

## Empathy and the Family<sup>1</sup>

NANCY SHERMAN\*

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### 1. Introduction

For many themes having to do with the companionship of friends and family, one can hardly do better than begin with Aristotle's account of *philia*. *Philia* (or friendship, and by that Aristotle means both chosen or natural relationships), is a mutual exchange of good will and affection against a background of shared interests and time spent together<sup>2</sup>. Aristotle insists that the mutuality of the relationship is captured not just in its reciprocal exchanges, but in the fact that the

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\* Georgetown University, 224 New North, Washington D.C. 20057

<sup>1</sup> A slightly shorter version of this paper appears as «Changing Places in Fancy», *L'Amitié*, ed. Jean-Christophe Merle and Bernard Schumacher (forthcoming). For an earlier treatment of some of the themes in both papers, including a review of some of the developmental literature in sec. 5, see SHERMAN (1998). I want to thank Alisa Carse and Mark Lance for discussion of some of the topics of this paper. Also thanks to audiences at University College, Dublin and students in my graduate seminar at Georgetown, Spring 2001.

<sup>2</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)* VIII. 2. The notion of reciprocal exchange is captured in the prefix *anti*, as in *antiphileisis* (exchange of affection), *antiprohaireisis* (mutual choice); see 11157b30, 59a30, 64a4, EE 1236b3, 1237a32. The idea of doing things together is captured in the prefix, *sun*, as in *suzên* (to live together), *sunêmereuin* (to spend one's days together); see *NE* 1157b8, b15, b19-24, 58a9, a15, a23, 1166a23; *Eudemian Ethics (EE)* 1235a2. For more extensive discussions of Aristotelian *philia*, see SHERMAN (1997) ch. 5 and (1989) ch. 4.

exchanges are acknowledged by both parties to each other<sup>3</sup> so that that common knowledge can deepen the bonds of attachment and trust. Moreover, sharing interests is not simply a matter of having a common love. It involves actively working together, planning together, coordinating one's actions in a way that promotes that common love.

But despite these insights, what is not a point of emphasis in Aristotle's account is perhaps the most fundamental craving of intimacy: to be in synchrony with another<sup>4</sup>. We crave others' company, crave the life, to use Aristotle's own words, of "spending days together" because we want others to track our hearts and minds. Thus, as friends or family it is not simply that we want to do things together, coordinate our wills, as it were, in pursuit of a good life. Nor is it enough, especially friendship, to be supported in our separate choices, or even to love or be loved in return. In addition, we want to know that another can feel our joy or anguish, and that he or she can grasp what we are thinking. We want to know that without too much struggle a friend can "track us, "be" on the same page". In short, we want to know that we are understood. The fact of real consensus is not so much at issue. It is empathy we are after—that a friend can see from our point of view and feel from our point of view, even if those would not be her own responses to similar situations. In the world of empathy, sincere pretense is sometimes crucial.

A full-blown conception of empathy as a primary form of social connection does not really emerge philosophically until the 18th Century in the writings of David Hume and Adam Smith. There the topic is taken up under the heading of "sympathy", and often conflated with issues of what we now think of as sympathy proper (e.g., practical concern, compassion, and the like). The term "empathy" itself comes into modern usage only in the 19th Century as a technical coinage within psychological literature (Titchener 1909; Lipps 1903, 1905). Empathy (from the Greek *empathia*) becomes a translation for *Einfühlung* - literally to feel one's way into another.

In contemporary discussions, empathy is often picked out by one of two common markers<sup>5</sup>. The first is role-taking — to feel one's way into a situation, the other is the experience of congruent feeling or vicarious arousal. Both these phenomena are key, but empathy, I shall argue, is expressed in a considerably wider

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<sup>3</sup> *mê lanthanontas* -friends "do not fail to notice" the exchange of good will and good feeling. NE 1156a4.

<sup>4</sup> A form of the term *empathia* appears in the *Insomnia*, but with different meaning than it comes to take on in the later literature. The *Eudemian Ethics*, in contrast, does briefly touch on the theme, as I explore in SHERMAN (1989) p. 135ff. There Aristotle speaks of friendship as forging a "singleness of mind" *mia psuchê* 1240b2, 1240b9-10 and claims that friends share grief in the sense that they feel "the same pain" (*ou monon sullupeisthia, alla kai tèn autên lupên*). Still, the idea does not take on the prominence it will come to have in the writings of Hume and Smith.

<sup>5</sup> See EISENBERG and STRAYER (1987); HOFFMAN (1982,1984).

range of behavior. The point becomes especially evident when we turn to developmental and psychoanalytic literature.

In this paper, then, I explore that broader conception of empathy. I begin with the 18th Century views of Hume and Smith on sympathy. In significant ways, both authors set the stage for contemporary work in philosophy of mind and developmental psychology on the nature of empathy. I then take up a vigorous debate within the philosophy of mind in the past decade about how best to model our folk psychology of “mindreading”. The debate is relevant for our inquiry since the challenger view in the debate, a simulationist heuristic, explains simulation via a notion of empathic identification. While the debate sharpens intuitions about how empathy and imaginative transport may be involved in knowing other minds, still the evidence is not compelling that the proposed simulation model undergirds all or most of our mindreading activities. Through a selective review of developmental literature, I suggest that empathetic phenomena constitute a heterogeneous lot, and that different forms of empathy figure in our capacity to share each others’ mental worlds. Overzealous attempts at streamlined, philosophical models distort the phenomena. At the end of the paper I turn to clinical psychoanalysis where the notion of tracking another mind becomes central. I suggest psychoanalysis offers insight into empathetic capacities not taken up in the philosophical literature. I conclude with some thoughts about the attunements and misattunements that can arise within close relationships, such as the family. Underlying my remarks, Adam Smith emerges as something of an unsung hero.

