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# The Limits of Empathy in Business Ethics Education

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A COMMENT ON Marc A. Cohen (2012), “Empathy in Business Ethics Education,”  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper challenges Cohen’s application of empathy to business ethics education. I argue Cohen fails to adequately address the problems of empathetic penetrability and accuracy in regards to reading other’s minds. Given these problems, I conclude empathy may be less important as an antecedent to moral action than Cohen suggests.

**OVER THE PAST** three decades, empathy has received considerable attention in philosophy and psychology thanks to the interdisciplinary debate regarding how propositional attitudes (i.e., folk psychology) develop. For simulation theorists, empathy – stepping into the shoes of another as a way of simulating latent beliefs and desires – is important for understanding, explaining, and predicting behaviour. Cohen’s application of empathy to business ethics education to achieve what he calls (2012: 359) “cooperative, mutually beneficial outcomes” or CMBO is a welcome addition to the literature. Unfortunately, cultivating empathetic experience is more difficult than he realizes because it suffers from the problems of penetrability and

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accuracy. Although empathy might be sufficient for moral motivation, I will argue it is not necessary for ethics education.

### **Empathy versus Reason**

Cohen argues that business ethics education should strive to ensure students engage in actions that are mutually beneficial for both business and society. Actions that put one's self-interest (i.e., profit) ahead of others, such as exploiting workers, would violate this imperative. As a way of meeting the tactical outcomes of CMBO, we must move away from the historical emphasis on improving moral reasoning skills. Emphasizing rational moral thinking is unjustified, Cohen says, for a number of reasons. First, meta-analysis of the effectiveness of business ethics education on moral reasoning skills has shown it to be minimally effective (Waples, et al 2009). Second, despite these meager results, it's questionable whether such reasoning skills will manifest into improved moral behavior. Finally, by focusing on improving a student's ability to discuss ethics, it could lead to the rationalization of unethical or dishonest behaviour; clearly, not the goal of business ethics education.

For Cohen, ethics pedagogy should shift away from the cultivation of moral reasoning and towards empathetic experience. Cohen grounds this shift primarily on primatology (De Waal 2009) and leadership (Parks 1996) research which shows how empathetic responses to another's situation can motivate prosocial, cooperative, and moral behavior. Although Cohen does not give a specific definition of empathy, he does reference Hume, who, despite using the term sympathy instead of empathy, references the human ability to put oneself into another's place as a way of coming to know how some-one else feels. The implicit assumption, when placing oneself in other person's situation, is that one simulates the situational circumstances and implicit mental states. For Cohen, empathy allows one to simulate another's affective states and propositional attitudes (beliefs and desires) as a way of motivating beneficial outcomes for the greater good of others. The upshots, say Cohen (2012: 368), are two important claims: 1) "empathetic experience can motivate persons to act in ways that support cooperative, mutually beneficial outcomes"; and 2) "moral action necessarily involves an empathetic component." For Cohen, empathy is a necessary but not sufficient condition for determining CMBO.

However, as Cohen recognizes, there are problems associated with empathy such as being unreliable and suffering from bias and, therefore, cognitive reasoning should not be eliminated. Analytical reasoning can help one recognize and rescue empathy from these limitations by correcting biases or allowing us to understand why one empathizes in some situations but not others. Moral reasoning is also important for allowing us to understand facts surrounding ethical issues, constructing ethical alternatives and solutions to complex problems, providing individuals the means to critique personal assumptions, and assessing harmful outcomes. Reason, in other words, must play a sub-ordinate role in business ethics education.

Cohen argues classroom practices should be established to cultivate empathetic experiences such as using film and reflective exercises (e.g., journal writing). Another important pedagogical technique is service learning. Service learning has been shown to improve student understanding of social issues, personal development, and commitment to civic responsibilities. Collectively, Cohen (2013: 373) writes,

business ethics should focus on cultivating empathetic responses, or focus on work that offers students the possibility of empathetic connection with others, because these experiences will lead to better outcomes.

In other words, ethics education should strive to make students care about the common good of society beyond self-interest.

### **Empathetic Penetrability and Accuracy**

The problem with the idea of becoming an impartial empathetic spectator, as already noted by Cohen, is that personal biases may prevent one from penetrating, and thus simulating, another's mind. However, he underdetermines the extent of this concern. Psychological research shows taking another's perspective is more difficult than he suggests because we have a natural tendency to assume people think the same way we do (Epley and Caruso 2009). Davis et al. (1996), for example, found that unless subjects were explicitly prompted to empathize, they instinctively assumed others shared similar thoughts and emotions to themselves. Our natural egocentric bias is a major obstacle to empathetic penetration. One needs to overcome her own biases in order for empathy to work and there is no research to indicate moral reasoning will prevent this bias.

