Encountering the stranger

Hannah Arendt and the shortcomings of empathy as a moral compass

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Abstract

It is an often taken for granted notion in contemporary Western everyday life that there is an intimate connection between empathy and moral action. Yet in recent years, this connection has come under scrutiny. In this article, we first ask the question, what is empathy? A brief survey over the psychological and philosophical approaches to the notion of empathy shows that it remains a highly contested concept. The field has a propensity to discuss empathy within the frame of *sameness*. We instead argue that in order to grasp empathy it is necessary to foreground *otherness*. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, we further argue, that when encountering the stranger, moral action requires both *visiting* the other – as distinct from empathic *knowledge* as well as *thinking* in order to judge what is right. Ultimately moral dilemmas are solved, not by having or demanding empathy, but by addressing the issues at hand in *joint action*.

Key words: empathy, moral action, stranger, other, visiting, Hannah Arendt

> *Any justification ends* finally with the rationally gratuitous presence of the emotion of sympathy: if that condition were not met, one would simply have no reason to be moral.
>
> (Thomas Nagel, cited in Denham, 2017 p. 227).

On the 7th of September 2015 the Facebook feed of one of the authors was full of images of a man standing on a bridge spitting at a crowd of Syrian refugees crossing the border from Germany to Denmark. The caption read, that after spitting at the walking families, he yelled at them, telling them to go home, and that they were not welcome. Everyone in the Facebook feed was horrified by his behavior. People pointed out the immorality of his behavior and stressed that he lacked empathy, i.e. that he lacked the ability to put himself in the situation of the refugees and feel their suffering with them. In a similar vein, in a speech given in 2006, Barack Obama said: ”The biggest deficit we have in our society and in the world right now is an empathy deficit. We are in great need of people being able to stand in somebody else’s shoes and see the world through their eyes” (Bloom, 2016, p. 19). This corresponds nicely with the colloquial understanding of empathy, which is captured by Harper Lee in To Kill a Mockingbird, when Atticus tells Scout: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view – […] – until you climb into

his skin and walk around in it." (Lee 1960, p. 33). We choose to focus on the man spitting from the bridge to highlight the moral aspect of the common understanding of the notion of empathy – i.e. that empathy is usually called for in relation to someone in need of help or assistance and as a way of judging how to act towards them. Empathy is thus commonly taken to have a clear moral component.

This article addresses the role of empathy when encountering the other – and more specifically an *other* who comes to our encounter with discernible or imagined differences in their ways of life, that is, a stranger. In such meetings, empathy is often called for as a solution to the confusion and potential conflicts such meetings may entail. We will argue that the call for empathy, rather than solving this issue, may in fact be a problematic call for more knowledge, that draws on notions of sameness. Related to this, it is a call for certainty - a certainty that cannot be established when acting in relation to an *other*. We will start by delineating different perspectives on empathy arguing that these approaches, whilst having fundamental differences, all draw on an inherent logic of sameness, i.e. that the other is similar to me. Furthermore, they predominantly understand empathy as a kind of knowledge – of the other and/or of the self. After considering other critiques and objections to empathy as a central moral compass, we turn to Hannah Arendt, and argue that *visiting* and *understanding* the other is important, but not sufficient, in order to judge what one ought to do. Instead, the ability to *think* and take responsibility in the face of perpetual uncertainty, is necessary in order to act morally well when encountering the other.

The Concept of empathy:

Since David Hume and Adam Smith[i], empathy has generally been viewed as the ability to feel the suffering of the other and the general ability to know what it is like to be someone else. This ability has been commonly considered the foundation of moral action (Batson 1991; Hoffmann, 2000; Shoemaker, 2017). However, in recent years this assumption has been the target of much critique (Bloom, 2016; Maibom, 2009; Prinz, 2011a; Prinz, 2011b). There is thus considerable disagreement as to the relationship between empathy and moral action. To complicate matters, the field of research into empathy is broad and full of controversy, engaging both philosophical and psychological disciplines across a wide range of traditions. Consequently, there is no clear understanding of what exactly empathy *is* or to what extent it is related to and different from other concepts such as emotional contagion, motor mimicry, imaginative projection, or perspective taking (Zahavi, 2014, p. 101). In the following we turn to the concept of empathy and give a brief overview over some of the conceptions of empathy that exist in both psychological (primarily experimental) and philosophical literature. Subsequently we will take a closer look at the literature on the relationship between empathy and moral action.