## **2. Catching another’s feelings/ Changing Places in Fancy**

One way of thinking about empathy is as a kind of contagion. Sometimes we just seem to catch another’s feelings or at least congruent feelings. The examples are commonplace. I start off the day in a glum mood, but after being in the company of my daughter who is particularly chipper and upbeat, my mood picks up, and I’m feeling bright and sunny. I “fall under the sway” of another as it were. I get “caught up” in her cheer<sup>6</sup>. Frequently documented is the spread of depressive affect within a family. A young baby may be especially vulnerable to “catching” a mother’s postpartum depressed affect, just as an older child may internalize a parent’s depression. Or consider a different kind of example. Willie, a third-grader, may talk to a friend on the phone and betray the accent and affect of his phone partner. His parents, listening to only his side of the conversation, immediately identify who is talking to by his unconscious mimicry. What goes on in these cases? We might explain the latter in terms of peer pressure or a desire to belong, or perhaps even a kind of emulation or idealization. But other affect transmis-

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<sup>6</sup> See STOCKER (1996), pp. 60-61.

sions, like becoming upbeat in the presence of a chirpy friend, often seem no deeper than contagion: emotions can spread the way infectious laughter does.

The notion of contagion is central to Hume's account of sympathy. His conception is roughly this: We have no immediate experience of others' feelings. Instead, we must rely on inferences we make from more direct impressions of effect in behavior or action to ideas of cause in emotions. Through sympathy the ideas of those causes come to have such vivacity as to be converted back into the impressions they represent<sup>7</sup>. In this way, a person comes to share another's feelings in the sense of really experiencing the original. One catches another's emotion; and the mechanism of sympathy is meant to explain the contagion. The following passage describes the process:

«When I see the *effects* of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion, as is presently converted into the passion itself. In like manner, when I perceive the *causes* of any emotion, my mind is convey'd to the effects, and is actuated with a like emotion. Were I present at any of the more terrible operations of surgery, 'tis certain, that even before it begun, the preparation of the instruments, the laying of the bandages in order, the heating of the irons, with all the signs of anxiety and concern in the patients and assistants, wou'd have a great effect upon my mind, and excite the strongest sentiments of pity and terror. No passion of another discovers itself immediately to the mind. We are only sensible of its causes or effects. From *these* we infer the passion: And consequently *these* give rise to our sympathy»<sup>8</sup>.

The passage reveals an important ambiguity in Hume's notion of sympathy. For while the actors in the scene (the patients and assistants) feel anxiety and concern, the observer resonates not with these specific emotions, but rather with pity and terror. These are, of course, the paradigmatic tragic emotions, and as Aristotle hints in the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, each requires a different observer stance<sup>9</sup>. To feel terror is as if to be there; it is to shudder and shake in empathetic identification. In Hume's passage, we can easily think of terror as fairly congruent with the patient's own fear or anxiety: it demands the participant's point of view, and a mode of experiencing things as the participant would. It demands an empathetic point of view. To feel pity, on the other hand, is typically to take up, as we would now put it, a sympathetic not empathetic standpoint. It is to retain an external point of view. Humean sympathy does double duty here for both perspectives<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> *A Treatise on Human Nature (T)*, p. 319.

<sup>8</sup> *T.*, p. 576.

<sup>9</sup> *Poetics* 13; also *Rhetoric* II.5 and 8. In *Rhetoric* II.8: «The terrible (or fearful) is different from the pitiful. For we no longer feel pity when the danger is near ourselves», 1386a24.

<sup>10</sup> See WOLLHEIM'S (1984) insightful discussion of centered and acentered imagining for a

Moreover, Hume acknowledges that while there is “great resemblance among all human creatures” which allows us to “enter into the sentiments of others”, even so, the Humean mechanism of sympathy works best in those cases when there are strong contiguity and resemblance relationships<sup>11</sup>. In such cases there seems to be an easy kind of contagion, an easy reverberation from one heartstring to another. In other cases, when a sufferer is remote from us, in time, temperament or country, a more robust effort of imagination is required in order to share feelings<sup>12</sup>. But Hume doesn’t limn in further detail what is involved in those flights of fancy. The elaboration is left to Adam Smith. Smith suggests that even in cases of sympathizing with those near and dear, imagination will be central.

Thus, sometimes the expression of empathy seems less the result of contagion than of an imaginative transport that involves deliberate role taking. The examples populate our life. I think about how a neighbor, a private voice teacher, feels having lost his tenor voice due to a botched surgery on his vocal chords. I find my mind wandering into his house, into his basement studio. I hear a young student singing selections from musicals (is it *Oklahoma* or *Carousel*?), see my neighbor seated at the piano, wondering how he will instruct the boy now that his voice is compromised. Will he try to sing, what sounds will come out, will he rely on the piano to replace his own vocal instrument? Is he thinking about another profession, or does he think he can rely on recordings to teach and demonstrate? To answer my questions, I try to occupy his physical and mental space. I change places in fancy, as Adam Smith vividly puts it.

For Smith, the starting point, again, is one of access into other minds: “We have no immediate experience of what other men feel”. Imagination is the mode of entry. Sympathy, «our fellow feeling with any passion whatever»<sup>13</sup>, results from acts of imagination. It is not itself the mode of access, as it is for Hume.

«Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations»<sup>14</sup>.

Smithian empathetic imagination embodies several elements. First, “to change places in fancy with the sufferer” implies that we take up the *role* of the sufferer. We *transfer* or project ourselves to another’s circumstances, put ourselves in another’s shoes. Second, Smith further suggests that role taking typically involves *analogical reasoning*: from how *I* would react in those circumstances, I infer how

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related distinction. For a discussion of Hume’s related notion of «comparison», see BAIER (1994), pp. 145-50; also *T.* 29004, pp. 376-377, 383, 594.

