

Heidi Maibom, *The Space Between*, Oxford: OUP, 2022.
Response by Carl Hildebrand¹

In *The Space Between*, Heidi Maibom provides a rich account of empathy as perspective taking, a skill enabling us to be more objective and impartial in our understanding of others (Maibom, 4). On this account, the power of empathy lies in its ability to take us outside our own egocentric center of gravity, shifting this center towards another to create what Maibom calls “the space between”, the idea at the center of the book (33).

A tension between objectivity and bias plays out throughout the book. It opens with an epigraph from Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, cautioning the reader against abstract ideas like pure reason and knowledge-in-itself, preferring to understand the world from many immanent perspectives. In the introduction, Maibom explains that we are mistaken if we believe the best route to impartiality in moral judgments is to strip away our personal experiences and attempt to inhabit a view from nowhere (3). Philosophers like Thomas Nagel and Jesse Prinz as well as the psychologist Paul Bloom are therefore mistaken to criticize empathy as they do (3). The best way to attain an impartial and more objective understanding of the world is through empathy, that is, taking other peoples’ perspectives and blending them with our own, enabling us to counterbalance pre-existing biases. Reason is in this way a coordination of multiple biases, rather than an escape from bias: “reason itself is biased” because it is suited to our concerns and needs, enabling us to flourish by directing us toward the things that we need (6).

The first part of the book then develops the idea of what a perspective is. Chapter one argues that taking the perspective of another person is not fundamentally different from taking a perspective on oneself, because in both cases we depend on information and processes of verification outside our immediate thoughts and memories (31). So, if another’s background is sufficiently similar, we should be able to understand them almost as well as we can understand ourselves, at least in principle (33). This is a fascinating claim and it would be illuminating to see it developed in more detail at this point in the book. I wonder how far it is possible to get inside another person’s point of view (though it is important that we try) and have reservations about our ability to inhabit another’s perspective nearly as well as our own.² I also wonder what we should do when we are unable to inhabit another’s perspective, or unable to empathize. The final chapter of the book discusses a study from Maron Mooijmam and Chadley Stern which asked social conservatives to imagine being homosexual and having sex with their partner (240). The hope was that this would lead participants to demonstrate increasing support for minority sexual rights, when in fact participants demonstrated disgust and increased dislike for those with whom they were meant to empathize. It is argued that this shows that empathy is a complex process, conservatives did a bad job at perspective-taking, and the induction for the experiment was poorly done (241). To empathize effectively in this case, participants should have been asked to imagine having sex with someone they desire and love, enabling them to realize that this is precisely the position a gay person is in (241).

These criticisms of the study seem right to me, though it would be beneficial to hear more about what we can or should do if we cannot be brought to empathize with those whom we

¹ Draft manuscript in preparation for *Journal of Philosophy of Emotion*. Based on presentation at Society of Philosophy of Emotion’s Author Meets Critics session, APA Central Division Meeting, 22 Feb 2024.

² This could lead to a form of paternalism if we allow ourselves to believe we understand another’s point of view when we cannot. This is one reason against empathy, or empathy’s exclusive moral utility since we do not always need to understand another’s point of view to respect their decisions.

should respect. It seems to me that there are many cases where this cannot be done; in other words, when another's experience is so remote from one's own that empathy cannot be accomplished. Another case like this might involve someone who has experienced strong and consistent deception, perhaps as a victim of human trafficking or a series of bad relationships, and as a result has become incapable of trust in the context of a personal relationship (whether close friendship or romance). It may not be possible for another to empathize in this context if that other has only ever experienced honest communication and gentleness, say, from family: the level of deception and baseness to which human beings can sink may be a surprise and effectively beyond such a person's imagination. Or, if the person who suffered these experiences does not wish to share them, it will be difficult for someone capable of understanding (someone capable of empathy in such a case) to get very far. It would be insightful to hear in more detail how Maibom's framework would handle these situations.

Further, clarifying the goal of empathy can enable us to better gauge its success. I wondered throughout the book whether empathy's purpose is primarily to help us achieve meaningful human relationships, or to understand what the right thing to do is? That is, whether its purpose is to achieve flourishing in a broad and loosely defined sense, or whether its purpose is more narrowly moral. Or, how does empathy as a skill or a virtue square with broader normative commitments? In this respect, the central argument that empathy improves impartiality and objectivity would be enhanced by a broader discussion of its intended scope and normative commitments. Which norms, values, or virtues are built into empathy beyond the epistemic value of impartiality? The right kind of impartiality is a virtue in personal relationships: the ability to step outside of one's own egocentric point of view is crucial to being a good partner or friend. If the purpose of empathy is to help us to do better in personal relationships, then it is less important that empathy include a set of norms or values internal to its concept, since an account of these can be provided externally. But if the concept of empathy is meant to include a standard of right and wrong, good and bad, etc., then it would be beneficial to say more about what makes actions right and good. And it would be worrying if empathy's ability to help us discover those things turned out to be limited.

