents to do what his conscience and imagination tells him is the work of the devil. The temptation does not spring from some unearthly love of evil (whatever that might be). Rather, it only gets its bite because Macbeth has qualities of character and aspirations that are in other circumstances marks of virtue. The valour and pursuit of an honour that makes him a fearless and noble warrior is perverted in the self-defeating pursuit of an ‘honour’ and a ‘greatness’ that cannot be achieved by legitimate means (pp.217-218).”

No doubt Macbeth is not the average evildoer we hear about in real life. But the fact that we need not judge him any less harshly despite his positive (or human) qualities goes to show that we need not shy away from empathy or understanding in order to maintain our moral verdict on the evildoer. Should we nevertheless shy away from feeling sympathy? Not necessarily. In the case of Macbeth, we could say that truly understanding this character requires that we see the *tragedy* of his life. But at the same time, I think we should not lose sight of the fact that the situation is way more complicated in real life. While we can think and feel about a fictional character as we like, our response to an evildoer in real life must also take into account its potential effects on other people, especially the victims. So even if one is justified in feeling sympathy for an evildoer, expressing it may still be morally inappropriate, considering what the victims have suffered and how they (or their family and friends) are struggling to recover.

3.4 What is at stake?

So far, I take myself to have shown that much of the resistance against understanding evildoers rests on a *misunderstanding* of what it is to understand them. By attempting to understand evildoers, we do not thereby condone their acts of evil or “dilute” either their responsibility for the acts or the gravity of the acts. To be sure, it is possible to make mistakes in understanding — e.g., relying exclusively on the evildoer’s point of view, or failing to rein in strong emotions — which will then skew our judgment of

the evildoer. But this is not reason to avoid trying at all, but rather to proceed with caution and look out for common pitfalls as we try to understand.

My aim, however, is not just to show that understanding evildoers is a morally suspect project as some might think. Ironically, what may in fact be morally questionable is a staunch refusal to understand evildoers. It seems to me that what holds a lot of us back from being willing to understand them is not just the worry that we might cease to judge them as harshly as we should. There is also a sense that we must distance ourselves from them, especially from their evil, dehumanizing point of view. And since understanding them would involve some sort of close contact with their point of view (even if it is not *adopting* their point of view), we must thus avoid understanding them.⁷ Resistance to understanding evildoers on such grounds would remain unshaken even if one accepts my arguments in the last section. Hence the task of this section: to weaken, if not demolish, this different type of resistance.

To clarify, I'm not suggesting that anyone who refuses to understand evildoers is wrong to do so. One could have good reasons for it: perhaps she simply cannot bear to think about the killings. But to consider evildoers "unfit" for us to understand, to classify them as a group of people that we must avoid as we go about understanding people - *this*, I will show, is morally questionable.

Now one may agree that despite what they have done, there is one thing we *cannot* do to evildoers on pain of contradicting ourselves or even committing a moral wrong on our own part. That is, as commentators on the subject of evil have urged, we should not deem evildoers as worthless vermin, which we are free to destroy. Treating them as if they were subhuman makes it incoherent to resent them for their acts of evil, for in resenting someone (and expressing other negative reactive attitudes), we attribute

⁷Except for the small number of people charged with the job of prosecuting evildoers, or studying them for the purpose of reducing evil in the future.

moral responsibility to him, as Strawson argues. It would also be incoherent for us to demand justice, presumably to be achieved through some form of retribution against the evildoer. As long as we do resent evildoers and see to it that they be punished severely, we cannot at the same time deny their status as moral agents. Furthermore, one may agree that morality demands that we treat every person in humane ways regardless of whether they themselves have turned against humanity. For one may believe that central to our moral thinking is a conception of persons as being “sacred” - for example, as having a dignity in virtue of their rational nature, according to Kant, and thus commanding unconditional respect - so that our moral response to them cannot admit of certain kinds of treatment, such as torture and “cruel and unusual” punishment.

In other words, one may be on board with the idea that evildoers are persons too, but it is not immediately clear what could be wrong in refusing to consider them as possible targets for our *understanding*, on a par with other, decent human beings. After all, it is perfectly fine for us to consider them unfit for various kinds of association, at least not until there is sufficient evidence that they have reformed; until then, we can justifiably refuse to accept them as our neighbors or colleagues, or let them take care of our children. If it is compatible with the spirit of humanity to distance ourselves from evildoers in these ways, why is it problematic to distance ourselves from their point of view, which is morally corrupt?⁸

One possible response is to suggest that an evildoer’s point of view is not completely corrupt or inimical to humanity, but has something worthy about it. Perhaps the SS

⁸I’m focusing on understanding of the evildoer’s point of view not only because understanding one’s point of view is in general essential to understanding the person, but also because what we find particularly baffling and horrifying about evildoers is how their acts, among other things, seemed from their point of view. In asking how they could have done what they did, we wonder, what were they thinking? What did they take themselves to be doing? How did it all make sense to them? Furthermore, much of the concern we seem to have about understanding evildoers can be seen as worries about “getting too close” to their point of view, as we saw in the last section.

officer did not consistently see Jews as scum, but at times felt sympathy for them. And perhaps there is something to be said about the terrorist who was willing to sacrifice his life for what he took to be a higher cause. Even if we can find nothing good about one's point of view, there is still the possibility that he may, with rehabilitation and reflection, change his mind for the better.

This all may well be true, but I think such a response is unsatisfying, for a few reasons. First, just as it is possible that an evildoer's point of view is not entirely corrupt, it is also possible that it is so perverted that there is really nothing to be said for it. And although it is possible for people to change the way they think, it can be very difficult, especially for those who have taken their entrenched beliefs or values to the extreme, as is the case with many people who turned to evil. Even if eventually one does "come to his senses," which is not guaranteed either, does that mean his point of view can be dismissed as long as it has not shown any signs of change for the better?

This leads to a more serious problem with the response. It assumes that a person's point of view is worth engaging with only if there is something good about it or at least the promise of something good. As the response is phrased, "good" here means *morally* good, but presumably we could use other standards to evaluate the quality of one's point of view, like sophistication, coherence, or the extent to which it is in touch with reality. The response thus implies that "good" points of view are "fit" to be engaged with, to be understood whereas "bad" ones aren't. And it appeals to the possibility that there is (if only potentially) some "good" left in an evildoer's point of view to argue that we therefore should not brush it aside. But the problem with the response lies not so much in the weakness of this appeal, but rather in the fact that the assumption it relies on is precisely what is troubling about the view it is meant to oppose.

Granted that the specific character of a person's point of view on specific matters

affects *how* we want to engage with it (and with the person) — I may celebrate my friend’s optimistic outlook on life, or consult my mother’s opinions on furniture choices, but condemn the mass shooter’s complete disregard for the lives of the children he killed. Yet, just as we cannot treat someone in manners that fall below a certain minimum standard insofar as we regard him a person, regardless of *what kind of person* he is; there is also a minimum standard, I think, for what we can do with someone’s point of view, regardless of its merits or flaws. That is, it cannot be deemed unworthy of any consideration or any sort of engagement. This is because what one is as a person is fundamentally tied up with one’s conception of the world and of himself, and one’s stance towards both. Treating someone properly as a person would be virtually meaningless if his point of view as a whole (as opposed to on specific matters) was disregarded. And disregarding the points of view of their victims entirely was a key element of how evildoers treated their victims, and we call their attitude towards the victims *dehumanizing*.

The phrase, disregarding one’s point of view, is somewhat ambiguous. A perpetrator could disregard his victims’ points of view in the sense that he did not bother to think about what his act could mean to the victims, how they would like to be treated, how they were feeling, and so on. There are also those who did “bother” to think about the point of view of their victims. In fact, they could relish in physically torturing or humiliating their victims precisely because they knew how much the victims must be suffering.⁹ In both cases, the perpetrators failed to give weight to the points of view of their victims. But in the first, it made no difference to the perpetrator whether or not they *had* points of view of their own. In other words, though he might well know

⁹In *Good and Evil*, Raymond Gaita quotes a passage from Chaim Kaplan’s Warsaw Diary, which shows how an evildoer could dehumanize the victim not by ignoring, but by paying close attention to the latter’s point of view: “A rabbi in Lodz was forced to spit on a Torah scroll that was in the Holy Ark. In fear of his life he complied and desecrated that which is holy to him and his people . . . (2004, p.1).”

that they did, his complete disregard for what their points of view might be like made it irrelevant to him whether they did or not.

Similarly, even though we can say that we acknowledge an evildoer has a point of view, the acknowledgement would not amount to anything if we also thought it fine to completely disregard what that point of view was like. That is, if we deemed it unworthy for understanding.

3.5 What about the victims?

So far, I have been talking of “we” as the general public. By virtue of their positions as third-parties with respect to the evil done, members of the general public can be assumed to share similar concerns regarding whether and how much they are to understand the evildoer. But one might think that the case is entirely different for a special group of people: the victims of the crime, and possibly also their close family and friends. Even if we grant that there’s moral good in trying to understand evildoers *as a society*, it seems rather insensitive to suggest to the *victims* of evil that they do the same. For they may simply want to have nothing to do with the perpetrator, except to demand that justice be done. As Lucy Allais points out, even though reconciliation and understanding are values worth promoting in the aftermath of wrongdoing, “[i]t is conceivable that many victims desire punishment before thinking about reconciliation (2012, p.350).” Further, she adds, “it is questionable whether it is fair to require victims to pursue the mending of relationships with those who have wronged them, and whether it really makes sense to talk of ‘repairing relationships’ in the context of being wronged by a stranger (ibid.).”¹⁰ Allais does not directly address the issue

¹⁰Alice MacLachlan makes this point when she says: “Murphy and others rescue resentment from discomfort and alienation by ‘cleaning it up’ and by connecting it directly to recognizably moral values: namely our sense of justice, our practices of holding others accountable and protesting wrongdoing, and our self-respect. In emphasizing the moralizing function of resentment, these philosophers offer an important service to angry victims of political violence, for example, who may otherwise get swept

of understanding here, but I think her point applies all the same. Whether we take understanding as a path to reconciliation (which seems implicit in Allais' view) or as an end in itself, it is questionable whether it is morally appropriate to require victims to understand the perpetrator in the deeper sense. For to do so would be to fail to properly respond to their suffering. The victims need comfort and support to recover from the harm; they have *themselves* to attend to first and foremost, and have their own lives to put back together. It would be absurd to ask them to attend to precisely the person they least want to have in their lives or even think about.

I agree that victims of evil should not be *required* to understand the perpetrators. And this is not just true for the victims, but for members of the public as well. My point is not that we as individuals *should* always try to understand evildoers.¹¹ It is rather that we should not dismiss them as being unsuitable for our understanding. No doubt the victims would have very different concerns — healing being the primary one — when it comes to responding to the evil done. But is there any special reason, available only to the victims, for ruling out the perpetrators as *potential* objects for understanding?

I doubt that. If I'm right in claiming that dismissing evildoers this way is tantamount to denying their humanity, then it holds true as much for the victims as for the general public (as I argued in the last section). Could the victim object by saying, "Why should I affirm the humanity in the person who denied (or blatantly disregarded) the humanity in me in the first place?" Well, when one is in the grip of intense anger and hatred as the victim would be following the evil deed, she is, quite understandably, prone to demonize the perpetrator.¹² But if we were to reason with her, we could say

up in *the push to reconcile, to end conflict, restore normal relations, and resume business as usual* (2010, p.427)."

¹¹Perhaps we *as a society* should always try to understand evildoers.

¹²As Charles Barton notes, moral disengagement is not only exploited by criminals to silence their

that even though someone who has done evil is morally corrupt, she is nevertheless a morally corrupt *person*, and deserves to be treated as a person. Besides, if the victim demands that the perpetrator be punished, which implies that he is a person, it would be incoherent of her to at the same time deny that he is.

Furthermore, while many victims have good reasons to not try to understand the perpetrators, some may find understanding beneficial to their recovery. Consider Cheryl Ward-Kaiser, who witnessed the rape of her daughter and the murder of her husband by a group of youths.¹³ Seven years after the crime, she began getting in touch with the criminals one by one as part of a restorative justice program. Of the first person she met with, she says she wanted the girl to hear her experience as a victim of their crime, and then she wanted to hear the girl talk about what they had done:¹⁴

“Then I wanted to hear her tell about her crime. And then I had questions for her. I wanted to know why they picked my house. I wanted to know why they singled me out. I didn’t have what they wanted. I didn’t have a safe. I didn’t have the money they wanted. Where did they get that from? And there’s — I think every victim that’s involved in every crime has questions

conscience, but also by victims in reacting to the wrongdoing(2010). Moral disengagement by victims can be seen “in their derogation and demonization evident in such phrases as ‘He should be hanged;’ ‘He is a monster,’ ‘He is an animal, not a human being,’ etc.”

¹³“Finding Closure Through Confrontation,” *NPR*, April 30, 2007.

¹⁴Getting the perpetrator to understand the victim can also be immensely beneficial to latter’s recovery process (and to the rehabilitation of the perpetrator as well), but my focus here is understanding in the other direction.

Arendt makes the same point about Eichmann: “Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain.’ Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*. It was precisely this lack of imagination which enabled him to sit for months on end facing a German Jew who was conducting the police interrogation, pouring out his heart to the man and explaining again and again how it was that he reached only the rank of lieutenant colonel in the S.S. and that it had not been his fault that he was not promoted. In principle he knew quite well what it was all about, and in his final statement to the court he spoke of the ‘reevaluation of values prescribed by the [Nazi] government.’ He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness — something by no means identical with stupidity — that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period (1994, pp.287-288).”

they want answered.”

But the meetings weren't just for her own benefit. Ward-Kaiser describes her meeting with another accomplice, who “fell to pieces” as she began to talk about what he did at the time. She observes that criminals typically found it difficult to talk about what they had done:

“I think that's the one thing that hasn't happened for them in their lives is that they don't stop to look at themselves. I mean, I think that's that whole problem with the system. There is no vehicle by which they sit down and people talk to them about what their feelings are and why they ended up where they are today, which is part of the reason I go talk in prisons. . . But for the first time in a long time, a lot of these people have never really understood the harm that they have caused. So a lot of us victims are going into places like that for them to begin to start looking at themselves. It's very hard for people that have never been asked to do it to look at what they did and why they did it.”