<sup>11</sup> *T.*, p. 318.

<sup>12</sup> *T.*, pp. 371, 385-386.

<sup>13</sup> *TMS*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *TMS*, p. 4.

*you* would. This is the force of his repeated phrases, «bringing the case home to oneself “and” bringing back the case “to one’s own bosom»<sup>15</sup>. Bringing the case home to oneself typically involves *my* associations and memories triggered by the role taking. I draw on my own psychological repertoire to understand you as I stand in your shoes. Third, those associations and memories may be experientially alive. As I see my son’s face light up with surprise when he receives the award, I remember when I won the poetry award. I remember not just *that* it happened - that I won the prize over Bette though we all thought Bette had a lock on it, but *what* it felt like to be handed the award, what the curtains looked like that draped the stage, what the presenter said, how her voice sounded, who was standing where, what expression Bette wore on her face, how I felt when I read her face, what I thought she felt when she read mine. Past and present collapse; the past is before me now, as palpable as it was then. I recreate the scene, relive the moment with all its «plenitude»<sup>16</sup>. Fourth, in changing places in fancy, I may also experience some degree of vicarious arousal. Primed by my own associations and memories, when I turn my focus back to the observed subject, I become more receptive to her experiences and empathetically alive to her feelings. We “beat time” with the emotions of another, as Smith says<sup>17</sup>. This notion of vicarious arousal is explicit at the end of the following passage:

«By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him and thence form some ideas of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels»<sup>18</sup>.

But the passage also suggests that changing places in fancy may go beyond a mere transfer of role. As Smith says, we “become in some measure the same person” with another. Sometimes, we transfer *and* transform<sup>19</sup>. We become the other in their shoes. Still, Smith is equivocal about this more robust form of imagination. For he doesn’t want to relinquish entirely the advantage of the spectator who retains her own psychology as she enters another’s circumstances. So he explains, in the case of empathetically understanding a wailing infant, a mother identifies with her infant yet draws on her own beliefs and wisdom to fill out the picture of her baby’s real suffering: “in her idea of what it suffers, she joins, to its real help-

<sup>15</sup> *TMS*, p. 141.

<sup>16</sup> WOLLHEIM’S term (1984), p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> *TMS*, pp. 140,146, 167.

<sup>18</sup> *TMS*, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> The language is Robert Gordon’s. “Transformation” is requisite for his notion of radical simulation, as we shall see shortly.

lessness, her own consciousness of that helplessness". Similarly, those whose rational faculties remain reasonably intact look on at those who have suffered severe mental deficits and imagine their unhappiness (visualize, here, grown children caring for parents who suffer from dementia), though the sufferers themselves are often oblivious to their own setbacks<sup>20</sup>. In stepping into others' roles while holding onto our own psychological repertoires, we thus retain a standpoint of judgment, whether sympathetic, antipathetic, or in some cases, simply enlightened. The Smithian model of empathetic imagination, thus, suggests the possibility of this sort of role taking (that maintains the perspective of our own bosom) as well as more robust transformations. In the discussion that follows, we shall see that radical simulation exploits the notion of empathetic identification as robust transformation.

### **3. The contemporary debate on mindreading: Theory-Theory vs. Simulation**

In the philosophy of mind literature two rival have emerged to explain our "theory of mind" skills in understanding and predicting others' behavior and our own<sup>21</sup>. On the orthodox view (called the «theory-theory») our folk psychological theory of mind is essentially theoretical and involves the application of information: we predict and explain others' behavior by appeal to beliefs and desires and laws which connect them<sup>22</sup>. According to the simulationist challenge, we don't theorize, implicitly or explicitly, in understanding others; rather we use ourselves to simulate them. Simulation becomes a form of role taking and empathetic identification. (On a radical simulation model, proposed by Robert Gordon, simulation bypasses entirely analogical inference from self and is a matter of robust transformation<sup>23</sup>). The difference between the theory-theory and simulation views can be captured initially by the following simple example. Suppose I see my neighbor going out for a run in the park, and muse about what she'll do if her jog is interrupted by a stranger who stops her for idle chit chat on the trail? It is a bright, sunny spring afternoon - a glorious day to run in the park although almost

<sup>20</sup> *TMS*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>21</sup> For important anthologies that cover the debate, see CARRUTHERS and SMITH (1996), DAVIES and STONE (1995a, 1995b).

<sup>22</sup> Some leading proponents here are Fodor, Nichols and Stich, Wellman.

<sup>23</sup> Leading proponents of the simulation model are Gordon, Goldman, and Heal. Goldman's simulationist view allows an introspective awareness of one's own states and an inference from self to other as a kind of argument from analogy. Gordon proposes a more radical (or purer) simulation model which aims to eliminate introspection and analogical inference from self. In a certain way, Goldman's view is a hybrid between a simulation model and a theory-theory view in that it involves role-taking which draws on an information base. But to sharpen the contrast between the theory-theory view and simulation, I often appeal to radical simulation, despite its limitations.

everyone running in the park these days is on alert because of a recent murder on the trail in broad daylight.

On the theory-theory view, I draw on knowledge (implicitly or explicitly) I have of the kind of beliefs and desires people would typically have in those circumstances, and relying on background laws that connect beliefs and desires with certain feelings and actions move from those beliefs and desires to an inference about what the person will feel or do. So, I reason that if the runner were stopped by a seedy-looking stranger, she would believe she was in danger and desiring to save her life, would try to flee, probably feeling extremely tense and frightened all the while. According to this account we have an internalized belief-desire theory of our minds. As in the application of other theories that we use to explain the world (e.g., a folk meteorology to predict whether it will rain tomorrow), here too we have a body of information in a relevant domain which we can appeal to for prediction<sup>24</sup>.