This is a worry that philosophers coming from the perspective of Nagel, Prinz, Bloom, and myself are likely to have. While appreciating that empathy is complex and a challenging skill to acquire, those of a broadly rationalist persuasion are likely to remain skeptical about its ability to capture all or enough of the right information. They would understand empathy more along the lines of an empirical faculty or skill than a normative power (though it's possible to engineer a concept of empathy differently). Returning to the study of social conservatives, what if the study were conducted with a correct induction and a high degree of effort on the part of participants, and still participants were unable to empathize? Say they wanted to be able to and still reacted (and believed) as they did. Is empathy necessary to reach the correct normative judgment concerning minority sexual rights; and if this group, or another sufficiently large one could not be brought to empathize with and endorse these rights, how should they be handled in the context of a liberal democracy? The rationalist will want to reply that they are grounded in moral norms that should be respected invariantly and independently of anyone's ability to empathize with them.

The values of respect and care for the well-being of others are assumed throughout the book (e.g., 238). However, it is less clear how these values fit together with the perspectival commitments evident throughout the book. While empathy is understood as a form of reason, providing as much objectivity as we need (237-8), it is understood to be distinct from traditional

ideal observer theories like Adam Smith's, as well as from Thomas Nagel's idea of a view from nowhere. These accounts are said to be overly abstract and impersonal, preventing them from accessing rich resources of experiential and affective information that is crucial for good deliberation and action (233). They are also described as paternalistic insofar as the omniscient point of view of an ideal observer eliminates the need for communication with actual parties in a dispute (234). I understand these concerns, though I believe the rationalist can provide a satisfying response to them. The challenge empathy faces is that without further argument it is not robust enough to ground the values that are central to the enterprise of empathizing. Absent something like a view from nowhere, or an argument for transpersonal values, a perspectival account can only endorse those values that each perspective brings to the encounter: values beyond that are an unrecognized intrusion.

The values of impartiality, respect, and care, which are understood throughout the book to guide the process and outcome of empathy, are not endorsed by every perspective. However, it is open to argue that they ought to be endorsed by every perspective, that every agent ought to take up a view from everywhere or nowhere in particular. Something like this is needed to ground the values that empathy serves, so that they remain constant independent of the view of any particular person. Nagel describes a process by which we "begin with a partial and inaccurate view, but by stepping outside of ourselves and constructing and comparing alternatives we can reach a new motivational condition at a higher level of objectivity" (Nagel, 140). If our evaluative faculties are working well, we begin to see that some reasons for acting are good for all beings like us, while others are not (142). This is one path to objectivity. Abstracting from our particularity is a search for moral reasons in the most general sense, but it does not require that we ignore or exclude more particular reasons for action.³ Bloom describes this in terms of justification: "to provide a reason for something is to justify and explain it, presumably in a way that's convincing to a neutral third party" (Bloom, 51). Reasons could be said to provide an even higher order of empathy in cases where empathy is empirically difficult or impossible. Returning to the example above, the social conservative who cannot empathize in relation to minority sexual rights can still recognize that some freedoms are good irrespective of how one fulfills them. Taking another's perspective in cases like these may not be enough, or necessary.

Finally, when we take another's perspective, the goal is to understand the other and what matters to them. In the book, chapter six argues that emotions are powerful tools for doing this, because in feeling another person's sadness, for example, we identify with what is relevant to them (Maibom, 146). This helps us to move beyond a narrowly egotistical perspective that sees our own needs as more important than the needs of others when they are not (as per the asymmetry between agent and observer perspectives explained in chapter three). In chapter seven, a key strength of perspective taking is that it helps us understand why others act as they do (168). In chapter eight, adopting the perspective of an unknown or uninvolved other helps us to understand our social standing and social identity and therefore the social impact of our actions (193). In chapter nine, "the point of considering other people's point of view [...] is to give us more information about them for some purpose or other" (217). To me it seems that if empathy is primarily about understanding others, it could then be described as a form of social cognition, social intelligence, or theory of mind, which are equally important for rationalists like

³ "The task of ethical theory is to develop and compare conceptions of how to live, which can be understood and considered from no particular perspective, and therefore from many perspectives insofar as we can abstract from their particularity. All these conceptions will attempt to reconcile the apparent requirement of generality that objectivity imposes with the richness, variety, and reality of the reasons that appear subjectively" (Nagel, 151).

Bloom (Bloom, 17). The difference between some of these theories and that of the book is that Maibom's will involve emotion. Whereas Bloom and others would allow that it is possible to get what we need in a theory of social cognition in the absence of emotion. This is not to discount the potential epistemic value of emotion, though it is to be more skeptical about its epistemic and moral advantages. And it would be argued that empathy needs moral objectivity in the way I have outlined above, that is, something beyond a particular point of view (including that of a socially situated uninvolved observer).

Nevertheless, the distance between these two perspectives is not far. In its best expression, empathy enables us to triangulate between three points of view, that of oneself, another, and an uninvolved observer, and then synthesize these perspectives to arrive at a kind of all things considered best understanding of a situation (Maibom, 236). Aside from the normative questions outlined above, I found that it was often difficult to distinguish this from a view from nowhere in the best sense. So, one thing that was striking to me is the degree to which Maibom's account of empathy is compatible with a rationalist framework like that of Nagel, Bloom, or even Kant, who I have not discussed. The great merit of this book is to provide a rich account of how human empathy works, responding to many of the common critiques of empathy without abandoning the concept. Its deep engagement with the psychological literature is a beautiful example of interdisciplinary work done well. The book is a pleasure to read. Maibom enables us to better understand how we attain morally useful knowledge of another given the beings we are and the psychology we have, a significant and valuable contribution to philosophical research on empathy.

References:

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