This point echoes mine in the last section, but makes it more vivid. As a member of the general public, my attempt to understand a perpetrator usually does not directly influence the latter; it is rather primarily a matter of how *I* regard the perpetrator. Any transformation that might occur as a result of or alongside the attempt would be a transformation in *my* attitude, for example, from dismissing the perpetrator as unworthy of humane treatment to recognizing him as fundamentally my equal. But in a face-to-face encounter such as that between Ward-Kaiser and the youths, what happens is not just the victim's acknowledgement of the perpetrator's humanity, but the perpetrator's being compelled to rediscover it himself. I think these are two sides of the same story. Ward-Kaiser's meetings with the youths illustrate how engaging with their points of view is also in a way *confronting* them. In the absence of such meetings, the confrontation plays out in our mind, so to speak, as we look at the perpetrator's point of view from our own perspectives. On the other hand, when our attempt to understand the perpetrator takes place in a conversation with him, the confrontation

plays out between us. As Ward-Kaiser says, when perpetrators are asked to talk about their crimes, not only is it an opportunity for the victims to engage with their points of view, but it allows the perpetrators to begin to engage with themselves, “to start looking at themselves.”

This is not to say that victims of evil should always try to talk to the perpetrators, or that the perpetrators will always reflect on their acts and take responsibility for them. Rather, Ward-Kaiser’s story shows that understanding perpetrators need not be “off bounds” even to the victims. It can be valuable for both the victims and the perpetrators. My quote of Lucy Allais’ view earlier in this section applies as much to a single-minded push for reconciliation and understanding as to a blanket resistance to it.

3.6 Conclusion

My discussion of understanding evildoers addresses questions about evil as well as about understanding. In relation to the topic of evil, I have suggested that given the complexity in people who commit evil, the range of appropriate responses to them — both emotional and practical - is larger than we tend to assume. And the responses we tend to focus on, such as condemnation, retribution, and alienation cannot be taken to the extreme, for evildoers are after all persons who have done evil. It is for the same reason that they should not be ruled out as potential targets for our understanding. In relation to the topic of understanding, I think the lesson about evildoers is applicable to anyone who may be presumed to “of course” be unworthy of being understood. They need not have done terrible wrong, but only to appear strange or even “alien” to us, perhaps in the way they act, or in the beliefs they hold. To therefore assume we should never bother to understand them is to head down the dangerous path of treating them in ways unacceptable of fellow humans.

It remains to be seen how much we *can* understand evildoers. While it'd be too quick to declare at the outset that all evil is incomprehensible, it is true that understanding the people who inflict evil is no easy task. They may actually be quite like us “average” persons, as Arendt’s theory goes, but what they did lies undeniably far beyond our “average” experience.¹⁵ Robert Fine, commenting on what it must mean to understand something so different from our ordinary experience, says,

“We must resist the presumption that nothing can happen which our categories are not equipped to understand and which cannot be deduced from its precedents. In the case of the Holocaust and of other forms of totalitarian terror, ‘all parallels create confusion and distract attention from what is essential.’ If the Holocaust has deprived us of our *traditional tools* of understanding, still we must confront the difficulty of constructing *new tools* (2001, p.135).”

Fine makes clear that he does not think we have no resources whatsoever to understand the Holocaust and other evils. We certainly *feel like* we’ve run out of intellectual resources in the face of evil and, throwing our hands up, resort to naming it with the evasive term, “evil.” But Fine is optimistic that we are capable of “constructing new tools” to come to grips with evil. I think he is right. Indeed, it is part of the process of understanding to “construct new tools,” for we are bound to encounter in others (and perhaps in ourselves too) something unfamiliar, evil being one extreme case, which resists straightforward assimilation into our existing system of schemas and categories.

¹⁵In this respect, we are quite like the judges at Eichmann’s trial. On Arendt’s view, the judges could only see Eichmann’s crimes as “proof for his fanaticism, his boundless hatred of Jews (1994, p.146)” — “No other explanation ever occurred to the judges, who tried so hard to understand the accused” The reason, as Arendt surmises, is that the judges are morally decent people who firmly believe in the “moral foundations of their profession (ibid.).”

Chapter 4

Is to Understand All to Forgive All?

4.1 Introduction

When we think about why it is morally valuable to understand others, a familiar saying comes to mind: “To understand all is to forgive all.” For if it is true, and if we suppose forgiveness is virtuous, then it would show understanding is a good thing too. But the saying is frustratingly ambiguous. If we ask, Is it true that to understand all is to forgive all? we cannot seem to make up our minds about it. Usually when the saying is brought up, we think it is blatantly false that a wrongdoer could be forgiven *just because* we have come to understand her well enough. If learning more facts changes our judgment that there was culpable wrong done to us — if, for example, the person did not actually do anything wrong or that he was not culpable for the offense — then our subsequent change of heart would not be a case of forgiveness. Alternatively, if learning more about the offender’s side of the story produces sympathy in us, prompting us to let go of hard attitudes, then forgiveness in this case seems to be too “cheap,” and we wonder if such a change of heart deserves the name of forgiveness at all.

I am also rather skeptical of the saying, but I wonder if there is also some truth to it. It does seem to have much intuitive appeal; we cannot articulate it when pressed to do so, but the saying seems to contain some important truth about forgiveness. Part of that truth also has to do with some sort of tight connection between understanding

and forgiveness although the saying itself may not have represented the connection accurately. The goal of this chapter is to uncover this connection.

4.2 Forgiveness

The details of the various formulations of forgiveness currently on offer may vary, but there is large consensus on what forgiveness must involve, and correspondingly, what it is not. To forgive, one must renounce the negative attitudes such as resentment and anger one initially held in response to a wrong done to her.¹ Also, the negative attitudes must be justified if renouncing them is to constitute (in part) forgiveness. In other words, to forgive is not to revoke those negative attitudes, but rather to both affirm their validity and yet give them up. The negative attitudes are usually considered to be tied to a judgment about the act of wrongdoing, the judgment that the act is wrong and the agent is culpable for it.² Forgiveness, at a minimum, is to renounce the

¹Susan Wolf suggests the possibility of forgiving without renouncing negative attitudes because the victim developed no such attitudes in the first place even though she does judge that she has been wronged and the offender is responsible for it. I agree that this is indeed a live possibility, though I suspect that it's seldom realized. In most cases where we are not so "bothered" about the wrongdoing, it's because we think the act is either excused or justified. This is not forgiving though we may still use the term to refer to our response (mistakenly, I would say). Of course this is not what Wolf is suggesting. I can think of two ways in which someone can hold that judgment about the wrongdoing and yet does not develop negative attitudes towards the offender in response to the wrongdoing, *and* it makes sense to say she nevertheless forgives the offender (if she does). First, she does not judge that the offender actually disrespects her person despite the appearance of his act to suggest otherwise. Second, she judges that the offender does indeed disrespect her (through his act), but for some reason, she does not react with negative attitudes like resentment, as most people would. This does not need to be because she has an unusual psychological makeup. She may have internalized religious teachings that encourage positive attitudes to even one's enemy, or she may be persuaded by secular views on the value of love, compassion, or respect of some sort for people to the extent that she no longer responds to offenses against her with resentment. Such cases are unusual, but the possibility of them highlights two important assumptions that discussions of forgiveness take for granted: (i) When someone judges herself wronged by another, she also judges that the offender harbors ill will towards her, or at least lacks respect for her; and (ii) When someone so judges the offender, she responds with negative attitudes such as resentment. Indeed, my own contribution to the discussion relies heavily on (i).

²Commentators have different formulations of the content of the judgment that must remain fixed for it to be a case of forgiveness, but I think they are more or less variations on the central theme of wrongful act and moral responsibility on the part of the agent.

negative attitudes while holding fixed the judgment about the wrongdoing.

On the face of it, there seems to be something paradoxical about forgiveness. On the one hand, one is to give up her negative attitudes. But on the other hand, she has to retain the judgment expressed by those attitudes. The basic challenge that every account of forgiveness has to meet is to explain away the apparent incompatibility between the two sides of forgiveness. It is widely agreed that not just any way of changing one's attitudes can count as forgiveness even though a change in attitudes can come about in many different ways. We may suppress our anger or other negative attitudes by diverting our attention to something else, or if that works only temporarily, we may go through certain mind-training programs to alter our emotions. Or to use an example that commentators particularly like, we could change our attitudes by simply popping a pill if such a pill exists. But certainly these ways of changing our attitudes are not in the picture when we think of forgiveness as being somehow paradoxical, for if they are, no one would think there's anything mysterious about forgiveness since we can very well hold the judgment fixed and alter our attitudes in one or more of these ways.³ Understanding is indeed unnecessary if one gives up her negative attitudes by taking a pill.

³There is some consensus in the literature regarding the reasons to forgive. Jeffrie Murphy's thought that forgiveness must be done for moral reasons is often invoked in accounts of forgiveness. I think this is a mistake and I'll briefly explain why. Let us look at the two cases that have motivated Murphy. First is the case of forgetting: "Sometimes we lose a vivid memory of old wrongs, become bored with our resentments, and simply forget (1998, p.507)." Murphy argues that forgetting cannot be forgiving since it "just *happens* to us." Then there's the case of undergoing a change of attitudes for selfish reasons: "... my resentment so dominates my mental life that I am being made miserable. In order to regain my peace of mind, I go to a behavior-modification therapist to have my resentment extinguished. (Let us suppose there are such techniques.) (ibid.)" Murphy seems to have two concerns here. First, he wants to rule out certain ways of giving up negative attitudes as forgiveness; forgetting or modifying attitudes by certain psychological/therapeutic "techniques" do not count as forgiveness. Second, he wants to rule out certain motives or reasons for changing one's attitudes. He rejects the second example as one of forgiveness on the grounds that the motivation is not moral but selfish. I think this claim is controversial. It is quite plausible to say that someone forgives but for bad reasons (eg. selfish reasons). It can still be a case of forgiveness, but deficient according to certain moral standards. And if we reject this part of Murphy's view, all he needs to rule out the two examples is a condition on how the attitudes are to be changed, i.e. by way of a change in judgment.

Thus, an account of forgiveness must at least rule out the giving up of negative attitudes because (1) one has forgotten about the offense over time, and (2) one finds out that the perceived wrong is in fact (fully) excused or justified. (1) is a case of revoking negative attitudes that were unjustified in the first place, hence it is not forgiveness. (2) is also not forgiveness since by excusing or justifying the wrong, one has changed the judgment that makes forgiveness possible in the first place.

Those who confuse forgiving with excusing or justifying may believe the proverb is true, (partly) because a more thorough understanding of the offense (e.g., through gaining knowledge of facts that one is previously unaware of or mistaken about) may change the initial judgment that it is an instance of culpable wrongdoing. One may come to understand that the offender had legitimate excuses to act the way he did, and hence cannot be blamed for the offense. Or one may, given the new information or a corrected view of the event, realize that what the offender did was overall the right thing to do. In the cases where the offender is found to be fully excused or justified for his act, the victim would renounce her negative attitudes. There, to understand all is to forgive all, one may say. But as I said, this interpretation of the proverb rests on a mistake. The victim's renunciation in such cases is not forgiveness, but acknowledgement of the incorrect judgment she made initially. Forgiveness is out of place here, for the negative attitudes turn out to be unwarranted in the first place.⁴

Hence, understanding may undermine the very condition that makes forgiveness possible — the judgment about culpable wrongdoing must be held fixed in a case of forgiveness. But the real question is: if someone has wronged me (which is true), will understanding her lead to forgiveness?

⁴It is an interesting question to ask whether someone who has come to a better understanding of the offense and consequently refuted her initial judgment about the wrongdoing *after* she has “forgiven” the offender can still be considered to have *forgiven* him. I think it is still a case of forgiveness, though one of mistaken forgiveness, for *when she gave up her negative attitudes*, she still held judgment (W) unchanged, and that is all she needs for it to be a case of forgiveness.

4.3 Conditional forgiveness

One strategy to explain how forgiveness is possible despite culpable wrongdoing appeals to a change in the offender. Pamela Hieronymi follows this route. She lays out the three judgments that must be held fixed if one is to forgive and if the forgiveness is genuine:

“(1) The act in question was wrong: it was a serious offense, worthy of moral attention.

(2) The wrongdoer is a legitimate member of the moral community who can be expected not to do such things. As such, she is someone to be held responsible and she is worth being upset by.

(3) You, as the one wronged, ought not to be wronged. This sort of treatment stands as an offense to your person (2001, p.530).”

She adds that the act of wrongdoing makes a claim, one that threatens to deny any of (1)-(3).⁵ The fourth judgment, that the act makes such a claim, is one that grounds the negative attitudes (or rather, resentment, which Hieronymi focuses on). It is easy to see what then grounds forgiveness: the undermining of the fourth judgment. Whereas (1)-(3) cannot be changed, (4) can be if the act ceases to make the threatening claim. Hieronymi suggests that an apology can alter the moral significance of the act, since the threatening claim is retracted by the one who issued it in the first place.

Does understanding come into this picture? Hieronymi makes clear that the kind of empathic understanding of the wrongdoer proposed by David Novitz is neither necessary nor sufficient for forgiveness (2001). It is not necessary, when the wrongdoer gives a sincere apology (thus altering the significance of his act) but cannot even make sense of his own motives, or as Hieronymi puts it, “has lost touch with the point of

⁵Hieronymi herself admits that she is vague about what is being threatened. At one point, she suggests that it is a claim that “you can be treated in this way, and that such treatment is acceptable (2001, p.546)”, hence a threat to (1) and (3). Later, she includes the denial of (2) as also a possible part of the claim, where she refers to the act as “a threat to either the public understanding of right and wrong, to [the wrongdoer’s] worth, or to [the victim’s worth] (2001, p.548).”

view of the offense (2001, p.538).” It is not sufficient, for one can still be angry when she returns to her own point of view or perhaps become more so if she learns that the wrongdoer’s reasons are in fact worse than she thought. Moreover, Hieronymi argues that the dissolution of negative attitudes *merely* because of a change in point of view in one’s engagement in empathic understanding, then it is not genuine forgiveness, but lack of self-respect (2001, p.538). Hieronymi does acknowledge that an understanding of pertinent facts about the wrongdoing is a necessary condition for the possibility of forgiveness because without it, one would not be able to form the judgments that ground the negative attitudes that she initially holds. This is a general point that I think applies to any account of forgiveness, but besides that, it is hard to see how, on Hieronymi’s account, understanding can be relevant to the victim’s change of attitudes.

Jeffrie Murphy’s proposal is perhaps closer to incorporating understanding into an account of forgiveness. On his view, the victim can come to forgive the offender once she has reached a new understanding of the latter, which results from what he calls a “divorce of agent from act (1982, p.509).” Murphy considers quite a wide range of judgments about the offender as possible candidates for grounds of forgiveness:

- “(1) He repented or had a change of heart or
- (2) He meant well (his motives were good) or
- (3) He has suffered enough or
- (4) He has undergone humiliation (perhaps some ritual humiliation, e.g., the apology ritual of ‘I beg forgiveness’) or
- (5) For old time’s sake (e.g., ‘He has been a good and loyal friend to me in the past’) (1982, p.508).”