The term empathy (Einfühlung) was first used by the German philosopher Robert Vischer working in the domain of aesthetics and taken over by Theodor Lipps in the field of social cognition. The German word Einfühlung, means "feeling into," or projecting oneself into something else. The term was used by Lipps to denote the capacity to understand others as minded, i.e. as thinking subjects. It

was this use of the term that guided its introduction into the English language by psychologist Edward Titchener in 1909 (Zahavi, 2014).

A common distinction in the literature on the concept of empathy is the between cognitive empathy and affective empathy (Maibom, 2017a). Cognitive empathy can be defined as "…the capacity to understand another person's state of mind from her perspective" (Spaulding, 2017, p. 13). Piaget emphasized empathy as connected to the child's development of the ability to decenter, i.e. the capability of distinguishing between the experiences of the self and experiences of the other (Davis, 2017). Cognitive empathy is thus connected to notions of "theory of mind" (Baron-Cohen, 2005). Affective empathy, on the other hand, can be defined as "…a range of emotional responses we can have to what others feel or the situation they are in…" (Maibom, 2017b, p. 22) and as "…an emotion that is more appropriate to the state or situation of someone else than to that of the person who experiences it (Maibom, 2017b, p. 23). This means that the emotions of person A has to do with the perceived situation of person B (e.g. I am sad because my neighbor's cat ran away, not because I had any relation to the cat, but because I respond to the sadness of my neighbor with sadness).

However, this coarse distinction between the affective and the cognitive may be too simple. It allows theorists such as Bloom (2016), in his controversial bestseller "Against Empathy", to make the claim that while he is not against the ability to consider what the world looks like and how it may be experienced from the other's perspective. he does not consider this cognitive aspect empathy. Instead he constricts empathy to the phenomenon where, "…your suffering makes me suffer, […] I feel what you feel" (Bloom, 2016, p. 17). It is this affective phenomenon of sharing emotional states, of "feeling into" the other, that Boom criticizes as a moral guide. We shall return to Bloom's arguments in a moment, but for now we will comment briefly on the inadequacy of this distinction. Although distinguishing between cognition and affect is alluring, it may not be tenable. As Martha Nussbaum (2001) argues, emotions (affectivity) are always bound up with judgements of values. Emotions are always *about* something. They are directed towards a world, and consequently "always involve thought of an object combined with thought of an object's salience or importance." (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 23). We are angry because we perceive that we are treated unjustly, or we feel sad because we have experienced loss of something we deem valuable etc. Likewise, rationality/reason is never pure, but always bound to experience and to values. If we return to Maibom's example of feeling sad when one's neighbor's cat runs away, then the affective response of sadness is bound up to the cognitive judgement that my neighbor actually liked her cat and didn't want it to run away.

The distinction between the affective and the cognitive thus appears untenable and most empathy theorist draw on more complex descriptions of the nature of empathy. These approaches may be roughly divided into the *theory-theory of mind* and the *simulation theory of mind* (Spaulding, 2017):

Theory-theory of mind: According to the theory-theory of mind we attribute certain mental states to the other by drawing on a folk-psychological theory of mind, e.g. when we see the child, Susan,

with a wrinkled-up facial expression, and acknowledge that there is a large dog, we draw on the general knowledge, that some dogs are dangerous and thus we can experience fear when encountered by a dog. Consequently, we *deduce* based on a general theory, that Susan is afraid.

The simulation theory of mind theorist, on the other hand, claim that we base our understandings of others based on a model of our *own* minds. Some claim that this is done through imagination and deliberative inference, i.e. we imagine that we are Susan, project ourselves into her shoes, recognize that we would be afraid if we were her, and conclude that Susan is experiencing fear. For instance, autism-expert Simon Baron-Cohen, writes:

> "Empathy involves a leap of imagination into someone else's headspace. While you can try to figure out other persons' thoughts and feelings by reading their faces, their voices, and their postures, ultimately their internal worlds are not transparent, and to climb inside their heads requires imagining what it must be like to be them." (Baron-Cohen, 2005, p. 170).

Others argue that this simulation is not conscious but implicit. This is the case with mirror-neuron theorists (e.g. Gallese, 2001), who would claim, that when seeing Susan and the dog, we would at a neuronal level experience fear in the same way as Susan does, simulating her fear.