On the radical simulation view, in contrast, I don't theorize, tacitly or explicitly or draw on information from my own case. Instead, I *use* my mind to understand other minds. I pretend to be in the situation of the woman runner with her perceptions, beliefs, and desires. As Robert Gordon puts it, I "recenter" myself on her: I transfer roles but also transform me, in the sense of holding aside the relevant parts of my psychological repertoire in order to take on hers. And using her beliefs, desires, and perceptions as input, I *let* myself react. As it is put in some of the literature, the processing takes place off line: I use an existing mechanism but detach it from its usual function and use it to support another function. So instead of processing, as I usually do, *my* actual perceptions, beliefs, and desires, I process *pretend* ones, and come to pretend intentions disconnected from my own motivation to act. My emotional reactions, though, may not be off line. For in the above case I may feel a slight shudder or actual tensing in my body as I imagine the runner fleeing past the sight of the recent murder. The emotions are actual, though the result of simulation. In actual practice we are probably hybridists — sometimes simulating, other times theorizing, though until recently, many of the proponents from the different campus have claimed priority for their views. Moreover, it is not always clear which mechanisms we are relying on, and when.

Even so, an attractive feature of the radical simulation theory is that it allows a kind of theoretical naiveté. To understand others or predict behavior we don't need to have an explicit or tacit body of information that we draw on. We simply bring to bear the skills we would use if in the situation ourselves<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> See NICHOLS, STICH, *et al.*

<sup>25</sup> HARRIS (1992) 124, quoted in NICHOLS, STICH *et al.* (1996), p. 43. NICHOLS, STICH, *et al.* (1996), pp. 49-53. Suggest that a more telling test focuses on the way mistaken predictions arise. They conduct such a test (regarding the phenomenon of illusion of control) and conclude that the two ways available to simulationists to explain failures of prediction - either through the simulationists' reasoning differing from the targets' reasoning or from wrong pretend inputs - cannot in fact explain failure in these cases. Simulationists must go outside



The simulation model makes a number of assumptions<sup>26</sup>. The first is that individuals process information in fairly similar ways so that it makes sense for an agent to use her own mind as a kind of “analogue” device for generating information about others. Broadly speaking, there is a structural isomorphism. Second, our reasoning process in pretend mode parallels our reasoning process when the inputs, or perceptions, beliefs and desires, etc. are not feigned, but actual. Put differently, the processing is real, though off line. And thirdly, if there is a structural isomorphism across persons and parallel reasoning in actual and pretend modes, then the accuracy of the simulation depends upon the accuracy of prior information about the target object’s condition.

The assumptions seem fairly straightforward. Our formal structures of reasoning and motivation do seem similar enough to be able to use ourselves as structural models for others. Second, we regularly engage in conditional planning about our own lives in a way that parallels what the simulationist envisions we do with others<sup>27</sup>. Suppose I haven’t yet been asked to take on a university committee assignment, but my sources say it is likely to come. I think about how I am likely to respond were I asked by pretending that I have been asked. From there, I begin to imagine the implications of taking on one more assignment. I plot out just what commitments I have on my plate at the moment, and whether I have room or appetite for one more. It seems safe to say that though the invitation is feigned, I reason and perhaps also emotionally respond much as I would if the invitation had been actual. True, sometimes we surprise ourselves by coming up with different choices in actual reasoning than we would have expected given our hypothetical experiments. We might explain this by noting that when scenarios are real, constraints and pressures kick in that aren’t fully appreciated by imagination. But this may be more the result of differences in input than differences in the structure of reasoning.

This brings us to the third assumption. Sometimes it is no trivial matter to get the inputs right, even in the case of our own future selves. And certainly it seems safe to say, with Hume, that our skill rapidly degenerates the more alien the culture and foreign the beliefs and experiences of those we aim to understand. In such cases it becomes non-trivial to feign accurately the inputs. How do I know what another sees, feels, hears without adjustment of my own psychology as well as a fair bit of information gathering and research? A therapist comes to such information slowly over time, as the narrative of a patient’s life unfolds in an ongoing series of clinical hours. And he is constantly on the alert to his own contaminating projections, thoughts, and associations. A method actor does his home-

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their model and explain the failures in terms of the simulators lacking information relevant to the tacit theory the targets are using. Theory-theorists, but not simulationists, can legitimately help themselves to such an explanation.

<sup>26</sup> For this, see GOLDMAN (1993), p. 89; PERNER (1996), p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> See GOLDMAN (1993).

work before stepping into role. Some, famously, Dustin Hoffman, do more research than others. But how do we simulate others effectively without that sort of investment?

Regrettably, not all persons we want to understand are at the other side of some researcher or storyteller's lens. The more basic point is that when we most need an act of imagination, our imagination often shows its limits. Simulation is only as good as the inputs. Processing the content is the trivial part. Feeding in the right content is the challenge.

But if stretching our imagination is the problem for some cases of mindreading, in other cases, we hardly need to turn to our imaginations. Indeed, in cases where we need little input switch from our own, we may even question whether radically simulating another is the most plausible way to explain what we go through in understanding others' thoughts and motives. So in the jogging example I gave earlier, if I am a woman jogger familiar in a first hand way with the hazards of running in the park, and know my neighbor is fairly similar to me when it comes to taking precautions about bodily safety, then I may simply predict what she'll do by analogy from my own case. I simply introspect, by retrieving memories of similar reactions and thoughts in those sorts of circumstances in the past, and then attribute them to her. In cases where I cannot retrieve memories of exactly the same kinds of circumstances, associations from similar cases may get me to another's responses. So if Megan learns that her friend Amy's child has just been diagnosed with leukemia, Megan may imagine how Amy feels by remembering her own feelings when her father was diagnosed with a terminal illness several years earlier<sup>28</sup>. More generally, at moments when we find ourselves slipping into apathy, we may deliberately move back to our own bosoms, as Smith would say, and look inward for something that helps us resonate with others. These sorts of examples suggest that even if radical simulation is an important heuristic for understanding others' minds, it is not the only one we use. In some cases of tracking other minds, we draw on our own knowledge and experiences in order to be "in synch" with others. Smith's acceptance of a variety of ways we change places in fancy is instructive here.