Like Hieronymi, Murphy emphasizes the “message” that an act of wrongdoing sends: “Intentional wrongdoing *degrades* us — or at least represents an attempt to degrade us — and thus it involves a kind of injury that is not merely tangible and sensible. It is moral injury (1982, p.508).” Also like Hieronymi, he argues that while the act cannot be undone, the message can be altered. Although he seems to suggest, as Hieronymi

does, that a change in the victim's attitudes has its basis in a new understanding of the *offense*, I think a better way to read him is to locate the basis in a new understanding of the *offender*. This is why: only on (1) out of all five judgments is it true that the insulting message has been retracted so that the offense, as the victim sees it now, loses the meaning it embodied before (i.e. it no longer threatens the victim now). The same cannot be said for the other four judgments. (5), for example, says nothing about whether the wrongdoer is now willing to retract the insulting message, and yet, Murphy deems it an acceptable reason for renouncing one's negative attitudes. It seems to me that what is common to all five judgments is that they reflect a different understanding of the *offender*, someone who the victim first thought identified with his act, but who no longer does or would not given the kind of person he is or given his post-offense experience. On this reading, the grounds for renouncing negative attitudes is not that the offense ceases to carry the same meaning, but that the offender is not, or is no longer, someone who exhibits the kind of disrespect towards the victim that was conveyed in the act.

It seems to me something is missing from Murphy's account: if one forgives the wrongdoer because of the kind of person he is (i.e. he is a person that would not actually identify with the wrongful act), then it's not clear in what sense she is forgiving him *for this particular wrong* done to her. The point is that even though the object of forgiveness is the person, it is also always with respect to a particular instance of wrongdoing. When we forgive someone using the separation strategy, the change in our judgment that grounds the change in our attitudes is one concerning the wrongdoer ("he's not the bad person that his act made him look like"), but it seems that a change in how we think of the act is also important.

But if we do not take the idea of agent-act separation too far, we may find it instructive in that it encourages us to "keep things in perspective" as we try to understand

the wrongdoer and his act. Whereas we should not rush to judge his character based on this single act, we may find the act telling of him in some way. The way we interpret what the act reveals about him, where it fits into his life, or how much weight we should put on it in forming our judgment about him can matter to whether we have grounds to forgive him, both on Murphy's views and on others'.

Nevertheless, if forgiveness is conditional on finding something good in the offender, then it is clearly false that to understand all is to forgive all. Since forgiveness is conditional on a kind of separation of the offender from the offense, it ultimately relies on features of the offender rather than what the victim does, such as her attempt to understand the offender. Depending on the specific views on how the agent-act separation may be achieved, understanding can play a role in some, but not all, accounts of conditional forgiveness. On a view like Hieronymi's, separation occurs when the offender no longer identifies herself with the meaning of the offense by renouncing it, apologizing for it, or repenting. Understanding isn't all that important here. On some other views, according to which redeeming qualities in the offender can serve as the basis for forgiveness, this basis is available to us only if we look beyond the particular offense to the person as a whole. Once we see, through understanding, that the offender has always been a good friend to us (e.g., on Murphy's view) or that she is fundamentally a decent person (e.g., on Hampton's view), we can separate her from the offense and consequently forgive her. But even for these accounts, the role of understanding is secondary. If it turns out there is nothing good to be said for the offender, no amount of understanding could get us to forgive her.

But I doubt this is a satisfying conclusion to our inquiry into the proverb. It certainly captures the sense in which we hesitate to agree with the proverb: by requiring that the offender meet certain standards to deserve forgiveness, we stand by our conviction that the offense must be taken seriously, and we must be taken seriously. But it barely

touches on what remains deeply appealing in the message conveyed by the proverb, that forgiving may be possible regardless of what the offender is like, and that there is something profoundly valuable in being able to forgive without imposing standards on the offender. It seems to me that it is too early to dismiss the proverb. Perhaps we've been looking at forgiveness the wrong way.

4.4 Problems with conditional forgiveness

One major limitation of the accounts of forgiveness we have considered so far is that they leave little room for the offended to exercise her moral choice over whether to forgive. There are two sorts of considerations for why moral choice in this matter is important. First, what seems “profoundly valuable” in being able to forgive unconditionally has to do with a kind of generosity in one’s attitude towards the offender.⁶ This is connected to the Christian thought that forgiveness is to be given like a gift; One does not need to earn our gift, but we give it purely out of our goodwill, which presupposes that we *freely* choose to offer the gift (as an expression of our goodwill). But when the appropriateness of forgiveness is tied to the separability of the offender from the offense, i.e., to the presence of redeeming qualities or acts of the offender, there is little room for gift-giving. Rather, we would be put in a position to distribute to the offender what she rightly deserves. Advocates of conditional forgiveness claim that they have not made forgiveness obligatory. Murphy, for example, suggests that having a good moral reason to do something does not entail an obligation to do it, and in the same way, the offender’s “deserving” forgiveness gives us a good moral reason to forgive her but nevertheless does not compel our forgiveness (1982, p.511). “Just as

⁶Cheshire Calhoun makes the same point when she write, “Because forgiveness is an elective response to culpable wrongdoing, it is conceptually connected with supererogatory acts of generosity and charity. It is something we ask or hope, rather than demand, for ourselves and grant, rather than owe, to others. forgiveness is a gift, not the paying of a debt or the remission of a debt whose collection would prove too costly (1992, p.81).”

I have a right to choose within limits to whom I will be benevolent (e.g., to support cancer research instead of giving to the heart fund), so too do I have a right to choose which of all ‘deserving’ persons I shall forgive,” Murphy writes, “I have a right to refuse to forgive even a sincerely repentant wrongdoer. (Perhaps he did me an injury so deep that I regard it and him as unforgivable.) (ibid.)” Murphy is right that I still retain the choice to not forgive despite having a good moral reason to forgive, if there are countervailing moral reasons against forgiving. But on his and others’ accounts of conditional forgiveness, no such countervailing reason is available to me once the offender meets the condition of separability. In Murphy’s example, if the offender sincerely repents *as to deserve forgiveness*, that means I have good reason to believe she has separated herself from her act.⁷ But then I would have no reason to continue holding the offense against her, given what I have good reason to believe. If, as Murphy suggests, I think the offense is so egregious as to render the offender unforgivable, then I would not consider her, now that she sincerely repents, to be separated from her act (and hence deserving forgiveness) in the first place. Thus, if I think I have the choice to (justifiably) not forgive someone who deserves forgiveness, it’s only because I do not truly believe she deserves forgiveness.

The second sort of consideration in favor of electivity stems from the idea that forgiveness, as part of the victim’s process of healing, can be empowering for her.⁸ If we eliminate the conditions for the offender to deserve forgiveness, we will thereby eliminate a dependency of the victim on the offender in choosing how she wants to deal with the offense, including how she wants to respond to the offender. As the victim was previously “at the mercy” of the offender, being able to choose her response

⁷I stress “as to deserve forgiveness” here to rule out the possibility of our choosing not to forgive her because she has not repented sufficiently.

⁸This point is discussed by Govier, 2002, and Kohen, 2009.

independently of what the offender does (following the offense) can be particularly helpful for the victim to assert respect for herself. This is not to say that forgiveness is necessary or desirable for healing. Nor am I suggesting that victims cannot forgive for the wrong reasons. But insofar as we think that it is important for the victim to exercise control over her recovery from the offense, and insofar as we sometimes do genuinely want to forgive the offender even unilaterally, it is a merit of an account of forgiveness to be able to accommodate and account for such cases of forgiveness.

4.5 Unconditional forgiveness

Let's then turn to accounts of unconditional forgiveness. On these accounts, forgiveness is unconditional not in the sense that it is morally arbitrary, but in the sense that its appropriateness does not hinge on the offender's meeting certain standards. To forgive properly, we still need to have the right kind of moral reasons. Supporters of unconditional forgiveness offer different candidates for right moral reasons for forgiveness. I will focus on two accounts that I find most promising: Eve Garrard and David McNaughton's human solidarity account, and Cheshire Calhoun's aspirational story account.⁹

On Garrard and McNaughton's view, our reason to unconditionally forgive an offender is human solidarity — “the concern for the well-being of those who one feels are in the same condition as oneself (2003, p.55).” The condition we all share as humans is that given the kinds of “dreadful propensities” in human nature and the unfavorable

⁹Another notable contender is Margaret Holmgren's account of forgiveness based on respect for persons. Although I find her characterization of the process of forgiving very insightful, I think her main argument for her conception of unconditional forgiveness has two main flaws. First, as other commentators also point out, it is not clear why attitudes like resentment cannot be compatible with respect for persons, hence not clear why respect for persons gives us reason to opt for forgiveness over continued resentment. Second, I find it confusing that Holmgren appeals to compassion (as an appropriate response to the offender's sentience) when she is trying to ground forgiveness in respect, especially when she draws on Kant's view on respect and the value of persons.

circumstances to which we may all be subject, we are all vulnerable to moral failures (p.54). Since even the worst offender is like us in this way, we have reason to forgive independently of the offender's character, willingness to repent, and so on. Garrard and McNaughton are careful to distinguish acknowledgement of this commonality from excusing the offender or condoning the offense (pp.56-57). When we say that we would have done the same were we caught in the same circumstances as the offender, it is perfectly reasonable for us to agree that we would then have done the wrong thing and been responsible for it.

The idea that the offender shares with us this fundamental weakness is echoed by those who support a more compassionate approach to wrongdoers rather than a strict focus on condemnation and retribution. Andrew Gleeson, for example, argues for humanization of people who commit evil on precisely this basis, or what he calls our "common vulnerability to evil" (2006, p.256). Martha Nussbaum holds a somewhat similar view in her discussion of mercy, where she endorses a merciful attitude like Seneca's towards wrongdoers. Elaborating on Seneca's view, she writes, "The merciful judge will not fail to judge the guilt of the offender, but she will also see the many obstacles this offender faced on the way to being just — as a member of a culture, a gender, a city or country, and, above all, as a member of the human species, facing the obstacles of human life in a world of scarcity and accident (2006, p.20)."

While Garrard and McNaughton's account directs our attention to what the offender has in common with us, Calhoun's aspirational story account urges us to see the offender as someone who is different from us in the distinct way she makes choices, which are informed by (and informs) her distinct conception of her life. Correspondingly, whereas the former account appeals to our compassion and aims to bring us closer to the offender, the latter urges respect for her by way of giving her room to lead a life of her own. Calhoun argues that our ordinary way of thinking about wrongdoing rests

on a false assumption about how people make choices, an assumption that reflects a narrow and overly moralistic view of how human beings are. Drawing from Strawson's discussion of reactive attitudes, she argues that the way we make sense of wrongdoing is often inadequate: either we try to preserve the wrongdoer's personhood by seeing him as separable from the act (hence still deserving of forgiveness), or we deny his personhood by attributing some psychological defect, or "malignancy" or "moral indifference" to him (1992, pp.88-90).¹⁰ We can't make sense of persons who deliberately do immoral things. The problem, as Calhoun sees it, is that we assume morality must somehow take precedence in people's lives (p.91). But this is a mistake. Normal persons need to make sense of their choices and actions within the context of their lives (p.92). To forgive the wrongdoer, on Calhoun's view, is to "place respecting another's way of making sense of her life before resentfully enforcing moral standards (p.95)." Understanding the offender as the subject and author of her life story, and understanding how the offense fits into the biographical context of the offender can supply a moral reason for the victim to forgive. Like Garrard and McNaughton, Calhoun maintains that in forgiving the offender, we do not thereby think of the offense as any less morally wrong, or the offender any less culpable. The moral significance of the offense does not change when we understand how it makes sense for the offender. Rather, our appreciation of the significance of the offense outside of the moral context shows us that demanding moral change in the offender is not the only, or the most appropriate, response to her.

On these two accounts of unconditional forgiveness, it seems true that understanding the offender provides a sufficient moral reason for us to forgive (though it does not literally guarantee forgiveness, since forgiveness must be elective on these accounts). Both accounts highlight the importance, for effecting a change of heart in the victim, of

¹⁰By "personhood," I take Calhoun to not mean moral agency, since the malignant or morally indifferent people are capable of moral agency but refuse to act morally. Rather, someone is a person in the sense that it is possible for others to form interpersonal relationships with her.

understanding why the offender did what she did. On the human solidarity account, we come to understand the offender's choice in the larger context of factors that influence all human action, including the weaknesses inherent in human nature, circumstances surrounding the development of our characters, and the more specific features of the situation we are in at the time of making individual choices. This in no way denies or diminishes the part that the offender herself plays in making the choice she did. The idea is rather that to fully understand her wrongdoing, we cannot isolate her reasons, motives, and maybe also her character traits from this larger context in which they operate. On the aspirational story account, we come to understand the offender's choice in yet a different kind of context: that of her life as a whole. Although it may well be true that the choice is one of attacking the victim's sense of self-worth or compromising her wellbeing, most likely it is not *just* that. As Calhoun puts it, it is often also "something about themselves and their lives," apart from what it means for those affected by the act (1992, p.93). To fully understand her wrongdoing, we must also consider its place in the whole series of choices she makes. Again, this is not to take away the wrongfulness from the act, but to restore the complexity of the act as not just a moral offense against someone, but also, say, part of the offender's working out a life of her own. On both accounts, a more complete understanding of the offense reveals to us that there is more to the act than we thought, which opens up space for a revision in our attitude towards the offender.

It looks like we have found a plausible way of making understanding central to forgiveness. Both the human solidarity account and the aspirational story account avoid the common pitfalls in attempts of connecting understanding with forgiveness. First, the more complete understanding envisioned in the two accounts does not rely on the discovery of new facts about the offender, be they mitigating factors or redeeming qualities. The discovery of mitigating factors would indeed prompt a change of heart in

us, but as we saw earlier, such a change is not forgiveness, but realization that we made an incorrect judgment in the first place. The discovery of redeeming qualities in the offender may also temper our negative attitudes towards her, but making forgiveness conditional on such a discovery detracts from the special value we think it has as a “gift.” Second, the change in our attitude does not signify our endorsement of the offender’s point of view.