Summing up, simulation theory theorists argue that empathy is about feeling the same as the other, or cognitively theorizing that one would do or feel the same as the other, if one were in their shoes. Theory-theory theorists propose rather that empathy is about making sense of the other, grasping their reasons for feeling and doing as they do. This is done by drawing on a general theory of what people are like, i.e. a folk psychology of general human behavior. How we should understand the concept of empathy thus remains a point of contention. However, despite fundamental contrasts in perspectives, the above approaches all conceive of empathy as the ability to cross the gap between subjects and experience the world from their point of view. In each of these approaches, empathy is distinctively about understanding the other in a way that reduces dissimilarities and difference. It is about understanding the other as "someone who is like I am" or as "someone who is like people in general." It is this propensity to sameness that we wish to challenge. By drawing on Hannah Arendt we will argue that moral judgement and action *must* build on a space of difference rather than sameness. But first we will present a brief overview over other critiques that have been raised against the notion of empathy as a key moral compass.

Questioning the link between empathy and moral action

The sceptics of a link between empathy and moral action often draw on simplistic or overtly different definitions of empathy than do the protagonists (Denham, 2017). This makes the discussion of the role of empathy in moral activity rather murky and inaccessibly contentious, if not to say litigious. Researchers, creating an overview of the research on the relationship between empathy and moral action, often conclude that whilst there is little uncontested experimental evidence to point to a clear causal relationship between empathy and altruism (Schramme, 2017), moral judgement (Kauppinen, 2017), moral motivation (Denham, 2017), or moral responsibility

(Shoemakker, 2017), there seems to be *some* relation between empathy and moral action, although the exact relationship remains unclear. For instance, Kauppunin (2017) writes,

> "It is likely an exaggeration to claim that empathy is the "cement of the moral universe," as Michael Slote (2010) does. […] But people who lack the ability to put themselves in the shoes of others and feel for them do appear to have trouble with moral insight and appreciating the grounds of pro-social moral principles, even if their rational powers are largely intact." (P. 225).[ii]

However, there are a range of critiques that carry some notability, and we shall here present an overview of these, arguing that empathy and whom we empathize with is a culturally embedded norm, that moral judgement and action does not necessarily require empathy, and that empathy is biased and consequently has a predilection to helping those that are similar to oneself.

Empathy as culturally determined: Firstly, it has been argued that empathy is a culturally specific perspective on moral action, i.e. one rooted in western thinking. *How* we empathize, and *what* we empathize with, is a normative and culturally bound practice. Throughout history, and in different cultures, other approaches to moral judgements have been influential. The role of the laws of God, ideas of the natural order, or the idea that certain actions pollute one's body, all act as moral guides (Maibom, 2009). Empathy is a (post)modern emotionalized perspective on morality that has received extra traction in a society that, through the rise of psychology as a discipline, has become increasingly focused on the roles of emotions in all aspects of life (see Furedi, 2004). On the other hand, Lynn Layton (2009) argues, that in a neo-liberal society, the individual is increasingly held responsible for themselves, yet not responsible for the other. This individualization inhibits empathy and the experience of solidarity. However, one could further argue that the call for empathy as a moral compass is exactly in tune with the neo-liberal individualization of responsibility – rather than arguing for political and social responses to suffering and injustice, the call for empathy is an individualized as well as an emotionalized response.

Regardless of whether western cultures foster empathy or not, *who* we empathize with is culturally scripted with the effect of overlooking the suffering of particular others. For instance, Cynthia Burack (2006) studied homo-phobia in Christian fundamentalist groups. She shows, that this group does not see themselves as hate-filled, but rather as empathic and loving. They have, however, created an understanding of the world where some deserve empathy and others do not. Likewise, most readers of this article will, perhaps, subscribe to a world view, where such an understanding is reproachable, calling for empathy for homo-sexuals and *not* for Christian fundamentalists, who are deemed perpertrators who do not deserve empathy. Similarly, the introductory example of the man spitting on the refugees on the highway shows a cultural norm, where the refugees are deemed deserving of empathy, whereas the plight of the perpetrator, the suffering that prompts his heinous act (such as a worrying about jobs and pressure on the welfare state), does not elicit an empathy-imperative. However, this does not absolve one of acting well towards this man, and certainly does not justify acting immorally towards him. The culturally scripted norms for who deserve empathy thus fall short as a moral compass in the face of those deemed as perpetrators.