#### 4. Early Forms of Empathy

The literature on early development within the family equally suggests that primitive forms of empathy take a variety of shapes, and that these mediate our capacity for shared worlds in distinct sorts of ways. Below I briefly review some of the findings to make vivid how pervasive, diverse, and basic empathetic phenomena are. If we think about creating a shared world through family or friend-

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<sup>28</sup> NICHOLS, STICH, *et al.* (1996) classify this as an "information-based" account of role taking that differs from simulation in that the inputs come from the subject's own knowledge base.

ship, or even through the mindreading models considered above, we begin, from a developmental perspective, at least, far too late. Mechanisms for creating a shared world manifest themselves far earlier, and ubiquitously.

#### 4.1. Motor Mimicry

As we have seen, Hume capitalizes on the idea that empathetic phenomena are sometimes a matter of catching others' feelings. Related to this kind of contagion are various examples of motor mimics. Classic motor mimics in adults are leaning and body sway. Smith was an early observer of the phenomenon: «The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on the slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies as they see him do»<sup>29</sup>. The adult phenomenon has been observed repeatedly in the lab<sup>30</sup>, but more significant, are recent studies with neonates. Researchers (Melzoff and Moore, 1983) have shown that three-day old neonates can mimic mouth opening and tongue extension, and that the same aged neonates tend to mimic, with their own strong and hearty cry, the crying of similar aged neonates (Sagi and Hoffman 1976, reported in Hoffman, 1982). They seem to respond to a cue of distress by experiencing the distress themselves. Similarly, the contagious properties of smiling have been well documented in infancy, beginning with the pioneering work of René Spitz. Other forms of auditory mimicry have been observed in neonates: Rosenthal (1982, discussed in Bavelas et al., 1987) showed that mothers and their three-day old infants covocalized significantly above chance. In other words, there was prosodic mirroring: when one vocalized, the other chimed in<sup>31</sup>. Further studies show infant's mimetic changes in intonation track adult frequencies<sup>32</sup>. The strong implication of these studies, and others whose results are consistent with these, is that we are pre-wired to mimic in kinaesthetically homologous ways. Certain mimics occur only days after birth, suggesting that the behavior is not learned but that as humans we have inbuilt mechanisms for primitive forms of empathy.

The mimetic synchrony studies, such as the covocalization one above, suggest further interactional capacities beyond those of motor mimicry. Motor mimics are typically one directional. Mimetic synchronies, in contrast, are reciprocal actions initiated by either person and that may be shared (Bavelas et al., 1987). They set up patterns that may last for a while, and that consequently help to solidify the rhythm of a relationship.

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<sup>29</sup> *TMS*, p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> For a good review of the literature, see BAVELAS, *et al.* (1987).

<sup>31</sup> For a brief review of prosodic mirroring, see OMDAHL's (1995).

<sup>32</sup> In this paragraph, I draw heavily on BAVELAS's discussion (1987) of early motor mimics.

## 4.2. Mutual attunement

The developmentalist, Daniel Stern, has suggested a related phenomenon of mutual affect attunement that characterizes early attachment relations of infant to parent or caregiver. While his focus is less on the mimicry of behavior than on sharing of congruent affects, the indicators of affect attunement are external dimensions of behavior that can be matched without being imitated, like for like. Even so, the outer dimensions of these attunements are deeply embedded in common interactions, many cross-modal that often go unnoticed. Still, the following are relatively unencumbered examples of the phenomenon: A nine-month-old boy is sitting facing his mother. He has a rattle in his hand and is shaking it up and down with a display of interest and mild amusement. As mother watches, she begins to nod her head up and down, keeping a tight beat with her son's arm motions.

A nine-month-old boy bangs his head on a soft toy, at first in some anger but gradually with pleasure exuberance, and humor. He sets up a steady rhythm. Mother falls into his rhythm and says, "kaaaaa-bam, kaaaaa-bam," the "bam" falling on the stroke and the "kaaaaa" riding with the preparatory upswing and the suspenseful holding of his arm aloft before it falls<sup>33</sup>.

Stern suggests that in these examples, the dimensions of temporal beat and intensity contour can be isolated as matching criteria: In the first case a temporal beat, or pulsation in time, is matched: the nodding of the mother's head and the infant's gesture in shaking the rattle conform to the same beat. In the second case, an intensity is matched «The mother's vocal effort and the infant's physical effort both showed an acceleration in intensity, followed suddenly by an even quicker intensity deceleration phase»<sup>34</sup>.

The phenomenon of attunement, though often covert within interactions, is a common enough part of the experience of parenting. Parents routinely set up synchronies with their infants, reciprocal and repetitive loops which cross modalities but which, as Stern suggests, match on some behavioral dimension. Once the loop is in play, the synchrony often goes on, with the child sharing in and perpetuating the interplay. On Stern's view, these reciprocal attunements prepare the child for the world of shared feelings. Infants whose efforts are not matched, whose parents under-shoot or over-shoot the pitch contour, rate, rhythm, and so on of a behavior, seem to notice the lack of synchrony. Thus, in trials where mothers deliberately misjudge their babies' level of excitement or rhythm, and jiggle back or gesture at a mismatched pace, the babies quickly stop playing and tend to look around somewhat quizzically and somewhat upset. The suggestion is that by three months of age, infants react to these dissynchronies «with social withdrawal, alternating with attempts to re-engage the impassive partner» (149): These obser-

<sup>33</sup> STERN (1985), pp. 140-141.