Both accounts maintain that deeper understanding of the offense is perfectly compatible with holding fixed our moral judgment of it. Calhoun stresses the importance of empathic imagination for revealing the complexity in the offender’s choice, but she makes clear that grasping its complexity is different from justifying or excusing it. By separating understanding from endorsement, the two accounts avoid a common but objectionable way of making sense of the proverb, “to understand all is to forgive all.” If one assumes that understanding the offender’s point of view necessarily results in endorsing it, one can make sense of the proverb — we will certainly give up negative attitudes once we come to agree with the offender. But on this interpretation, the proverb would suggest a view of forgiveness that trivializes the wrongfulness of the offense.

4.6 A further problem

Do we now have a better way to make sense of the proverb? I’m hesitant to say “yes,” for it appears that the accounts of unconditional forgiveness face another, different problem. Although they talk of understanding in terms of understanding the particular offender and her offense, what connects up with our change of heart is really a kind of understanding of human beings *in general*. In fact, it is precisely through shifting our focus *away* from the particularities of the offender to general features of all humans that our resentment is tempered. On the human solidarity account, the general human

condition is our shared moral frailty. And on the aspirational story account, it is the common need to live a life that is distinctly my own. But the kind of understanding I'm interested in is understanding of a *particular* person, and the relation I'm looking for is that between understanding this *particular* offender and forgiving her. So even though the accounts of unconditional forgiveness points us to the *right kind of connection* between understanding and forgiveness, I'm afraid we have smuggled the *wrong kind of understanding* into the equation.

Samantha Vice notices a similar problem in Nussbaum's discussion of mercy. Even though Nussbaum, following Seneca, emphasizes that the merciful judge must pay close attention to the *particulars* of the offender, the merciful attitude arises not from these particulars alone, but from them "against a framework of knowledge of the general state of human existence (2006, p.99)." Just as in the case of the two accounts of unconditional forgiveness, "the kind of understanding Nussbaum has in mind cannot stop at understanding character, formative influences and the circumstances of the particular action if it is to lead to mercy. Rather, it must continue on to the general conditions of human existence, and it is this that does the work for mercy (ibid.)."

One might try to salvage the problem by suggesting that our understanding of the general human condition is *part of* our understanding of the offender as a particular individual. That is, we do not fully understand her unless, in addition to seeing what is unique about her, we also see her as sharing the same general human condition as everyone else. This is no doubt a correct characterization of what is involved in understanding the individual person. But I do not think it is all that helpful for bridging the gap between understanding *of a particular person* and forgiveness. Although we cannot fully understand a person without our general understanding of human beings, the opposite does not hold — we do not need to fully understand any particular person to arrive at an understanding of the general human condition. Since only the "general"

kind of understanding is relevant to the change in our attitude, we do not need to know — much less to understand — anything specific about the offender to be able to make that change.

4.7 A solution

But is it true? Are we right to say that understanding of the particular person is irrelevant to a change in our attitude since what's “really doing the work” is the understanding of the general human condition?

I suspect that what's “really doing the work” is not as straightforward as it seems. Instead of looking at how *understanding of* the particular (person) or *that of* the general (human condition) is related to forgiveness, I think it makes more sense to consider the *process* of understanding. And once we look more closely at what happens in the process of understanding, we can see how understanding the particular offender can contribute to our change of heart. Let me unpack.

First, once we distinguish between the product of understanding and the process, it becomes clear that the “understanding” of the general human condition that we take to be crucial for unconditional forgiveness is really *knowledge* of the general human condition: knowledge that all humans, including the offender, are vulnerable to moral failings at a fundamental level (on the human solidarity account), or that they all need to lead a life of their own and make sense of their choices in light of what they take to be their life story (on the aspirational story account). One might have noticed from my quotes of Samantha Vice that she does talk of *knowledge* of “the general state of human existence.” But the fact that she uses “understanding” and “knowledge” interchangeably marks her failure to distinguish between the two, and between the process and product of understanding. I think it is this failure that prevents her from understanding Nussbaum's emphasis on the attention to the *particular* person in her

discussion of mercy — I will explain this in a moment. Now that we see that what’s “really doing the work” is knowledge of the general human condition, we can ask, can it “really do the work,” i.e., turn us around towards forgiveness? In one sense, yes — it shows us a good moral reason to forgive. But in another sense, no — by itself, it is insufficient to move us.

I think this is why Nussbaum puts such a great emphasis on understanding the particular person. In the process of understanding the struggles of the offender, we engage our emotions as we enter into her perspective and imagine the efforts she puts in overcoming the obstacles in life.¹¹ It is also through this process that the meaning of “a shared human plight” becomes especially vivid to us; it ceases to be abstract to us, for we can experience its reality as we come to see the ways in which we could have turned out to have a similar character or made a similar choice as the offender. Although Garrard and McNaughton do not specifically address the role of understanding the offender in our awareness of the shared humanity we have with her, I think Nussbaum’s point can be a friendly addition to their account. To forgive one on the ground of human solidarity, it is not enough to simply hold the belief that the offender is “one of us,” or that she exemplifies our shared humanity. In forgiving, we are forgiving this *particular person* for this *particular offense*. Our understanding then cannot go around this particularity, even though that process will lead us to understand something more general about all humans.

Like Nussbaum, Calhoun also insists on understanding the offender in her particularity. While respect for the way in which the offender chooses to live her life gives us reason to forgive her, Calhoun says that this kind of “aspirational forgiveness” is

¹¹Although Nussbaum talks as if understanding is just empathic understanding, I think she does not take the two to be equivalent. Rather, it seems that she stresses the role of empathy because it serves to counteract our tendency to look at an offender “from a vantage point of lofty superiority” (2006, p.13).

“*achieved* by seeing that, although an agent’s wrongdoing fails to make moral sense, it does make biographical sense (1992, p.92).”¹² Here again, the point is that *through* our attempts to understand the offender and her offense — how she sees it, how it makes sense to her, how it fits into the “biography” of her life — we can be motivated to choose forgiveness as our response to her.

Admittedly, I have not said anything about whether we should prefer a particular account of unconditional forgiveness over the others. That is because I suspect the different reasons often work together in an actual case of forgiveness. We do not understand the offender *just* as sharing common moral weaknesses with us and come to feel compassionate for her, or *just* as trying to make choices that go along with her life story and come to respect that. Let us consider an example.

Gabby finds out that Fred, her boyfriend of five years, has been cheating on her with a colleague of his for the past three months. The discovery comes as a huge blow to her, undermining her trust in Fred and in their relationship, and her confidence in herself. She sees Fred as a liar who betrayed her love and trust as well as his own commitment to her. She resents him for his blatant disregard for her, as he takes pleasure in something that he knows will hurt her deeply. Fred admits that he has made a stupid terrible mistake and agrees that Gabby has every reason to resent him because his behavior is utterly disrespectful to her. He hates himself for it, apologizes profusely, and promises he will not do it again. He tells Gabby that though he did get pleasure out of the affair, he was also tormented by the fact that he was leading a double life, deceiving both Gabby and himself. He acknowledges that this is of course no excuse for what he did, but nevertheless he did not set out to purposely hurt her.

Fred’s apology seems too weak to effect a change in Gabby’s view of him. Given that he has been lying to her about something so important to her for such a long

¹²Italics added.

time, Gabby has good reason to doubt the sincerity of his apology. But even if Gabby takes his word for it, there is a strong sense that more is needed for her to completely overcome her resentment. Like many others who have experienced infidelity, Gabby now has a different view of Fred as a person. It is as if she never really knew him. He has turned into someone who not only does not care about her, but humiliates her and even takes it upon himself to destroy what is most valuable to her life and her person. In her eyes, his infidelity completely defines who he is.

I do not mean to suggest that in such a case, forgiveness is always attainable by just anyone. But if Gabby does come to forgive Fred, a major task she needs to undertake is to better understand how Fred is related to his affair. While Fred did change — he was always faithful before — his change is in no way as drastic as Gabby thinks. No doubt his starting the affair and maintaining it indicates a gross lack of respect for her, but at the same time, an exclusive focus on just the affair itself distorts Gabby's view of its place in Fred's overall attitude towards her as well as its place in Fred's own life. At the same time, as much as she may be reluctant to admit it, she can see how she might have done the same if she were in Fred's position. Perhaps she *would not*, given the kind of person she in fact is, but she cannot be so confident that she *is not* susceptible to making bad choices, or that she *could not* ever have done a similar wrong to someone.

The disrespect as manifested in Fred's betrayal and deception does not fully capture how Fred regards her. As Fred has confessed (and it may very well be true), even when he was having the affair, he was deeply troubled by the thought that he was hurting her. Furthermore, although he did knowingly wrong her, the affair was not a deliberate attempt at sabotaging her happiness, her trust in him and in the relationship, and her self-esteem. It took place as other things were going on in his life. It could be that he was bored in the relationship, or he was stressed out about his work, or he was feeling

adventurous — it could be anything that we often hear from someone in that position. Admittedly, such things are usually offered as excuses meant to lessen the wrongfulness of his cheating or the degree to which he is to be blamed, rather than grounds for forgiveness. And in real life cases, it is indeed hard to tell whether the other person has actually forgiven the unfaithful partner, or retracted the initial judgment about the wrong done. But by hypothesis, Gabby does forgive Fred, and so let's suppose that she does not take those "things going on in his life" as excuses. Instead, as she considers the way in which the affair fits into the broader context of his life, she comes to understand that even though it remains just as disrespectful as before, it is not true that Fred's attitude towards her is exhausted by what the affair shows. Nor is it true that Fred devotes his life to pleasing himself at the expense of Gabby.

As we can see, central to unconditional forgiveness is the process of understanding the offender as a particular person. Reading all about Garrard, McNaughton, Calhoun, or Nussbaum may give me the knowledge about what moral reason there is for me to forgive someone. But until I take up the task of understanding her and her offense, I'm nowhere near forgiving her.

Chapter 5

What's Wrong with Judgmentalism?

Be curious, not judgmental.

Walt Whitman

5.1 Introduction

Judging — in the sense of evaluating — is an indispensable part of our practical deliberation. Our decisions, from which candidate to vote for president, to which cereal box to pick for breakfast, rely on our judgments about how well the options meet certain standards or compare to each other. And since our decisions often involve other people, be they presidential candidates or our Facebook friends or their babies, *people* make up an important category for judging. Moral philosophers, in particular, lavish much of their attention on problems having to do with judging people's actions and characters.

Yet at the same time, we also feel somewhat uneasy when a person is “too eager” about judging. Imagine a person called John, who likes to go about judging other people. When his friend shows up to dinner 15 minutes late, he tells himself the friend is untrustworthy. When he hears his colleague complain about her neighbor's dog, he denounces the neighbor (whom he has never met) as selfish and obnoxious. Even a glance at a passer-by's outfit triggers a judgment: what awful taste this young man has!

If we knew John, we might admonish him by saying, “Don’t be so judgmental!”¹ To many of us, the term, “judgmental,” seems to carry negative connotations. But if judging is acceptable, and often desirable or even necessary, why do we have a problem with being judgmental?

One might think the answer is quite straightforward. Look at the kinds of judgments a person like John makes — excessively negative, his judgments are bound to be false, unjustified, or inappropriate in other ways more often than not. He is thus liable to criticism for the bad judgments he tends to make, which we take to be a manifestation of underlying flaws in him.

However, an exclusive focus on the problems with the *content* of one’s judgments misses an important respect in which judgmentalism is objectionable. While it may be true that most, if not all, judgmental people are prone to making poor judgments, an essential feature of them is an inclination to assess or evaluate others. A serious discussion of judgmentalism — and of judging — would be inadequate insofar as it fails to go beyond looking at the kinds of judgments someone like John is apt to make, to address questions about his *tendency* to judge other people. It is for this reason that I think our intuitive responses to the question, What’s wrong with judgmentalism, are unsatisfactory. In this chapter, I will consider some of the most common responses to this question, and suggest an alternative answer that locates the main problem of judgmentalism in one’s *tendency* to judge. Recognizing this problem is not only key to a proper diagnosis of judgmentalism; more significantly, it will enable us to think more critically about our practice of judging people, by highlighting the connection between our approach to judging and one of the basic attitudes we have in relating to others.

¹Are we being judgmental when we judge John to be judgmental? Not necessarily, as my analysis of the concept will show.

5.2 Common objections

What's wrong with judgmentalism? We may say that a judgmental person like John is not very pleasant. When he's around, we'd expect to hear negative remarks about just anyone he knows. We may even wonder whether he's also secretly judging us as we talk to him, so much so that we have gotten into the habit of prefacing everything we share with him by saying, "Now don't judge me, but..." This may all be true; a judgmental person can be quite unlikeable, for no one enjoys hearing constant criticisms of others or themselves.²

However, our problem with judgmentalism is more serious than that. It's not just that we do not like being around a judgmental person, but rather, we think such a person has some kind of *moral* fault. When we tell John, "Don't be so judgmental," we are not so much speaking from a personal preference about the kind of people with whom we'd like to hang out as issuing a reprimand.

So the real question is, what's *morally* wrong with judgmentalism?

Arrogance

One answer suggests itself: the judgmental person is full of himself. Since he is always pointing out others' flaws, it is at least implicit — if not explicit — in his criticisms that he himself does not suffer those same flaws. We can almost imagine the smugness in his tone when John utters to himself, "What awful taste this young man has!" He may or may not *intend* by the judgment what it apparently implies — "I, on the other hand, have impeccable taste in fashion" — but we can safely say that it is his arrogance that is underlying his tendency to judge others harshly. And arrogance is a vice.

²Unless, perhaps, one is also as critical of others as the judgmental person.

But one can take herself to be in a position to judge without assuming her superiority in the particular respects with which her judgments are concerned. I may think that Michael Phelps gave outstanding performances in the past three Olympic Games, knowing full well I myself can barely complete a lap, much less enter an international competition.³ The same goes for negative judgments too. I can judge that my friend, Emma, has poor coordination when she does the freestyle, even though I'm much worse than she, and I know it. Still, my own lack of skill and talent in swimming and my knowledge of this lack need not prevent me from judging everyone I see in the pool.

Perhaps the judgmental person is arrogant in a different way? Two alternatives may be proposed. Even though the judgmental person does not necessarily assume he is better than others with regards to the particular qualities on which he judges them, he nevertheless assumes he is better than them, and everyone else, at *judging* these things. He thinks that he himself, of all people, can reliably tell which behavior points to a trustworthy character, whether someone is obnoxious, or what counts as good body movement in freestyle swimming. But surely he overestimates his competence in making such judgments.

Alternatively, one might think that the judgmental person is arrogant in the sense that he takes himself to be more *important* than others. His obsession with measuring everyone up seems to stem from the unwarranted belief that everyone else must conform to *his* standards and be evaluated accordingly, or that they are somehow subject to *his* approval and indeed, await his approval.