Moral judgement and empathy as non-contingent: Others point out, that we do not need to *feel* the emotions of others in order to know how to act morally well. This critique is directed towards those definitions of empathy that stress affective dimensions or simulation theorists who draw on mirror neurons to explain our ability to simulate the responses of others. The critique argues that we do not need to empathize with the refugees on the highway in order to know that spitting on them is morally wrong. Returning to the example of Susan and the dog, we do not need to be afraid ourselves in order know that it would be right to help the child who is afraid of the dog, in the same way as we do not need to feel the suffocation of drowning in order to know that it is right to save a boy struggling in a river. Instead, we draw on a variety of different skills and capacities to make these judgements. As Prinz (2011) writes: "My moral response is linked to action-types. If I classify your behavior as an instance of "stealing," then that is enough to instill moral ire. Disapprobation can follow directly from certain types of action without any need to contemplate the suffering of victims" (p. 220). Additionally, research into the moral judgements of frontal lobe patients, who are characterized as lacking the ability to empathize with others, shows that these patients seem to grasp what is morally right and wrong, i.e. despite their impairment, they still maintain their capacity for moral judgement. However, they do seem to struggle with more flexible judgements, such as judging an incident that has created harm that was unintentionally provoked (Kauppinen, 2017).

Another notable critique of the relationship between empathy and moral judgements is that, as Scheler (2008) points out, the basic simulation or reproduction of emotions does not necessarily lead to insight. Instead it may lead to emotional overload and stress. Bloom (2016) has a similar point in his exposition of the problems of empathy. He argues that we become emotionally overburdened by having an empathic stance that requires mimicry or the reproduction of the other's emotions. For instance, claiming that nurses need to feel the pain of their patients in order to act well, seems to be a non-sequitur, as nurses may very well be able to alleviate the pain of others in a practical manner without having to connect with them emotionally. Furthermore, this demand for empathy on professionals, risks resulting in emotional burn-out. The push for empathy may therefore in fact at times limit action, rather than motivate it, due to the experience of being overwhelmed by the emotions of the other.

Empathy as biased and self-centered: Bloom (2016) further argues, that empathy, is inherently biased and unreliable and thus explicitly unsuitable as a moral compass. We tend to empathize with those closest to us and most similar to us, reacting more if a tragedy occurs to those in our own country than to tragedies occurring further away. Adam Smith was aware of this problem. Nussbaum (2014) quotes him at length reflecting on a European man's reaction to the news on an earthquake in China. He writes that this man will feel a strong sorrow for the "misfortune of that unhappy people," reflect upon this in great melancholy, and "when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquility, as if no such accident had happened" (Smith cited in Nussbaum, 2014, p. 192).

Empathy is thus insufficient as a moral guide at a political level, but also at a more personal level. For instance, Primo Levi (1988) writes, "…a single Anne Frank excites more emotion than the myriads who suffered as she did but whose image has remained in the shadows" (p. 56). Empathy may in fact even lead to selfish rather than altruistic action. Bloom (2016) argues, that empathy, if considered the reproduction of the emotions of another, does not motivate moral action, but the alleviation of pain for oneself. To illustrate this, he tells a story of a woman living near a concentration camp during the second world war. She could hear the screams of the victims during executions. Feeling the pain of the victims, she asked the authorities to stop executing them, or at least do it somewhere else! According to Bloom, her empathy motivated her to alleviate her own pain, not that of the victims.

Empathy as de-contextualized and individualized: The concept of empathy may additionally entail an individualization and de-politization of interpersonal encounters. The societal diagnosis of an empathy-deficit in society, that we quoted from a speech by Barack Obama, is a rather individualized notion. For instance, the example of the man spitting at the refugees walking on the highway, was taken to indicate that the man lacked empathy. In fact, it could indicate a multitude of reasons and concerns. The man could be overwhelmed by fear of his own livelihood due to the pressure on the welfare state, economic struggles with competitions of jobs, poverty and so on. Or he could quite simply be a blatant racist, which is an ideological stance increasingly legitimized in current political discourses. These are not matters of individual empathy or lack thereof. These are political problems and should not merely be a question of pointing to individuals suffering, claiming need for more empathy.