<sup>34</sup> STERN (1985), p. 146.

variations are important for demonstrating early patterns of interaffectivity and mutuality. At a very early age, infants become partners in coordinated and reciprocal patterns. Through the mutual attunement process, they prepare themselves to share affects and to take up the point of view of another. They learn to set up a process of communication, which specific content aside, serves to establish basic forms of interaction and connection<sup>35</sup>. The fittedness of the synchrony often seems to matter. In some circumstances, closeness of match and interpersonal communion is an expectation, and infants are frustrated when it is absent. Motor mimicry results suggest that there may be biological programming which predisposes children in this direction.

#### 4.3. Shared Attention/Social Referencing

Other studies reveal additional protoempathetic phenomena present during the end of the first year of life. To begin with, there is the widely observed phenomenon of *shared attention*<sup>36</sup>. Infants toward the end of the first year look at a person's eyes and then follow the gaze to its target. They reproduce an adult's focus of attention, checking back and forth (through gaze alternation) to make sure that they and the other person are looking at the same thing<sup>37</sup>. This is the beginning of sharing another's world. As Baron - Cohen explains it, shared attention mechanisms function to build triadic representations among self, another and an object. Even blind children have shared attention mechanisms, mediated by modalities other than vision. So studies indicate that a blind child will put another's hand on an object and even use the language of "see" and "look" to direct attention to an object they want to share<sup>38</sup>.

A second and related phenomenon is that of *social referencing*, observed in infants of the same age<sup>39</sup>. Here, children read the face of a trusted caregiver in order to get information as to whether a novel, shared target object should be welcomed or avoided<sup>40</sup>. Again, a triadic relation is in play, here the triangulation moving from the child's eyes to the target object to the caregiver's face. Note, the

<sup>35</sup> See BAVELAS, BLACK, LEMERY, and MULLETT (1987) who would disagree with Stern. Synchronies on their view are not communions of internal feelings or affect, but more formal and neutral communication channels.

<sup>36</sup> BUTTERWORTH (1991).

<sup>37</sup> See BARON - COHEN (1995), p. 48.

<sup>38</sup> See BARON - COHEN'S (1995) summary of the evidence, esp 66f.

<sup>39</sup> The phenomenon is easily observable and widely discussed. HARRIS (1989) summarizes the research well. See also, CAMPOS and STENBERG (1981), and KLINNERT *et al* (1986).

<sup>40</sup> See related studies by S.I. GREENSPAN (1989) which indicate that a child comes to identify and regulate her own affects as a result of affectively expressive responses by a parent. Thus, children of poker-faced parents, on this view, show deficits in what we might call emotional intelligence and emotion regulation. See IZARD (1971) and EKMAN (1972) on reading facial expression of emotion.

mechanism does not seem to be simply contagion. Children may catch fear from their parents, but on this model, at least, they do it rather deliberately, by seeking guidance from an important and constant figure in their lives. They then read emotional expression in faces, and though in some instances, mimic the expression, feeling what their own faces express may be, in fact, less a matter of “catching” than the operation of an efferent feedback mechanism<sup>41</sup>.

A third phenomenon figures in this cluster of intentional stances. At the end of the first year and beginning of the second, the child not merely reproduces another’s attitude, but begins to act on it or influence it. That is, the child now seeks to *redirect another’s attention* or attitude by bringing to another an object of interest. So a child I observed weekly as a part of a year long observation excitedly pointed (at 10 months) to a Halloween decoration on a door in an attempt to turn my attention toward it. “Protodeclarative” pointing is a way of saying, “look,” “see,” “share this object with me, share my excitement”.

Significantly, children with autism seem to have impaired shared attention mechanisms of the above sorts. They suffer from «mindblindness», as Simon Baron-Cohen dubs it. They can detect eye direction, but do not try to detect the visual attention of others by using pointing gestures; they may bring an object over to someone or lead someone to an object but only when they want it, not out «of a desire to share interest with another person for its own sake»<sup>42</sup>. They also manifest evidence of a failure to establish joint auditory attention<sup>43</sup>. So autistic children will often speak too loudly or too softly, suggesting that they are not responsive to the need, which normal children show, of modulating voice and intonation to engage a listener. They lack fundamental mechanisms for coupling with others and creating a world of shared interests. Autistic children also do poorly in attributing to others beliefs different from their own<sup>44</sup>. In an experiment involving Sally and a marble that was hidden in her absence, most of the autistic children tested believed that Sally would look for the marble where they themselves (who have seen it being hidden) will look for it<sup>45</sup>. Thus, in addition to having difficulty sharing others’ perceptions, autistic children have difficulty sharing other people’s different beliefs. They tend also to show deficits in pretend play<sup>46</sup>. a fact simulationists appeal to in support of their view that mindreading is mediated by imaginative ability. Though the evidence here seems too slim for that conclusion, studies of autism, in general, shed significant light on the normal psychological mechanisms required for establishing shared worlds.

<sup>41</sup> STRACK, *et al.* (1988).

<sup>42</sup> BARON - COHEN (1995), p. 69.

<sup>43</sup> BARON - COHEN (1995), p. 69.

<sup>44</sup> For the original «Maxi» experiments on this theme, see WIMMER and PERNER (1983). Also see Gopnik and Wellman’s discussion in DAVIES and STONE (1992/1995a, p. 238).

<sup>45</sup> BARON - COHEN, p. 71.

<sup>46</sup> BARON - COHEN, p. 77. For a discussion of the normal development of imagination and pretend play in children, see MAYES and COHEN (1992), (1996).