These two suggestions do seem convincing, but they face the same challenge as the initial answer. Is it true that one can be judgmental only if she assumes she is better than others as a judge and/or that she is so important that she gets to impose her own

³Other examples include professional critics of certain kinds. The food critic, presumably, does not necessarily think she can cook better than the chefs of the restaurant she is reviewing.

standards on others?

Consider Margo, someone who likes to judge the *moral* qualities of people and their actions. If you talk to her, she will lament about her insensitive roommate who hasn't yet converted to vegetarianism, or about her father, an avid listener of NPR who never cares to donate a penny. She is especially bothered by her neighbor's son. He's a smart boy, but he's just so mean to all the other kids. Margo does not pretend she is a moral exemplar herself. Although she acknowledges that she may be morally better than some (she is certainly very kind to kids), what's driving her judgmentalism is not a sense of superiority, but a genuine concern with upholding the moral standards in the community, or promoting the moral development of its members. I'm not saying that this is what Margo *claims* to be her motivation, for she may well be deceiving us or herself, just as a truly arrogant, judgmental person would not admit her arrogance upfront. Instead, I'm postulating that there are people whose judgmentalism is rooted in their concern for, say, morality rather than in an inflated ego. And if such examples are plausible as I think they are, then we have good reason to reject the claim that judgmentalism is morally wrong because it is a result of a moral vice, of arrogance.

Hypocrisy

The same example can be used to reject another answer to the question, "What's wrong with judgmentalism?" — namely, the answer that the judgmental person is a hypocrite, and hypocrisy is a moral flaw. John may or may not be arrogant, but he is most likely overlooking his own shortcomings when he goes around pointing fingers at others. Can he be so sure that he has never been late to a meeting or done anything inconsiderate to other people? We doubt that. If so, then John is holding others to standards to which he himself fails to live up.

Margo could be a counter-example to the hypocrisy objection because it is quite possible for her to be fully aware that she falls short of the moral principles just as

much as many people she criticizes, but it does not mean she only pretends to believe in those principles. More generally, we need not ignore our own failures to meet whatever standards that we apply to others in judging.

Furthermore, the hypocrisy objection leaves open the possibility that it is fine for one to be judgmental about areas in which one has a pretty decent record (or no record at all). If I have always been diligent with my work, then I can't be hypocritical when I keep a mental scoreboard of the productivity of every person in the department. And since I have no children of my own, there is no way for me to be hypocritical as I evaluate the parenting skills of all my friends who have recently embarked on the next stage of life. If we grant that I'm nevertheless being judgmental in these cases, and that there's something wrong with it, then the wrongness of it cannot reside in my hypocrisy.

Poor judgments

A third answer, which I've already mentioned, is that the judgmental person is bound to get things wrong and hence make poor judgments. Think again about what we would say to John. "Don't be so judgmental," we would say, "you don't even know him," or "how do you know the neighbor was not just a bit careless?" It does seem a common objection we raise against judgmentalism, that the person is not in a good position to make a sound judgment.⁴ It may be because in jumping to conclusions,

⁴Gary Watson calls this problem with judgmentalism a failure in "interpretative generosity." He suggests two levels at which we can fail to interpret someone's behavior "ungenerously": "first, in our initial characterization of others' conduct and second, in what we make of that characterization. One may be too quick, in the first place, to read someone's behavior as rude rather than shy, harsh rather than honest. But even where the former attributions are accurate enough, the interpretively generous person will be more hesitant to epitomize the others in these terms (2013, p.15)."

Watson's use of term, "generosity," is worth noting. He seems to mean by it a kind of open-mindedness about alternative interpretations, which would be supported by information not (yet) available to one. We may say it is an epistemic virtue, since it promotes good practices that lead to more accurate judgments. But I wonder if Watson also intends by "generosity" some kind of *moral* virtue, since the term is morally loaded. What could be *morally* good about "giving someone the benefit of doubt"? It's not clear from Watson's paper. I suspect what he has in mind might be close to the notion of the receptive attitude that I propose later in my chapter.

he has not gathered sufficient evidence to support his judgments. He may be drawing largely upon his own assumptions and experiences rather than on his knowledge of the other person to interpret the latter's behavior. We usually associate the judgmental person with having strong biases, since being so quick to judge, he relies heavily on settled prejudices to arrive at judgments. Moreover, he is especially prone to errors whenever he judges people's characters rather than their specific traits or actions — a judgmental person certainly does seem to be rather fond of judging someone as a whole — simply because judging the character of someone requires a lot more information about the person than what a single event or a few of them can reveal.

We must be careful not to overstate this objection. If we do not want to rule out *all* judging of people as morally problematic, then the objection cannot be that we can never know enough about people to judge them in a morally appropriate way. It is rather that the judgmental person almost always makes poor judgments because they judge too quickly and carelessly.

So far, the objection is an epistemic one. We take it that there is a set of norms one has to follow in making judgments, which include rules like “check your own assumptions,” “consider countervailing evidence,” and “withhold your judgment when there's also good reason to believe otherwise.” The judgmental person is someone who blatantly ignores and violates these rules. This may be right, but more needs to be added if we are to give a *moral* objection against judgmentalism. So what if the judgmental person is not a good judge by epistemic standards? One thought is that such a person's faulty judgments about people can lead to bad moral consequences. Perhaps when John informs their mutual friends that the particular friend — call her Liz — he had dinner with is an untrustworthy person, his remark will adversely influence the relationships between Liz and the other friends (though if they know he's judgmental, they will probably take his words with a grain of salt). But it's hard to see how we

can generalize this point to a lot of other kinds of judgments, ones about non-moral qualities of people such as their taste in fashion, their lifestyles, or their swimming abilities.

There also seems to be more to the judgmental person's epistemic failures than potential moral consequences. We can imagine someone who is "judgmental" about music ("That song is just trash"), pets ("What a dumb dog"), or other non-human subjects, and we can barely find anything offensive about her "judgmentalism" as we would with John's. In fact, it seems odd to call this person "judgmental." What's offensive in John's judgmentalism has to do with the fact that he's targeting *people* for his judgments, and there's something wrong in his *attitude* towards them — something that would not be quite as applicable if he were to be "judgmental" about non-human subjects.⁵ But until we make clear what that attitude is and how it's tied to the faulty judgments that a person like John tends to make, the epistemic objection is just that, an epistemic objection.

Furthermore, the same problem I raised against the previous objections applies here too. That is, the epistemic objection (or whatever moral objection is based on the epistemic objection) allows that there would be nothing morally wrong with a judgmental person — call him Jack — who happens to make pretty accurate judgments. There are a couple of ways one may resist my challenge. The first is to question whether we would still find Jack's judgmentalism objectionable. If he gets things more or less right about people, why should we bother? In fact, it may even seem beneficial to us to encourage Jack to judge as he likes, since we can consult him, for a variety of purposes, as a reliable source on how well people meet particular standards. I'm not

⁵It is not implausible to think that a person who is judgmental about music, pets or nature shares a similar fault as a person who is judgmental about people, a fault that has to do with the attitude with which they relate to the subjects for their judgments respectively. Although I do not address judgmentalism of the first kind, I think my account of what is wrong with the second kind can be extended to the first.

sure we can all agree that it is perfectly fine when someone like Jack constantly grades people on, say, their driving skills, or eating habits, or their knowledge of world history. We may think that by issuing these judgments, he is inviting himself to meddle with other people's lives where his interference is often uninvited and unwelcomed. But more importantly, it seems that Jack's attitude towards others is as questionable as John's even though he may be better than John in other ways because his judgments are more accurate.

Yet another way of resisting my challenge is to deny the very possibility of a person like Jack. How could a judgmental person make mostly correct judgments? Well, this certainly goes against our impression of judgmental people, for they usually are quick to judge, hence prone to making poor judgments. But suppose some people are just more perceptive, better at reading others. Or suppose some like ranking people, but do so only when they are confident that their rankings are well supported by solid evidence. It seems quite possible that one can be disposed to judge people, and yet also be good at it. But now another sort of doubt would arise: how could a person, who has known enough about others to make mostly correct judgments, still be judgmental? Intuitively, if a person is such that she would judge only when she has understood others well enough to be justifiably confident in her "rankings," it would somehow seem strange if she is at the same time *interested* in the project of ranking them. If one rejects this intuition, then one must accept that a judgmental person like Jack is not that implausible. But if one doesn't reject the intuition, one must explain why knowing more about others undercuts a person's judgmental tendency. One could say that this is so because the person comes to realize "there's always more to the story," and therefore decides that she cannot be confident about her rankings as she thought. But I suspect that there's more to the intuition: the person would come to realize that ranking or evaluating others, whether or not she can do a good job at it, is not

a very good idea. Why is that? Those who hold the “poor judgments” objection to judgmentalism do not have the resources to answer this question.

Negative judgments

Perhaps the real problem with judgmentalism lies not with the faulty judgments a judgmental person makes, but rather in his focus on *negative* judgments. Even if he is not arrogant or hypocritical and his judgments are more or less accurate, there still seems to be something wrong with his eagerness to notice and the excessive attention he pays to the flaws in others. The colleague’s neighbor may indeed be rather inconsiderate or even obnoxious, but he may be a devoted employee at work. The young man may indeed have no sense of how to dress well, but he may be a talented musician. Of course in my original example, John could not have known these about the neighbor and the young man, but we can very well imagine an alternative scenario where he does know more facts about them, but being judgmental, only focuses on their shortcomings. Or in the case of Margo, being judgmental means that her roommate’s insensitivity to animals’ suffering is much more salient to her than, say, her mastery of the art of baking (non-vegetarian cakes and pastries, of course). It is objectionable for the judgmental person to overlook or downplay the positive in people as he goes about finding faults in them.

But if we press further, “What’s objectionable about fault-finding?” the answer is not so clear. One may say that the judgmental person is too critical. But that does not get us very far. Perhaps it is that the judgmental person is “too demanding” of people. This looks more promising, but still, what’s so bad about that? One may suggest, as Gary Watson does, that the judgmental person is too demanding of people in the sense that he makes objectionable demands on what it would take for others to enter meaningful relationships with himself. According to Watson, the judgmental person exhibits a “readiness to dismiss others or to foreclose or restrict important

human relations with them on the basis of those perceptions of fault (2013, p.3).” This explains what we might have in mind when we think of the judgmental person as being “too unforgiving” or “unaccepting” of people — he cannot accept them, given their flaws, into a kind of relationship with him that could otherwise have been deeper or closer.

The idea of the judgmental person’s being “unaccepting” is suggestive. It offers a way to make concrete the “negative judgments” objection. But here is the problem. We can object to the judgmental person’s being unaccepting only if he tends to find faults in people. We can imagine someone, Jane, who is just as eager to judge people as John, but whose judgments are split quite evenly between positive and negative ones. When Jane hears her colleague talk about her neighbors, she judges the dog-owner “obnoxious,” but considers his teenage son “extremely polite.” She also judges that the old couple exemplifies the ideal marriage, while the single mother is a fool. Similarly, we can imagine her labeling all her friends: A is “untrustworthy,” B “resourceful,” C “disorganized,” and so on. We may well wonder whether Jane shares some kind of moral fault with John (and Jack). But if we think she does, then it cannot be that she is too unaccepting of people, since she is certainly accepting of some, such as the old couple, on this interpretation of “acceptance.”

Thus far, all the objections we have considered are entirely centered on the content of judgments that a judgmental person tends to make — they are unsound, or they are excessively negative. They have not given us a satisfying reason for why judgmentalism is morally objectionable, although they do seem to point to one. What’s right about the “arrogance objection” is that there is something wrong with always taking oneself to be a judge of other people (although arrogance is not the right objection to that). The “poor judgments” objection is right about the idea that it is important to try to get a correct picture of a person, while the “negative judgments” objection is right that

a holistic picture is also important. What these objections point to is something about how we are to relate to others. Although John, Jane and Jack make different judgments about people (and hence are open to different kinds of criticism), there is something common in how they relate to those they judge, which is revealed in their *tendency* to judge. My view, as I will elaborate on in the following sections, is that having a tendency to judge constitutes a kind of moral fault, apart from any problems we might find with the actual judgments generated from this tendency. This is so because the tendency to judge others is at odds with what I call “the receptive attitude” towards them, an attitude that is deeply valuable.

Before I move on, it is worth noting that it may strike one as somewhat counterintuitive that a person like Jane or Jack may also be at fault for being judgmental. While there seems to be a clear case of judgmentalism with John, why think Jane or Jack too is judgmental? To this I will say two things. First, it’s not clear what we mean by “judgmental” or “judgmentalism.” Some think of “judgmental” as “inclined to make *moral* judgments,” whereas many of us do use it to refer to someone who is inclined to judge people in all kinds of aspects. We also tend to associate “judgmental” with “critical.” I’m not here concerned with deciding on the correct conception of judgmentalism; there may well not be one. Rather, and this is my second point, I want to focus on a sense of judgmentalism that is different from the ones mentioned above but nevertheless captures many of our intuitions and is thus worth attention. Judgmentalism, understood in the broad sense, is simply the tendency to judge or evaluate others.⁶ This seems to me a plausible conception of judgmentalism. Regardless of whether we approve of the judgments they make, we may well find it troubling for Jane and Jack to be as disposed towards judging people as John. I want to note that having this

⁶I’m leaving aside the issue of whether one can be judgmental with respect to oneself. I think my discussion of nonjudgmentalism and understanding may well apply to the relation one has with oneself although I will not argue for this point here.

tendency does not hinge on whether one publicly expresses her judgments, for being judgmental is a matter of having (or lacking) a certain kind of attitude towards people.⁷

5.3 The receptive attitude

The receptive attitude is a willingness to expose oneself to the reality of the other person. In adopting it, one thereby sends an “invitation” to the other person, welcoming her to show who she is.⁸ The unreceptive person, on the other hand, is indifferent to the other’s reality, if not dismissing it outright or indulging in assumptions about the other person that are fed by her own purposes and interests.⁹ An example would be someone who sees with “the arrogant eye” as Marilyn Frye Frye (1983) calls it. Contrary to “the loving eye,” “the arrogant eye” seeks to “reduce,” “assimilate,” and “simplify” its object to square with its own desires. This, however, is not the only way one can be unreceptive. One may simply refuse to “look” at all.