From empathy as 'knowing the other' to perpetual beginnings and the strangeness of the Other

Summing up, the discussion of the connection between empathy and morality seems to address two particular issues, i.e. whether or not empathy is a necessary component to *motivate* moral or altruistic behavior (Denham, 20017) and whether empathy is necessary in order to *judge* right from wrong, that is judging the actions of others (Prinz, 2011b; Kauppinen, 2017). All their differences aside, many if not all, consider empathy as a way to reduce the potential strangeness of the other's actions, i.e. it is a way to alleviate the discomfort connected to the uncertainty that arises in the face of *difference.* Seeing a scared girl makes us look for what scares her – seeing the big dog explains her fear to us. We would probably feel the same in her position. She and we are alike. We have reduced the strangeness of the situation and of the girl (the other).

As argued above, theories of empathy tend to adhere to a logic of sameness. However, they also adhere to a logic of *knowing* the other. One approach to empathy that stresses difference yet still maintains the possibility of *knowing* is Dan Zahavis (2014) version of a phenomenological approach to empathy. He does not acknowledge the perspective that understanding the emotions of other *requires* experiencing these emotions ourselves. Instead, drawing on the work of Edith Stein, a student of Husserl, empathy may be understood as a form of *other directed intentionality.* Zahavi

(2014, p. 107) argues that when faced with an other that is expressing emotions, we neither need to reflectively draw on theoretical inferences (as in the theory-theory approach) nor do we need to make subjective projections (as in the simulation theory approach) to understand these emotions. Instead, they are immediately *given* to us. Let us return to the example of the child, Susan, who is afraid of the dog. When I see her face, I do not see the mechanical motion of a contracted and tense facial muscles with wide eyes and a motionless body, after which I make the inferential interpretation that she is afraid. Her fear is given to me directly. No cognitive interpretation is needed. What I see *is* fear (Zahavi, 2014). I am subsequently drawn by her intentionality, follow her gaze and see that it is the dog that she is afraid of. Zahavi (2014; 2017) thus argues, that empathy is a form of social cognition where we are drawn by the other (i.e. an other directed intentionality), and understand the other directly and situated in a shared world. Although Zahavi emphasizes difference, in his theory, like the other theories of empathy described, empathy acts as a sort of knowledge that make it possible for us to make what seems strange and different, knowable, and if not identical, then at least therefore relatable.

By drawing on Hannah Arendt, we will to argue for the inadequacy of the notion that empathy, understood as a way of knowing the other, as a prerequisite for moral action. Arendt was concerned with the question of how we make good judgements about how to act when encountering the other? Her answer is that we do so through *understanding,* that is distinct from *knowing* and that stresses difference. Arendt aspired to develop a "half way plausible theory of ethics" (1971, p. 216) in her work "The Life of the Mind." In this article, we will focus on one aspect of her theory, namely the concept of understanding connected to her notion of visiting, arguing that the fundamental plurality and constant becoming of human beings hinders the possibility of knowing the other. Yet we can *understand* the other through *visiting*, which is a never-ending *activity*, i.e. understanding is an action not knowledge. In order to understand this, we first need to turn to her theory of action, natality and 'being,' and the ungraspable nature of the *other*.

Hannah Arendt: Natality and the Plural

One of Hannah Arendt's most central concepts is the concept of *plurality*. She argues, that we live in a world of *men* not of *man*, and consequently in a world of difference:

> "Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live." (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 8).

Arendt's key concept of natality is closely connected to plurality. Having studied under Martin Heidegger in Marburg, Arendt broke with his phenomenology by developing the concept of natality that describes our ability to take initiative. Heidegger's *others* are mere representatives and expressions of the existence of Dasein, that is being-in-the-world (Large, 2011). Contrary to this, Arendt stressed the fundamental nature of the uniqueness of others and plurality of mankind. Each human being is unique because of our ability to take initiative. It is because of our ability to bring something new into the world, i.e. to take initiative, and to begin, that the world is plural. In action, one starts something new: "To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin […], to set something into motion" (Arendt, 1958/1998).

It is in action, the mode of activity in which persons are together for the sake of togetherness, that the person appears as a unique individual. It is also through this beginning, that the subject risks disclosing itself. Initiative, in action, is the condition for appearing as a subject. She writes, "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world…" (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 179). Subsequently, others respond to this beginning. The subject is thus never merely the doer, but also the sufferer of others' beginnings. As Arendt writes: "Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others" (Arendt 1958/1998, p. 190).