Moreover, overcoming one's own perspective seems to depend on cultural values. Cohen and Gunz (2002) found Asians, given their collectivist values, are more inclined to define one's "self" in relation to others and, therefore, view themselves more naturally from an impartial spectator point of view. North Americans, on the other hand, given their individualistic values, have a self-oriented point of view and have greater difficulty overcoming their own biases and penetrating the mind of others.

A related problem is empathetic accuracy. Empathy assumes one has knowledge of the situational context and mental states of another person. But how much knowledge does one need in order to empathize? This is a difficult question to answer in part because, if Cohen is right about empathetic experiences being tainted by biases, then there is no guarantee when one steps into the shoes of another they will accurately reflect the situation or the underlying mental states of the subject. And, although Cohen acknowledges the problem of empathetic inaccuracy, it's more formidable than he realizes. It is questionable whether all situations or underlying mental states will be equally empathizable. Some mental states, such as raw emotions (happiness, sadness, and anger) might be easier to simulate, whereas the beliefs (poor working conditions, low wages, etc.) and desires (for a better life, education, etc.) of a sweatshop worker, for example, might be very difficult. Moreover, because people have an indefinite number of mental states, it is indeterminate which ones must be simulated to achieve a genuine empathetic experience. Cohen gives no guidance regarding how moral reasoning will take up the empathetic slack.

Interestingly, empathic accuracy is highly contingent upon the level of interaction between two people. Ickes et al. (1993) showed the more two people interacted and became familiar with each other (direct gaze, body language, asking questions, etc.) the better they were at accurately predicting the thoughts and feelings of others. However, empathic accuracy decreased as people talked about third parties. If we apply this research to business ethics pedagogy, the implication suggests that reflective journal or cases studies, where there is little or no interaction with others, may have limited value at increasing empathetic experiences. Service learning, however, holds more promise. If Cohen is correct, extensive interaction with vulnerable populations ought to enhance empathetic accuracy and motivation to achieve a common good.

But the problem of empathetic accuracy is most pronounced when trying to empathize with stakeholders whose beliefs and desires differ from one's own. Empathizing with people who are similar to us is easier than with people who are different. Consider Cohen's service learning example. Imagine students engage in service learning by volunteering with vulnerable populations. It is possible students, especially those who come from affluent households, could fail to empathize with the homeless, poor, or victims of domestic violence, and by extension act towards CMBO, because they cannot accurately represent the appropriate antecedent mental states. Simulating the mind of vulnerable populations may simply be too incongruent with average student experiences. To put the point more broadly, there is no reason to think students will have similar empathetic capacities. It might vary widely depending on upbringing, culture, or other background personal experiences. Some students may simply not be able to empathize or may have limited empathetic abilities. Cohen's claim that empathetic experience can motivate students to support CMBO may be very restricted.

Moreover, contrary to Cohen, Neuberg, et al (1997) found there is little evidence to suggest empathy plays a role motivating prosocial or helping behavior (CMBO). And in cases where there is a correlation, helping others only occurs when there is little cost to oneself. In other words, engaging in extensive service learning where students have to expend considerable effort is unlikely to provide the motivational force needed to cultivate empathy and social change. Even if students are empathetic, according to Neuberg et al. (1997), they are no more likely to help than non-empathetic students (Prinz 2011: 220).

### **Is Empathy Necessary for Morality?**

Cohen's second claim, that empathy is necessary for morality, is also questionable. If empathy is a necessary condition, Cohen would have to show, in its absence, students would lack moral judgment, but he has not done this. Students ought to know they should help the poor or homeless, not because they simulated beliefs, desires, and affective states, but because moral reasoning dictates they should.

To put the point differently, Cohen has not sufficiently explained to what degree empathy is doing any evaluative work. As I understand Cohen, even if students place themselves in the shoes of others, moral

reasoning could be mapped onto the situation to achieve the moral motivation for CMBO. It is possible one's duty to the common good, justified through normative theories, could itself account for guiding moral judgment and behaviour. And although, it is difficult to know to what extent empathy *itself* accounts for moral motivation, given my previous arguments, empathy may be less important than Cohen suggests. If normative ethics does the real work in regard to achieving CBMO, then empathy will be superfluous as an ethical educational tool.

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