My idea of the receptive attitude draws primarily from Carl Rogers’ Rogers (1989) writing on the relationship between therapists and their clients. Rogers, as the father of client-centered therapy, is widely cited for his views on the nonjudgmental approach

⁷One may ask, how can we tell if someone is judgmental if one can be judgmental without expressing her judgments? This sort of epistemic question (of how we can determine whether someone is judgmental) is not my concern here. One can also ask, if being judgmental is having a tendency to judge, can one be judgmental without ever acting on that tendency? Or how can we tell whether a particular instance of judging is a manifestation of one’s judgmental tendency or not? These are certainly worthwhile questions, but they are outside of the scope of this chapter, and do not affect my arguments. I do think, however, that a tendency to judge is often (though not necessarily) associated with characteristics like being quick to judge, judging when the context does not clearly call for judgments, etc.

⁸Receptivity comes in degrees. Our relationships with those we are close to may require a “heightened” receptivity towards them both in the sense of being more readily attuned to them, and in the sense of taking actions that go beyond what is morally decent behavior towards a stranger.

⁹This is not to suggest that one is either receptive or unreceptive. I will address degrees of receptivity in a later section.

Also, what I mean by “receptive” and “unreceptive” is somewhat different from their ordinary usage. Someone is receptive (to another) iff she holds the receptive attitude (to that person), and unreceptive otherwise.

in therapy.¹⁰ He proposes a kind of “unconditional positive regard” for the client on the part of the therapist as essential to the therapeutic relationship, for it enables the therapist to create an environment that promotes self-disclosure by the client.¹¹ I’m not suggesting that we too should always keep ourselves from judging others (much less seeing them as having mental issues). Rather, I want to abstract away everything else about the therapist, including what she does with judgments, and focus solely on her commitment to being “all ears” for the client.

Here is an example outside of the therapeutic context. You and I are having a conversation about our trip to a modern art museum earlier in the day. The conversation turns into a heated argument as our views begin to diverge over whether a particular artist’s work was genuinely original. As the argument goes on, I find myself spending more time and effort trying to formulate my views and paying less attention to what you are saying. Or even if I do pay attention, I now listen specifically for possible flaws in your argument, seeking targets for my next round of attack. You may well be doing the same. If so, both you and I have ceased to hold a receptive attitude towards each other (or it is at least diminished). We are no longer interested in what the other

¹⁰I want to flag two points regarding my appropriation of Rogers’ views. First, I do not intend to imply that he has the correct picture of the therapist’s role and obligations. It remains highly controversial whether the kind of nonjudgmentalism he advocates is appropriate for the therapeutic context, and apart from that, whether it is feasible at all. My aim is only to extract from his views relevant material to fill out my account of the receptive attitude. Second, since I’m *appropriating* Rogers’ views, I do not take myself to be offering an interpretation of his work. My task is rather (re)constructing a notion of the receptive attitude based on his views. It is not my concern to recover what he must have meant.

¹¹I find Rogers’ definition of “unconditional positive regard” somewhat unclear. He defines “positive regard” as follows: “If the perception by me of some self-experience in another makes a positive difference in my experiential field, then I am experiencing positive regard for that individual. In general, positive regard is defined as including such attitudes as warmth, liking, respect, sympathy, acceptance (1989, pp.207-208).” Unconditional positive regard is a kind of positive regard one experiences that does not discriminate between parts of the other’s “self-experience”, i.e. what may be judged positive or negative parts. Rogers’ definition is quite obscure, and what he means by “positive” is particularly ambiguous, for attitudes like “liking” and “sympathy” suggest a favorable rather than a neutral view of the other person.

has to say, and no longer willing to engage with the other's views or acknowledge the importance the other attaches to the views she holds. And in the moments when we do pay attention, our receptivity is selective and based on how we think it will suit our own purposes. I do not mean to suggest that we have to agree with the other if we are to remain receptive. Rather, to hold the receptive attitude is no more and no less than being interested in and attentive to what the other has to say, regardless of what is said.

Why is it so important that I listen to my interlocutor? Or more generally, why is it important for me to be open to the reality of another, which involves not only her opinions, but also her job, her interests, and much more? Let's look again at the therapeutic relationship. The receptive attitude is good in therapeutic contexts not only because of its instrumental value in achieving the desired outcomes of therapy (however they may vary depending on one's views of therapy), which at least depend on a good understanding of the client's condition, and in turn on the therapist's receptivity. It is also morally valuable because it is a recognition of the client's worth, which may appear diminished in the eyes of some people, including the client herself, because, say, she suffers from some mental disorder.

Or consider another kind of relationship: friendship. The benefit we get from a friend's receptivity is the comfort we find in a friend's company and the ease in being ourselves around her, and especially in times when we have doubts about ourselves, the assurance that we are accepted by our friend regardless of how good or how bad we are in various respects.¹² Moreover, friendship itself is a relationship founded, among other things, on precisely the kind of mutual, unquestioned acceptance of the other (friend) that the receptive attitude encourages. The things we typically expect from a friendship — being able to share our deepest secrets, having someone stand by us

¹²This is not to suggest that there are no limits at all in sustaining a friendship.

no matter what happened or what we did, or simply having someone listen to our complaint about a matter of the slightest importance to anyone (even to ourselves) — presuppose that the friends are receptive to each other.¹³

The receptive attitude is thus vital for close personal relationships such as friendships as well as certain helping relationships.¹⁴ Although the specifics of these different kinds of relationships vary, they share something in common: the meaning of the receptive attitude that one holds towards the other.¹⁵ Essentially, what the receptive attitude says is, “I value you,” or “You are important.”¹⁶ It is a form of respect. In respecting another, according to Stephen Darwall, “[w]hat we attend to here is... among other things, what she herself values and holds good from her point of view as an equal independent agent (2006, p.127).”¹⁷ A person’s point of view makes up a significant part of her *reality*. In being receptive to her reality, we take her point of view seriously — we find her worthwhile to “attend to.”

And it matters a great deal to us that others attend to our reality. We share our joys and sorrows with those close to us. We often want our opinions heard, sometimes even

¹³Kant writes, in “The Doctrine of Virtue,” that “[t]he human being is a being meant for society (though he is also an unsociable one), and in cultivating the social state he feels strongly the need to *reveal* himself to others (even with no ulterior purpose) (1996, p.216).” He goes on to stress the importance of “a judicious and trusted friend” who can meet this need we all presumably have (1996, p.217). Although he seems to characterize this need to “reveal” oneself as a need to disclose one’s *thoughts*, it seems his point can equally apply to other parts of one’s life, such as one’s habits, likes and dislikes.

¹⁴“*Certain*” — not all, because the people in need of help may need *different kinds* of help. One may need care in the hospital ward after a surgery, while another may need physical help with restoring her self-worth after a traumatic event that threatened to destroy her person but not her body.

¹⁵I want to note that the degree of receptivity is asymmetrical in asymmetrical relationships.

¹⁶Rogers makes a similar point about unconditional positive regard, which he sees as a kind of “prizing” (borrowing a term from Dewey), meaning “to value the person, irrespective of the differential values which one might place on his specific behaviors (1989, p.208).”

¹⁷It’s interesting that Darwall uses “attending” here, a word that care ethicists like to use in characterizing a caring relationship. Caring, on Darwall’s view, is another way of valuing. One who values a person through caring is focused on her welfare. Since the *reality* of a person can inform us of what is good for her, being receptive is thus also often required for caring.

when we don't expect anyone to agree. And it upsets us when others misunderstand us or do not want to try to understand us. It is a familiar point that our self-esteem relies in part on validation from people around us. What this means, however, is not just that we seek approval or agreement with regards to our feelings, opinions, choices, and so on. Just as important to us, if not more, is the recognition by others that we *possess* those feelings, opinions, choices and many other things that make up who we are.¹⁸

5.4 Judgmentalism and the receptive attitude

We can now begin to see how one's tendency to judge is in tension with the receptive attitude. When we are open to the reality of another person, we recognize that we are often not in a good position to judge, given the complexity and depth to that reality. Moreover, we would be less inclined to judge not just because we want to make sure our judgments are good, but because we realize that sometimes we shouldn't be "in the business" of judging at all. Let me unpack these two ideas.

First, I take it to be rather uncontroversial that the receptive attitude finds its expression in one's attempt to understand another. The receptive person, as she tries to understand the other, knows that there is always more to the latter than she currently grasps, whether it is something that she has yet to learn about or a part of the person that is undergoing change. She is therefore reluctant to make judgments lest she is wrong. She is especially reluctant to make sweeping judgments about the other person as a whole, since she is always prepared for the possibility that something about the other will defy her judgment.

¹⁸For example, we feel validated (though perhaps not to the fullest extent) when the other person says (sincerely) it is "understandable" that we acted a certain way, even though she goes on to say she does not approve of what we did.

The judgmental person then will be quite unlikely to be receptive. This is a different point from Watson's criticism of the judgmental person as too "unaccepting" even though the unaccepting person does look a lot like the unreceptive person. The difference is that on Watson's view, the judgmental person is unaccepting in the sense that she refuses to accept the other into a meaningful relationship *based on* the negative assessment she has made. Non-acceptance, for Watson, is tied to one's negative judgments of others. But my claim is that one can have a lack of receptivity or diminished receptivity towards another not simply because of the kinds of judgments she makes, but at the same time because her tendency to judge is indication of such a lack. It may also very well encourage unreceptivity, for as one gets into the habit of judging and sees it as if it is its own end, it's easier to take the other person as a mere vehicle for this end. Pigeonholing, stereotyping, and other ways of simplifying the other can become particularly handy to the judgmental person.

Furthermore, the richness in the reality of another not only makes the receptive person stop and question if she is in a good enough position to judge well. It opens up possibilities of relating to the other such that the other does not merely provide an occasion for applying one's standards, but also offers opportunities for us to engage with and make sense of her. Consider what happens when we try to appreciate art.¹⁹ We might think that to get the most out of our experience with art, it is best to immerse ourselves in the artwork (let it "talk to us"), and care not about how good or bad it is but about what it is. Appreciating it is all it "calls for" from us. Is there a parallel in the case of being receptive to people? Does receptivity promote in us, as it does when we approach art, a desire to simply "appreciate" the other person for what she is, which goes against an inclination to judge her, that is, an inclination to impose on her our view of how well she measures up? To answer this question, I want to channel Rogers

¹⁹Susan Wolf suggested the comparison with appreciating art.

once again. In his dialogue with Martin Buber Buber et al. (1997), Rogers makes more concrete what constitutes the “unconditional positive regard” by highlighting certain features of his experience within the therapeutic relationship, one of which is that the therapist “lets the client be.”

What good is there in “letting the other be”? I think this goes back to the thought that the receptive attitude is a form of respect. As we let the other be who she is and reveal herself to us, we show our recognition and affirmation of the person in all her particularity. The person matters to us not just in the sense that we should take her *interests* into consideration when we deliberate on a course of action that may affect her. It is not just the person’s interests, needs, or preferences that matter to us, or her capacity for reason, or the humanity that she shares with all the other persons. It is the person with all the particularities that make up the person she is. So when we see her in this way, we begin to wonder if we should even consider judging at all when there is no need to do so, much less be concerned with making good judgments. But this thought apparently does not occur to the judgmental person as he judges as he pleases.

5.5 Judging and judgmentalism

Two sorts of worries may arise regarding my critique of judgmentalism. First, my account of judgmentalism gives the wrong verdicts on certain people, who would be considered judgmental by my light, but are in fact not judgmental. Second, even if I can somehow defuse the first worry, my view on the receptive attitude seems to demand a strong nonjudgmentalism that would rule out any judging whatsoever.

I take it that both worries express the same challenge: how have I delivered my promise, namely, to make clear the distinction between morally appropriate judging and judging that is not (in this case, judging from a judgmental tendency)? The short

answer is that both worries stem from some misunderstanding of my account, as I will explain below.

First worry

The first worry is one about the “merit-seeker” and the philosophy advisor. The merit-seeker is the opposite of John in that she goes around making positive judgments about people because she is always seeking the good in them. The philosophy advisor, on the other hand, does not so much look for merits in her student’s paper as to point out problems in the latter’s arguments (perhaps occasionally noting a couple of good points). Both have a tendency to judge, but neither can be said to be *judgmental*, much less subject to criticisms for making judgments as they do.

I agree that neither is judgmental, but that is because I think neither has a tendency to judge. It is a mistake to assume, as those who have this worry seem to, that one who judges a lot must therefore have a tendency to judge. There may be a good reason for one to judge, maybe even to judge “a lot.” This is true of the advisor: she needs to evaluate her student’s work so that the student can improve on it, but this does not mean she’s disposed to judge it. If we imagine a philosopher who reads papers, including her students’, and judges them regardless of whether there is good reason to do so, we can see how the advisor differs from this philosopher. Admittedly, the case with philosophers may be a little muddy because one might think that there is always a good reason to judge a paper, since evaluating the arguments is the appropriate response (or at least always *an* appropriate response) to another philosopher’s work (and perhaps one *should* therefore have a tendency to judge philosophy papers). I doubt that’s right, but I will not get too much into the issue here. It may help to bring out the contrast more clearly if we compare a judge at a dance competition and a person with a tendency to judge, among other things, dance performances. The fact that the judge makes a lot of judgments about the performances at the competition is

no basis for attributing to her a tendency to judge. She may well not be inclined to judge dance performances. Nor would she suddenly acquire this inclination when she finds herself in the role of a judge. The same holds for the advisor.

As for the person who goes around making positive judgments of people, she would not have the tendency to judge if she is indeed looking for the good in people. Hers is not a parallel case with John's because the "merit-seeker" does not seek to determine how well (or how poorly, in the case of John) people measure up to certain standards. It may be more accurate to say she does not carry the standards with her and does not act or think as if she is a judge. And since flaws in people tend to grab our attention more than their merits, the "merit-seeker" is in a sense particularly receptive, being better than most of us at recognizing good qualities in people.

Second worry

The second worry is about judging in general. In criticizing the judgmental person for departing from the receptive attitude, it may be charged, I imply that *judging* is itself an unreceptive act. But judging is useful, and sometimes absolutely necessary for us, and even required by morality sometimes, so my account effectively throws the baby out together with the water.

I think this is a misreading of my view. The receptive attitude is at odds with certain approaches and attitudes to judging, but not to judging itself. To take up the attitude is to first of all check one's assumptions and rein in one's tendency to jump to conclusions. But is it in principle opposed to making any judgments at all? I don't think so, for although one would not be inclined to judge, she may well find herself in a position to make informed judgments given her understanding of the person. If she goes on to judge, it would not imply a rejection of the receptive attitude. Besides, she would consider the judgments to be provisional only and subject to change.