This disclosure or appearance of the subject is something intangible, or even ineffable. The other qua other is an irreplaceable self because of this momentary disclosure, that gives way for another new disclosure, and yet another, and so on. It is this constant beginning that makes the human world unpredictable and uncertain. The other is thus ultimately ungraspable in a constant becoming. Arendt writes, "The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is" (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 181). As soon as we move to graspable categories, we present the other in an impoverished and reified way. Emmanuel Levinas captures this by writing, "If one could possess, grasp and know the other, it would not be other" (1987, p. 90). As Edith Stein pointed out, rather than experiencing the other as a joint sameness, the other comes to us, that is *discloses* themselves, as precisely *other*, and are thus not fully comprehensible. At this point we turn to the first central critique of the notion of empathy as a central moral compass, raised by Arendt's theory, namely the propensity to sameness rather than difference inherent in the above described definitions of empathy.

Sameness and difference

> "If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood." (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 176)

As argued above, the described concepts of empathy, however different they are, all, with the exception of Zahavis phenomenological approach, essentially ascribe to the notion of sameness: I feel the same, can draw on the same experiences, or can draw on the same logics as the other in order to understand the other. This shuts down the possibility of difference and consequently the possibility for the individuals unique appearing. In his work Totality and Infinity, Levinas has articulated the clearest critique of this affinity to sameness, calling the Western quest for total knowledge of being the "imperialism of the same" (Levinas, 2002, p. 87). According to the radical approach of difference proposed by both Levinas and Arendt, the very foundation of morality has nothing to do with comprehending the other, grasping their existence in coherent structures and reducing them to a something fathomable, something recognizable – reducing them to "sameness." As Amiel-Hauser and Mandelson-Maoz (2014) write:

> "Under the presumption of empathy, people tend to dismiss aspects of difference and believe that they can truly know the subjective mindset of another person, sometimes even better than that person." (p. 204).

Arendt did not address the concept of empathy as such. She did, however, address the notion of *compassion*, which she defines as being "stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious" (Arendt, 1963, p. 85). This is thus similar to affective empathy or simulation theories of empathy. She critiques compassion as a moral guide, arguing that compassion closes down the space of difference rather than allowing for it, i.e. it closes down the space of unique appearing. She argues that compassion "sets out to change worldly conditions in order to ease human suffering," and points out that "…it will shun the drawn-out wearisome processes of persuasion, negotiation and compromise," (Arendt, 1973, p. 86-87), which is necessary for the space of difference and appearance. She argues instead for the active concept of understanding and of visiting the other, which we now will turn to.

Visiting and understanding:

For Arendt, the basic foundation for moral action is this recognition of "others as other to the other in a common world" (Hart, 2002, p. 99). Yet, although the other remains ungraspable, it is possible, in action, in this continuous disclosure described above, to *visit* the other. Visiting may seem very much like the imaginative capacity of those empathy-theorists who advocate a cognitive empathy involving projecting oneself into the shoes of the other, and for Arendt it does indeed require imagination. However, Arendt did not mean that this projection, this taking the perspective of the other, meant imaginatively *feeling* the other, projecting oneself into the shoes of the other, or entirely comprehending what the other may feel, think or do in a given situation. Rather, she advocates for the notion of *visiting* the other as distinct from the notion of empathy represented by simulation theory, as it maintains and stresses difference. Disch (1994) explains, "To visit, in other words, you must travel to new locations, leave behind what is familiar, and resist the temptation to make yourself at home where you are not" (p. 159). It does not involve becoming comfortable with the perspective of the other, making it your own. Where simulation theory assumes that I must *already* have the capacity to feel in a certain way, *visiting* is the possible discovery of *other* ways of being.

Visiting is an aspect of understanding the other. Understanding is, for Arendt, linked to yet distinguished from knowledge, as it does not totalize and cannot reach conclusions. She describes it as a specifically human way of being alive. It is thus a particular way of engaging with the other in action, and is consequently "unending, and therefore cannot produce final results" (Arendt, 1954/1994, p. 308). Understanding is action. It is a way of being with the other in a continuous visitation, striving to reconcile oneself with the plurality of the other, without forcing oneself to be at home, making the unfamiliar familiar. It is thus an ontological concept of being rather than an epistemological one of knowing. One cannot *have* an understanding – rather it is an activity, i.e. something that is *done*.