The data summarized above thus suggest that motor mimicry, shared attention mechanisms, and cross-modality attunements are protoempathetic mechanisms crucial for establishing synchronies and shared common objects. They are the first steps in taking shared voyages. But they are steps we continue to retake as we exercise our capacities to track others and enter their worlds. Moreover, we miss the variety of these early competencies if we read them too linearly as direct progenitors of one mindreading model or another. Simulationists, in particular, have tended to turn to this literature as evidence for their own theory<sup>47</sup>. Yet motor and vocal mimics seem more a kind of imitation or contagion than a simulation on the cognitive science model. Shared attentional mechanisms might seem to involve a minimal kind of role-taking, in the sense of taking up another's gaze. But on closer inspection, what is involved is more gaze tracking, than simulation or imaginative transport. Finally mutual attunement may be mediated by simulation and imitation, but the point of establishing those patterns is to cement patterns of attachment and interaction.

## 5. Psychoanalysis and imagining others

The early developmental context within the family, thus, extends our understanding of how we begin to enter others' mental worlds. But not surprisingly, the clinical context of psychoanalysis also extends our understanding of empathy. For the analyst's task is to track the way a mind moves, to be in attunement or synchrony, to have a heightened sensitivity to another's affect and mood, thoughts and musings. In a certain sense, the clinical hour is an hour for the most radical sort of empathetic identification.

And yet on the orthodox view of psychoanalysis, empathy, at least when it includes explicit signs of vicarious arousal or sympathetic support, is viewed as misplaced<sup>48</sup>. It is a distraction to patient and an indulgence on the part of the analyst of a vulnerability that ought to be controlled. The view is captured in Freud's famous remarks to practitioners:

«I cannot advise my colleagues too urgently to model themselves during psychoanalytic treatment on the surgeon, who puts aside all his feelings, even his human sympathy, and concentrates his mental forces on the single aim of performing the operation as skillfully as possible... The justification for requiring this emotional coldness in the analyst is that it creates the most advantageous conditions for both parties: for the doctor a desirable protection for his own emotional life and for the patient the largest amount of help that he can give him to-day»<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> See NICHOLS and STICH, *et al.* (1996).

<sup>48</sup> The idea is roundly rejected by Heinz Kohut. For important discussions of empathy, see (1959), (1971), (1984).

<sup>49</sup> FREUD (1912), p. 115.

The passage conjures up the image of the psychoanalyst as stoic sage-detached, dispassionate, not showing feeling. Perhaps some inevitable twinges of feeling, like the “preludes to feelings” (*propatheiai*) Seneca talks of -essentially, autonomic nervous system reactions, will leak through<sup>50</sup>. But the overriding posture the psychoanalyst aims for is emotional control. As Freud puts it, the psychoanalyst assumes a stance of neutrality and abstinence. He controls against empathetic arousals that might lead to overidentification with a patient and possible boundary violations: (hence the notion of abstinence as resisting sexual temptation). And he controls against satisfying the patient’s wish for sympathetic support, in so far as gratification might undercut the pain of psychic conflict necessary to motivate hard analytic work.

These ideas about neutrality have been significantly revised in contemporary analytic practice, as we shall see momentarily. But in an interesting way, Freud’s notion of neutrality, and the metaphor often used to capture it- of the psychoanalyst as blank screen, can be seen as aiming for the kind of non-contaminated empathetic identification that the radical simulation heuristic models. Freud’s idea is this. The psychoanalyst tries to understand a patient’s wishes, fears, and defenses without imposition of his own reactions, projections, judgments, and defenses. He tries to “hover evenly” over the various departments of the psyche (*superego*, *ego*, and *id*) and their contributory roles in a conflict, without overidentifying, through his own psychic habits, with any one. Thus, he tries to live out the life of the narratives being told and untold hour after hour, in a transformative, not merely projective sense. To follow the radical simulation model, we might say he goes off line, using his imagination to become another, with the caveat that imagination is decoupled in this case both from actual urges to act *and* expressed empathetic feelings. Thus, the blank screen exploits, in a curious way, the radical simulationist idea that one is not to import into the imaginative project one’s own psychological repertoire. It is only the patient’s inputs that get processed.

This may capture the hope and spirit of early psychoanalysis. And too many moments of psychoanalysis as it is actually practiced today. But contemporary psychoanalysts increasingly acknowledge a more Smithian view - that we often bring the case back to our own bosom. That is, despite the most trained clinical control, psychoanalysts, to some degree or other, inevitably draw on their own associations and reactions (generally speaking, countertransferences and enactments) to understand a patient<sup>51</sup>. Practically speaking, radical simulation is simply not fully achievable, nor normatively optimal. Moreover, to react to a patient, i.e., to engage in countertransference, is not necessarily, as Freud once thought, a contamination of the therapeutic process<sup>52</sup>. A psychoanalyst’s own carefully monitored responses to a patient can provide crucial insight into a patient’s psychological life. Here, it is not

<sup>50</sup> SENECA, *On Anger* (1995), pp. 42-45.

<sup>51</sup> On these phenomena, see SANDLER (1976), JACOBS (1986), RENIK (1995), CHUSED (1991).

<sup>52</sup> See FREUD (1915 [1914]), p. 164.



so much that the clinician deliberately brings the case home to oneself, á la Smith. Rather, “home” is simply, at times, where the listener’s reverie goes<sup>53</sup>. The therapeutic trick is to know when that wandering might be relevant for the analysis. Consider a vignette from the psychoanalyst James McLaughlin<sup>54</sup>: He notices in one session with Mrs. P that he is playing with his bifocals. This adventitious piece of behavior leads him to make an association that matches what the patient is currently feeling: Mrs. P is a rambler, who often feels stumbling and adrift. Fidgeting with his bifocals becomes a Proustian madelaine. It reminds the psychoanalyst of how stumbling and adrift he used to feel as a myopic youngster before getting his first pair of glasses. The reexperience of “the old pain of groping and failing” helps him to identify with his patient and break the stalemate in the treatment. The overtness of playing with his glasses tips him off to those congruent feelings. The introspective retreat is productive rather than distorting. A more radical simulation, without retreat to the home base, may not have moved the analysis along.