A scenario like this is entirely possible; we can still make judgments when we hold the

receptive attitude. Think of an art critic.²⁰ Her *job* is precisely to critique artworks, but she may well be the least judgmental towards them among members of the audience. This may sound paradoxical, but the art critic's nonjudgmental approach to art is required by her job, for she has to be able to appreciate a piece of art for what it is in order to analyze and evaluate it. That means, unlike the casual viewers, she has to look carefully and "listen" to what the artwork has to "say." She has to be able to point out to us what we do not see or see clearly as she helps us understand the artwork, which she must first understand herself.²¹ If receptivity can be found in someone whose job is to judge, it certainly would not preclude all judgment-making in others. Iris Murdoch's example of the mother-in-law can be used to illustrate the same point. Murdoch describes a mother (M) who looked at her daughter-in-law (D) first with hostility and jealousy, and later with "loving attention." Upon careful reflection on her own prejudices and flaws, M's judgments of D change from negative to positive even though D herself has not changed (as Murdoch stipulates for the sake of the argument). M now considers D "not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on (1970, pp.17-18)." Before her change of heart, M was judgmental towards D not just in the narrower sense of judging her excessively negatively, but in the broader sense too — she had a tendency to evaluate D. But when she realizes she might be in the wrong, M tells herself to *look again*, to find out what D is really like free from the distortions created by her own prejudices. M chooses to not focus on judging, but rather looks at D more attentively; she chooses to be nonjudgmental. Nonetheless, she does reach (new) judgments about D, informed

²⁰Wolf suggested this example.

²¹In a way, the art critic's job is to orient us to face the artwork much like Plato's cave dwellers are oriented to face the Sun.

by what she now understands about D through loving attention. However, even if judging is not ruled out in our adoption of the receptive attitude, adopting the attitude makes one more hesitant to judge. Could there be such a thing as being “too nonjudgmental”? It seems that we risk losing grip of our standards and values (moral and non-moral ones) if we are inclined to stay away from judging. Furthermore, if we lose grip of the things that we take ourselves to care about or stand for, then we would lose a big part of what defines our selves and gives depth to our lives. Just as a person with too many opinions (judgments) about too many things is liable to criticism, there also seems to be something objectionable about a person at the other extreme, who has too few opinions on too few things.

I have much sympathy for this concern, but the problem does not lie in having the receptive attitude. What is needed is a set of virtues that are going to guide decisions about when one is to judge and what kind of judgment is called for. In the case of the art critic, such decisions may be more straightforward, for they are typically (though not necessarily always) tied to whether it is her job to review a work of art. A good art critic can make sound judgments about art when called upon to judge, but generally remains nonjudgmental in approaching art because she appreciates it and knows how to appreciate it. We can think of a wise person — a good “life critic,” maybe? — as being similarly nonjudgmental and yet discerning about people. She is discerning because her judgments about people would be sound, nonjudgmental because she “appreciates” people and knows how to appreciate them, and most of all, wise because she knows when it is time to judge. What differentiates the wise person from the indiscriminate person is not that the latter is more receptive, but the former possesses qualities that are lacking in the latter.

5.6 Conclusion

I hope I have made clear an important — but much neglected — objection to judgmentalism: a tendency to judge others typically goes against the receptive attitude, which is morally valuable. The receptive attitude turns us away from judging — not just because we realize we are not ready to make a good judgment yet, but because receptivity calls for a kind of involvement with the other that downplays judging.

Here's one last question. Even if my view is right, hasn't my presentation of it been an exercise of judgmentalism? In criticizing the judgmental person for compromising or even lacking the receptive attitude, haven't I been unreceptive to the judgmental person? Or more generally, is a big part of moral philosophy a judgmental enterprise?

There is indeed a risk in doing moral philosophy. If I were to get out of my office now, armed with my account of judgmentalism, and make a mental note of how judgmental each of the people I encounter is, I would indeed be judgmental myself. But the chapter is an *inquiry* into a subject — judgmentalism — that piqued my curiosity.

Chapter 6

The Limits of the Moral Value of Understanding

6.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I have been advocating for more understanding of others, even those who have committed appalling wrongs. A question naturally arises for such a positive view of understanding: if understanding others is a good thing, ought we then to strive for *maximal* understanding? That is, ought we to understand as many people and as much as possible?

This is a familiar question. Recall that in the first chapter, we saw how empathy exercised without any constraint could be morally problematic, even though it is often morally good to empathize with others. The case with empathy gives us reason to refine our thinking about understanding as well. Despite the fact that we are not understanding others as much as we should a lot of the times, a single-minded pursuit of maximal understanding without regard for potentially relevant moral standards may well be no less susceptible to criticism than unquestioned resistance to understanding, as is in the case of empathy.

With that in mind, I set out in this chapter to explore the moral constraints, if any, on our attempts of understanding. I will conclude with some final remarks about the moral value of understanding persons.

6.2 The “ought” question

Let’s first consider the question as I initially stated it: Ought we to strive for *maximal* understanding, i.e., ought we to understand as many people and as much as possible?

Note here that the extent of understanding is taken to vary along two dimensions: the number of people to be understood, and the degree of understanding of them. As I pointed out in the second chapter, understanding (of any object), unlike propositional knowledge, comes in degrees. So maximal understanding of persons cannot simply be understanding of the maximal number of people, but also understanding them as much and as well as possible. The distinction between the two dimensions becomes important if, and once, we deny that maximal understanding is morally obligatory; for the denial could entail not only that we need not understand as many people as possible, but also that among those we do need to understand, we need not understand some as much as we do others.

We can see that along both dimensions, achieving maximal understanding would require an enormous input of time, energy, cognitive resources, and so on. Think of our experience with our closest friends, and we can begin to see how much effort it takes to understand one person really well. Multiplying that by a “maximal” number of people? We would be left with barely any time, energy or other resources for many other meaningful ends we may have in life — earning a degree, writing a book, raising kids, for example — or for watching a movie or simply having some peace of mind at the end of a long day. But we haven’t yet said anything about ends we should have as moral agents, such as helping the needy, fighting injustices, and perhaps protecting the environment. These too demand some of our limited resources, and moreover, they can often be more important or more urgent than the task of understanding. For me to neglect to donate to earthquake victims because I’m too busy with understanding some

new acquaintances to make the short walk to the donation collection point just sounds wrong, not to say ridiculous. And it doesn't make things any better — perhaps rather worse — if the people I'm busy trying to understand — through reading newspapers, watching TV, and discussing with others on social media — are none other than the earthquake victims. Granted we do need to have some understanding of their situation to provide aid, this is not the time to understand them as thoroughly as possible.

More generally, we can't have a moral duty to *maximize* the doing of X — even though doing X may be morally good — if fulfilling such a duty would preclude us from pursuing almost all other ends, moral and non-moral. For example, helping the needy is good, but a duty to help the needy *maximally* would require us to relegate all other duties, even making it practically impossible to ever fulfill those that also demand time and effort, such as promoting the welfare of one's own children. Personal projects essential to our flourishing, like cultivating friendships, would also have to be set aside. This is unless, of course, one is devoted to one single goal in life, that of helping the needy. We would *admire* someone like this for her commitment to the cause, but not all of us want to structure our lives the same way.

For the same reasons, it cannot be a moral duty to *maximize* understanding of persons. Besides, we might think that the case for its being a duty is even weaker than that of maximal help to the needy. For if we believe that being moral is mostly a matter of doing what is morally right or good, then at least one is doing something good in giving help, whereas understanding seems to be only halfway to moral action. Even with maximal understanding, it still leaves open how we are to act with what we have understood of others. I will come back to this point at the end of the chapter. For now, let's examine the morality of understanding taken as a kind of “doing” by itself.

6.3 A counter-example to a positive view of understanding?

Consider the public's interest in the lives of celebrities. Is it morally better for us to pay so much attention to the details of their personal lives than otherwise? The answer seems to be an unambiguous "No," for there is hardly anything morally commendable in a person's fixation on changes in Oprah's weight or in Tom Cruise's marriage, for example. Nor is there any moral value in the frenzied attempts of tabloid reporters to feed such an obsession. Quite on the contrary, their attempts often border on violations of privacy, hence liable to moral objections.

But one might object that the example is misleading, for it is not one of trying to *understand* the celebrities. For those who follow closely the dramas in celebrities' real lives, their interest stops at knowing what is happening with the celebrities rather than understanding them as individuals. Celebrities provide a wealth of material for gossip, and people love gossip. One might even go further to suggest that the problem with the obsession is not there is too much understanding, but too little: the public may be consuming tons of *information* about celebrities, but they have failed miserably at understanding them, always quick to make sweeping judgments upon hearing something new.

I think there is still something to be learned from this example, but before I elaborate on the point, let me address the issue raised in the objection. The objection appeals to a distinction between understanding a person and knowing facts about her, a distinction I made in the second chapter. The possession of justified true beliefs about the person is necessary but insufficient for understanding her. Knowing can occur with or without understanding, but either way, the activity of knowing is also subject to moral evaluation just as the activity of understanding is. For example, it is morally impermissible (under normal circumstances) for me to force person A to divulge person B's secrets that A has promised to keep — *what* we seek to know may be morally off

limits, as well as certain ways of *how* we acquire the knowledge. Thus, we could say whatever might be wrong with the public's interest in celebrity gossip does not have to do with understanding, but only with knowing. Understood in this way, the example would cease to be a counter-example to the view that understanding more is better, since it shows only that *knowing* more is not necessarily better.

However, it would be too quick to dismiss the example at this point. That knowledge is distinct from understanding is only half of the picture; talking about the morality of knowing persons is still relevant to talking about the morality of understanding them because knowing is necessary for understanding. If there are moral limits on what I can know about the person and how I can know it, the moral limits will carry over to how well I can understand her, insofar as better understanding requires at least some of the information that happens to be morally inappropriate for me to obtain.¹ Concerns about privacy, for example, constrain what we can know about someone to facts outside of what she considers private, and in turn limit our understanding of her (insofar as what she deems private matters to how we understand her). This does not mean that moral considerations regarding understanding persons must then collapse onto those regarding knowing them, but only that the latter can often inform the former. Since some of the problems I discuss later can be seen as problems in *knowing* facts about a person, I want here to forestall objections that these problems are not really problems in *understanding*, given the reason I have just explained.

Let us get back to the example. It can be debated what exactly one is doing when she shows so much interest in the lives of celebrities. It may be true that she is only trying to *know* what's new with them.² Yet it is not implausible to posit that she

¹The "insofar" qualification is included to leave open the possibility that we can understand a person just as well without knowing some facts about her.

²And since such a person may well be very judgmental about many of the celebrities, we have even more reason to think she is not trying to understand them. As I have argued in chapter 5, attempts

may be genuinely interested in finding out who these celebrities really are behind their glamorous faade. My job is not to analyze the psychology of the public's fascination with celebrities. Whatever the correct account, the phenomenon at least points us to some interesting questions: Is it always morally better to try to understand more people than fewer (e.g., more celebrities)? Is it always morally better to try to understand a person more than less? Does it matter how we go about understanding a person?

6.4 The “Who” question

Take the first question, is it always morally better to try to understand more people than fewer? Even if we grant that one is trying to understand celebrities by staying on top of the news about them, we wonder whether she is doing anything morally better than another person who is relevantly similar in all respects except that she does share this interest in celebrities because what they really are is simply none of her business. “None of her business,” for she holds no relationship whatsoever with these celebrities, and they do not figure in her moral decisions. Perhaps there is some epistemic value in achieving understanding of a diverse range of persons, for we will thereby have honed our cognitive skills and broadened our horizons. But it is not clear what additional moral value there may be in, say, understanding more celebrities. If there is moral value in the moral virtues we typically display in attempts to understand, the value is not tied to the number of people we try to understand, but only to the exercise of virtues. Could there be “indirect” moral value in understanding more people — valuable for its contribution to making one better at understanding different sorts of people, and hence in a better position to respond to moral situations that call for (a high level of) understanding? Presumably, there are many skills or abilities that can contribute to our acting well in certain moral situations — good communication skills, for instance

at understanding are at odds with a judgmental attitude.

— but our practice in them does not therefore become morally valuable itself.

Instead, I want to suggest that it is *whom* we understand, not *how many*, that matters morally. One place where understanding the other is especially valuable is a close friendship. As we have seen in previous chapters, a close friendship consists in part in a mutual willingness to understand (and not just empathize with) each other, and depends for its flourishing on sustained efforts to understand by both parties (and perhaps also a relatively high degree of success?). As we move away from close personal relationships to cases where no relationship whatsoever is present, the importance of understanding another declines accordingly. The example with celebrities is one of the latter. The vast majority of people we meet in daily life fall somewhere in between the two ends. Some are more like the case of celebrities: there's nothing wrong with not trying to understand the Starbucks barista with whom my interaction stops at getting a cup of Espresso.³ There are also persons who are, relative to the barista, more involved with us in various kinds of impersonal relationships. Take, for example, the students I teach in a seminar. While it is morally good for me to understand them (to some extent), it is not necessarily *better* that I also try to understand as many of the student population as possible in the absence of a similar relationship. At the same time, also because of the relationship I hold with my students, I do not need to understand them as well as their friends do, but a sense of what they are like in their capacities *as participants in the seminar* would be important.⁴

This is not to say, however, that there cannot be moral value in our understanding a person in the absence of any relationship with her. Sometimes we may be involved

³This is not to say that we should therefore see the barista as nothing more than her occupation. On the contrary, I think it is morally good to recognize that she is a potential object for understanding as a person who inhabits a world no less meaningful and rich than our own.

⁴Here, understanding my students more may be good, if in so doing, I create a more friendly and relaxed learning environment for them; or not so good, if it gets in the way of maintaining a professional relationship with them.

in a moral situation such that our decision about the right thing to do is contingent on some understanding of persons we have barely met. For example, one might think that the public can have a legitimate interest in understanding, and not just knowing about, public officials (potential or incumbent) even though they are as removed from us as celebrities. Insofar as we as citizens have a moral responsibility to select the best candidates for political office and hold them accountable while they are in office, and assuming our evaluation of them requires some understanding of them in their capacities as public officials, understanding is then morally required, though to a limited extent. To be sure, the public is divided on how much understanding is appropriate here. Some might think *knowledge* of one's credentials, policy commitments, or record in office is enough for evaluating candidates, while others demand to *understand* them more holistically in terms of how well they exhibit leadership qualities. And some might insist that leadership qualities include certain character traits such as honesty, self-discipline, and integrity. Consequently, that would require a deeper understanding of the candidates and knowledge about them beyond their performance in public office to areas in their personal lives. Regardless of how this disagreement is to be settled, at least all parties to it can agree that it is morally good, and even required, for us to understand (to a satisfactory extent) the persons running for or occupying public offices.

6.5 The “How much” question

What I said in the last section also suggests part of an answer to the other question, “Is it always morally better to try to understand a person more than less?” Whether it is so depends on the kind of relationship (or lack thereof) we have with another person, or sometimes the specifics of the moral situation we find ourselves in. At the same time and perhaps more importantly, it also depends on the *person* we are trying

to understand. This is a unique feature of understanding of this kind, for unlike other possible objects of understanding, a person is not merely an object for us but stands in a relation to us as a *subject* as well. That is to say, as we take up the task of understanding her, how we are to proceed cannot be determined solely by our own interests. We should also take into account her interests, such as how she would like to be treated.⁵ Since the person's interests may go against our attempts of understanding her one way or another, it is not always morally better to try to understand someone *as much as possible*, for it may be morally unjustified for us to do so. Of course, not every case of going against one's interests is morally unjustified: the political candidate may have a strong interest in presenting an idealized image to the public and thwarting investigative efforts to prove otherwise. But generally, the person's wishes as to how we are to relate to her put a constraint on our attempts to understand her.

More specifically, there are a few ways our attempts can be so constrained. First, certain *processes* by which we come to know about the person may be ruled out.⁶ Second, the information we are looking for about a person can be something that she would rather keep to herself.⁷ And lastly, there's also the possibility that the person simply prefers not to be understood.

With respect to the first, a familiar example is that of parents "snooping" on their children — looking around the child's bedroom, checking her cell phone, or eavesdropping on her phone calls. I do not intend to argue one way or the other for when parents are justified in doing so, but the fact that their snooping needs justification is telling. Even if their child does not in fact have anything to hide from them (which is highly

⁵In Kantian terms, she is to be treated not just as a means, but as an end-in-itself.

⁶The discussion below on this point is a response to the last question I raised in relation to the celebrity example — Does it matter how we go about understanding a person?

⁷As I discussed earlier, limits on our knowledge of a person almost always constrain our understanding of a person as well.

unlikely), the method by which they acquire new information about her is disrespectful of her personal space. Hence the need for justification: that the parents are doing it for the child's own good (they have good reason to believe something is going wrong with their child and she needs help), that there is no other way to find the information (the child refuses to communicate), that they have always been careful with respecting their child's privacy and will continue to do so under normal circumstances, and so forth.

Or consider the job of journalists. Telling the truth is the journalistic ideal; so is giving a balanced view of an event. Both can be considered as enabling readers to better understand what happened. But sometimes it may be morally objectionable for journalists to interview subjects on certain topics, or interview them at all, even though such an interview is apt to serve a legitimate public interest, or even do a lot of good. For example, reading first-person accounts of survivors of a devastating natural disaster may spur more people to give help, but should we bring this about at the expense of having the survivors relive the harrowing moments of their lives as they recount their stories? This is not to say that we should therefore not try to learn about their situation, but rather we should be sensitive to their needs and concerns and think about *how* we are to learn about them, and *what* we want to learn about them (perhaps we do not need to know the details of how they escaped death or lost their loved ones so as to sympathize and give help). Photojournalists too often come under fire for taking photos of subjects "at the wrong time." Although it can be argued that a picture of one's expression of grief conveys the message a lot more effectively than words, it is still an instance of unjustified intrusion if the subject would rather be left alone in that moment of an intense emotional experience.⁸

⁸Here's an excerpt from "What It Feels Like To Be Photographed In A Moment Of Grief," published on the NPR website, which illustrates the clash between the subject's interests and the photographer's:

On the night of the shootings in Newtown, Conn., a woman named Aline Marie attended a prayer vigil at St. Rose of Lima Roman Catholic Church, which was packed with local residents and the media. After about 45 minutes, Marie saw the statue of Mary and

The point can be put more generally. To have personal space, it must be possible to be left alone not just by certain people (e.g., my parents) or at certain times (e.g., when I'm too upset to talk to anyone), but by anyone at any time as long as there are no overriding moral considerations in favor of interference. And leaving others alone is the very minimum we can do in respecting them in the Kantian sense, if we take what Kant says about respect literally: "The principle of **mutual love** admonishes men constantly to *come closer* to one another; that of the **respect** they owe one another, to keep themselves *at a distance* from one another. . . (1996, p.244)" Our attempts at understanding can in many ways be seen as unwanted interference by someone who, for instance, does not want to talk to us about herself, or is simply uncomfortable about the attention we are paying to her even if there is no direct personal interaction — even if we had asked her friends, and not herself, about her. One may wonder, however, what if we are more discreet? Would it still be a problem if the person we are trying to understand has no way of knowing what we are doing? If she *feels* like she is left alone, isn't that enough for her being left alone? I think it depends. The issue here is not just about how things look to her, but about how we treat her, how seriously we take her concern for privacy. It is possible that all she wants, when she wants to be left alone, is to not be bothered. Then discreet attempts at understanding her may well be fine with her (provided we steer clear from things she does not want us to know). But

knelt down to pray.

"I sat there in a moment of devastation with my hands in prayer pose asking for peace and healing in the hearts of men," she recalls. "I was having such a strong moment and my heart was open, and I started to cry."

Her mood changed abruptly, she says, when "all of a sudden I hear 'clickclickclickclickclick' all over the place. And there are people in the bushes, all around me, and they are photographing me, and now I'm pissed. I felt like a zoo animal."

What particularly troubles her, she says, is "no one came up to me and said 'Hi, I'm from this paper and I took your photograph.'" No one introduced themselves. I felt violated. And yes, it was a lovely photograph, but there is a sense of privacy in a moment like that, and they didn't ask."

it is also possible that she does not want to be the object of our attention, whether or not attempts at understanding interfere with her life in any way. If this is the case, giving her the *feeling* of being left alone is insufficient for respecting her privacy, for the “snooping” parents can also create the illusion that they have never searched their child’s room.

The other point about noninterference has not to do with leaving the person alone, but with leaving *some things about her* alone, so to speak. We have seen in previous chapters that we have a strong interest in expressing ourselves and being understood. But at the same time, we also have an interest in keeping certain things to ourselves. We may share details of our personal life with close friends and family members. Yet even with them, we may not want to disclose our deepest secrets, like childhood memories that distress us, or thoughts we feel ashamed of having, or things we feel horrible about having done. Respecting one’s concern for privacy thus constrains the extent to which we can know about and subsequently understand her. But interestingly, if we limit our attempts of understanding in this way, we understand *something* very important to her and about her.

Finally, it is also possible for one to not want to be understood at all by certain people. Perhaps she does not want to associate herself in any way with a character she finds particularly annoying or even detestable, so cannot tolerate the thought that she might be on the latter’s mind. There could be other reasons for resisting someone’s interest in understanding oneself. Unlikely as such cases might be, they too are examples where greater understanding is not also morally better.

6.6 The understanding self

Now if the person to be understood can place moral constraints on our attempts at understanding her, does the understanding *self* also generate moral constraints of

some sort? Recall in the discussion of empathy, one potential risk we face in our empathic engagement with another is losing touch with our own feelings, desires, etc. as a result of excessive focus on the other person's inner experience. And insofar as this alienation from ourselves threatens our moral agency, or compromises self-respect, unconstrained empathy that gives rise to alienation becomes morally objectionable rather than commendable. Could the same problem arise for understanding as well?

I do not think the problem of "too much" empathy straightforwardly carries over to understanding. For of the person who empathizes "too much," we would not say that she also *understands* the other too much, but quite the opposite: She does not understand the other enough precisely because she fails to retreat from the latter's perspective to see things from alternative perspectives, which a fuller understanding requires. More empathy cannot correct for the ills of "too much" empathy like self-effacement, but more understanding makes it possible.

But one similarity between one's stance in empathizing and that in understanding may still be cause for worry. Although unlike in empathy, one who tries to understand another need not confine herself to the other's perspective, she is nevertheless focused on the other in trying to understand as she is in trying to empathize. When she is so oriented towards the other, it seems that she risks neglecting herself at some point — "too much" understanding, perhaps? After all, an overly understanding person often turns out to be a pushover. Morally speaking, a pushover fails to treat herself the right way, for she fails to regard herself as just as important as everyone else.

There are a few problems with this line of thought, however. First, not any kind of focus on another person threatens one's sense of self as in extreme cases of empathy. Someone could have a strong and lasting focus on her enemy, for whom she never stops wishing the worst. But we would not be worried that she might, as a result of her attention on her enemy (out of hatred and malice), come to think any less of her own

needs and concerns. She may forget to eat on time or lose sleep over the good fortunes of her enemy, but such disruptions are commonplace for anyone who is devoted to a project. A project involving thoroughgoing empathic engagement, however, can become dangerously self-undermining because it is an exercise in suspending a central part of the self: one's subjective perspective. But a project of understanding others does not confine one to another's perspective. Not only that, the self is constantly rediscovered and re-evaluated in the course of making sense of others who can be different from us in many ways.

Furthermore, it is a mistake to assume that the more one understands others, the more likely she is to yield to their wishes. It may be true that with greater understanding, one is more likely to accommodate others, but this may be a result of careful deliberation in light of factors we would otherwise not notice. The notion of an "understanding person" is worth some examination. If an understanding person is someone who is willing to bend her rules or give up her own demands easily when challenged by another, then we need to draw a distinction between an understanding person and a person who understands well. Even if with greater understanding, the latter is more disposed to being sympathetic, sensitive, and compassionate to others, there is nothing in understanding that prevents her from being as disciplined as anyone else in deliberating about how to respond to others.

6.7 Two further thoughts

Before I conclude, I would like to bring up two points worth considering as we think about the moral value of understanding persons.

The first point is that we should not lose sight of the fact that understanding is often a means to an end: achieving understanding is only half of the story, and taking appropriate action or making appropriate judgments based on what we understand

completes the other half. In other words, even good understanding is no guarantee of morally good or right action.

Let us revisit the example of the indulgent father who gives in to his son's craving for junk food. The problem with the father need not be that he empathizes too much with his son, or that he doesn't sufficiently understand other facts about his son. He may do both things right and yet fail to take the right action. We can imagine another father who doesn't understand his son as well but nevertheless does the right thing: not giving in to the child's craving for junk food. Greater understanding does not necessarily *lead to* morally better or right action, for there is a further step after understanding, where we need to deliberate and decide what to do, given what we have understood.

Or consider the case of my student who asks for an extension for the paper. I may understand his reasons very well, knowing how things look to him from his point of view *and* recognizing how trivial his reasons are from an external point of view. Even though his reasons do not justify an extension — let's suppose I'm right, and I have considered every relevant bit of information about him — I may nevertheless make the wrong decision and grant him an extension just to avoid any unpleasant confrontation. It is morally wrong for me to make an exception for him without sufficient justification because it is unfair to the other students, and because I have broken an implicit promise to uphold the terms I lay down for the class.

And of course understanding can be used precisely to do wrong. This is as true for understanding in sciences as understanding of persons. The nuclear bomb demonstrates just as good an understanding of nuclear reaction as the nuclear power plant. Likewise, *mistreatment* of a person can sometimes reflect as thorough an understanding of her as acts of care and concern for her. Stanley Cavell makes a similar point when he contends that the problem with slave owners of (the 18th century) is not that they failed to recognize the humanity in the slaves (1979, pp.375-376). Instead, it is a failure

to *treat* the slaves as humans despite such recognition. Precisely because they knew full well the humanity of the slaves, Cavell notes, the slave owners could enjoy the services of their slaves, for they clearly would not prefer being served by animals.

My second point is that besides moral reasons, we sometimes also have non-moral reasons for not understanding someone or not being understood by others as much as possible.

Psychologists Ickes and Simpson (1997) studying intimacy and communication conclude that people sometimes avoid the “inconvenient truths” about their relationship so as to maintain the quality and their commitment to the relationship — “inconvenient truths” such as undesirable qualities in the partner, or the fact that the partner doesn’t care as much for one as one thinks. It may be argued that the ostrich tactic is doomed to fail in the long term.⁹ And it seems doubtful how worthwhile it is to keep a relationship when at least one of the partners has to resort to some form of self-deception. Still, at the very least, some degree of ignorance may be a blessing to one in the short-term. Also, opting to not understand some aspects of the other need not be self-deceptive or detrimental in the long-term. Suppose my friend and I have opposing views on certain issues — abortion, for example — and we always get into impassioned arguments every time the topics come up. For fear that such arguments may get too emotional and adversely affect our friendship, we may agree to avoid talking about those particular issues. In doing so, we will also have given up the chance to really understand each other’s opinions on these issues, or even some of the deepest commitments they have. This is of course not the only way to resolve the problem; we could also do just the opposite, to simply listen to the other without trying to convince her that one is right. Nevertheless, it is up to the individuals to determine what works best for their friendship. Sometimes less than optimal understanding is better.

⁹Ibid.

Interestingly, the same can be said for the other side of the understanding-relation too. That is, it can be better for us if certain people do *not* understand us as much as possible. This interest in limited understanding of ourselves does not have to be morally suspect; it need not be accompanied by a malicious desire to deceive or manipulate others for personal gain. Instead, it can simply be an interest in presenting a side of ourselves we consider most fitting for a particular role or relationship. Many Facebook users are reluctant to “friend” their family members or professional contacts precisely for this reason.

Apart from prudential reasons, one may also have aesthetic (or other) reasons to not pursue greater understanding of certain people. While some fans are eager to learn everything about their idol, others may opt not to, not just because the person might not turn out as great as they thought, but because they think a sense of distance and mystery adds to the experience of admiration.

6.8 Conclusion

I would like to conclude by going back to where we started in the first chapter. In my discussion of empathy and “proper empathy,” we saw that moral rules and principles put limits on our empathic engagement even though it is often morally good to empathize. The same can be said about understanding: despite the fact that it is often good for us to understand others, we must be mindful of moral considerations that bear on our acts of understanding. Moreover, as I pointed out in the first chapter, our exercise of empathy is subject to different kinds of standards such that we can empathize accurately (“properly” in one sense) without empathizing in the morally right way (“improperly” in another sense). Similarly, we should be cautious in talking about when one is understanding “well.” “Better” understanding in the *epistemic* sense may or may not also be morally better. And finally, just as we should avoid exaggerating

the role of empathy — it does not amount to understanding, for example — we should also recognize the limits of the contribution of understanding to morality. Although sometimes understanding a person is all one needs to do in a particular situation, often further action is called for.

What emerges from all this is a view of understanding as a moral virtue, not understanding unqualified, but understanding of the right people, in the right way, in the right context, and to the right degree. And despite everything I have said on the limits of the moral value of understanding, what's cause for concern in our time, given how we tend to behave in real life, is not *too much* emphasis on understanding, but rather *too little*. Cultivating the virtue begins with trying to understand others more.

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