The analyst can use herself as an instrument for understanding the patient in yet other ways. In the presence of a particular patient an analyst may feel seduced, embarrassed, angry, threatened, excited, bored and so on. Through careful self-vigilance, the analyst may come to believe that these feelings have less to do with residue from her own internal conflicts or past history than with current manipulations on the part of the patient<sup>55</sup>. Still, like associations from one’s own past, these arousals and reactions can serve as important ways of understanding the patient. By recording actual reactions, a psychoanalyst can come to experience first hand what it is like to be on the receiving end of this patient’s emotional attitudes and actions, what it is like to be the others in his world, feeling his effect. Granted, all this might take place in an attempt at a purer simulationist style empathetic identification, where the goal is to be recentered on the patient as patient, without interference (or information) from one’s own reactions—either past or current. But the point is, to some degree or other, however controlled an analyst may be, some of her own reactions inevitably surface and serve to reveal the other in a way that a purer empathetic identification, even if successful, cannot capture. Radical simulation of others, attractive as it is in the abstract, may not be the way the most concerned listener understands another.

## 6. Conclusion: Back to family and friendship

It is time to tie up loose ends. What do the various forms of empathy and imaginative transport we have considered have to do with intimate relationships within

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<sup>53</sup> For an interesting discussion of reverie in this context, see OGDEN (1997).

<sup>54</sup> McLAUGHLIN (1991).

<sup>55</sup> At work here is the notion of projective identification; see OGDEN (1979) and SANDLER (1993).

friendship and family? In a sense, the connections are all too obvious. Like young children, we crave finely attuned relations with others. We notice exactly when conversations miss, when a voice goes flat, when our eyes catch another's averted eyes, when others fail to match our zest, enthusiasm, rhythm and tempo. We know when others aren't tracking us, when we are misunderstood, when we are in conversation, yet talking to ourselves. And these misattunements hurt us the most within intimate relationships. For it is there that we most crave and expect synchrony.

Still, the expectation for synchrony can often lead us astray. As parents we can overidentify with our children's emotional peaks and troughs and serve them ill by mirroring back just what they give out. And the same holds true in adult relationships. Attunement needs to be finessed with modeling and wisdom, direction and guidance in a way that takes seriously empathetic identification but also leaves room for growth, whether we are children or adults. Equally misattunements can be misread as deliberate snubs rather than as style or temperamental differences not consciously meant to indicate distance or displeasure<sup>56</sup>. In the world of psychoanalysis, where attunement and timing of interventions are the products of a well-honed art, many misattunements will be avoided. But not all, and those that aren't become grist for the psychoanalytic mill—indeed in some schools of psychoanalysis, (such as Kohutian self-psychology), a primary focus<sup>57</sup>. According to Kohutian theory, newly sustained narcissistic injuries caused by an analyst's parental-like failures of attunement within the clinical hour become an important medium of the analysis.

But casting misattunements as narcissistic injuries raises the important question of how much we ought to indulge our cravings for synchrony. Surely some demands for attunement are overly needy, too hungry for support and solidarity, too sensitive to another's responsiveness or lack of it. Even the most intimate soul mate can't be expected to track us on every twist and turn of our journey. Some bits we must go alone, however much we might like company. That is, after all, what it is to separate and hatch as a separate self. Yet misattunements typically arise not when we have decided to go our own way, but when we think we are going together, and yet are not. It is a failure in acknowledging common ground, as Aristotle might put it. And yet true "friends do not fail to notice". Moreover, the failure is often conveyed at the level of subtle protoempathetic responses—a failure to meet another's eye gaze or follow its object, a failure to match another's excitement through vocal inflection or shared tempo of activity, a failure to smile at one's smile. It is not just that Heloise might not follow the point of Abelard's story or fail to see the ending funny. It is that Heloise, on occasion, is not *with* Abelard in a more basic way.

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<sup>56</sup> Here Deborah TANNEN's work (1990) on gender differences in conversational style comes to mind.

<sup>57</sup> See KOHUT (1977) on narcissistic injuries and empathetic breaks, e.g., pp. 116, 118.

This doesn't answer the question of when the demands for synchrony are reasonable and when not. Presumably there is little one can say outside immersion in the particulars of a case. But that intimates demand some kind of synchrony and notice its absence seems to be commonplace. Moreover, my point throughout has been that mechanisms for synchrony are varied and not adequately modeled by overly streamlined, theoretical models. They may involve contagion, theorizing, imagining that looks into a soul and its motives as well as imagining that looks outward at behavior and action. They may involve tracking eyes, mimicking sounds and voices and body movements, attuning subtly to the rhythm of another's voice through the kick of a leg or the tapping of hand. All are ways we build a shared world. All are ways we come to be in synch with others.

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*straining function of wrong beliefs in young children's understanding of deception.* In *Cognition*, 13: 103-28.

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**Abstract:** *In this paper I explore the conception of empathy and its implications for the family. I begin with the 18th Century views of Hume and Smith on sympathy, which I argue have influenced contemporary debate on empathy in the philosophy of mind. However, through a selective review of developmental literature, I suggest that empathetic phenomena constitute a more heterogeneous lot than the contemporary debate within philosophy tends to suggest. Overzealous attempts at streamlined, philosophical models distort the phenomena. At the end of the paper I turn to clinical psychoanalysis where the notion of tracking another mind becomes central. I suggest psychoanalysis offers further insight into empathetic capacities not taken up in the philosophical literature. I conclude with some thoughts about the attunements and misattunements that can arise within close relationships, such as the family. Underlying my remarks, Adam Smith emerges as something of an unsung hero.*