Understanding has to do with coming to terms with the world, with the other, and reconciling oneself to a world where experiences, perspectives, values, opinions etc. that differ from my own, are possible. Arendt (1954/1994) critiques totalitarian explanations of the actions of others, "… because they submerge whatever is unfamiliar and needs to be understood in a welter of familiarities and plausibilities." (p. 313). Empathy, when defined through a propensity to sameness, is one mode of explaining the other by drawing on such familiarities. So, rather than comprehending the other in any full and totalizing way, understanding has to do with *coming to terms* with the reality that the other experiences and inhabits our shared world differently than I. It is thus not about transforming the unfamiliar into the familiar, the different into sameness, the unpredictable into the predictable. Rather it is about a constant learning to live in a shared world with other people, unique and plural:

> "… an "understanding heart," […] not mere reflection or mere feeling, makes it bearable for us to live with other people, strangers forever, in the same world, and makes it possible for them to bear with us" (Arendt, 1954/1994, p. 322).

Certainty and Introspection:

Connected to the call for the person to learn to live with difference and unfamiliarity, Arendt's thinking dissolves the possibility of reaching certainty. The notion of empathy as a moral compass draws on the idea that one can know the other, and consequently make good moral decisions based on this knowledge. This may particularly be the case with the theory-theory approach, where general folk theories are used to deduce an understanding of the emotions and actions of the other. However, simulation theory approaches to empathy also adhere to the idea that one can know the other by simulating the emotions of the other, either through projection or through automated neuro-processes. According to Arendt this quest for knowledge of the other and desire for certainty is problematic because, as argued above, human *being* in action is inherently uncertain and unpredictable due to natality and perpetual beginnings. It is particular in ways that the general cannot capture. And it is unique in ways that *I* cannot simulate, comprehend or know in any totalizing fashion. As soon as we take a stance on the "right" comprehension of the mental state of the other, or the "correct" explanation for why an other does as she does, we reduce this other and make them into a static object. According to Arendt, as Nelson (2006) writes, in order to act morally well one "must also embrace the discomfort of uncertainty and the anxiety of unpredictability" (p. 89). This is why visiting the other and understanding can never be a finished activity – it is always open, allowing for the constant appearing of the other in unforeseen ways.

Furthermore, Arendt critiqued the practice of introspection. The notions of empathy that adhere to the logic of sameness call for *looking into oneself* in order to understand the other. This is particularly the case with notions of affective empathy and simulation theories that consider empathy the ability to understand the other by imagining what one would do if in the same situation. After writing her dissertation on St. Augustine under the guidance of Karl Jaspers, Arendt wrote a biography on the life of Rahel Varnhagen, a Jewish woman born in 1771, living in Berlin, and leading a philosophical salon, which attracted some of Berlins leading thinkers, including the

Humbolt brothers, as well as Hegel at a later date (Arendt, 1957/2000). In this biography, one finds the foundations of Arendt's political thinking. She critiques Rahel for her "romantic inwardness," writing, "to believe that by cultivation (Bildung) one can make a work of art of one's life, was the great error of Rahel as well as her contemporaries" (p. 81). Arendt argues that this introspection results in worldlessness. Through introspection, man becomes concerned "only with himself" and "…is confronted with nothing and nobody but himself" (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 280). This is of course an unreasonable critique of empathy, as no proponent of empathy as a central moral compass would argue that one should become preoccupied with oneself. But for Arendt introspection is worldlessness because the world disappears whilst the subject concentrates on oneself. Instead, it is worldliness, i.e. the ability to look out into the world, neither gazing *into* ourselves nor gazing *into* another, that is central to our ability to act well. It is the ability to engage in the activity of understanding the world from the perspective of an other that is the essential constituent of acting well when encountering the stranger. It is thus not merely understanding the emotions or thinking of the other, but also about understanding the conditions of the other, as well as their values, norms and position in society with all that this may entail. This is described by Benhabib (1995) who describes Arendts perspective in the following way:

> "Whereas the ability to judge the world as it appears to others and from many different points of view is the quintessential epistemic virtue in politics, romantic inwardness tends to eliminate the distinction between one's own perspective and those of others through mood." (p. 12).

Worldliness, understanding the world from multiple perspectives, thus supersedes empathy, which merely calls for experiencing the world from the perspective of a single other by looking inward and reflecting on one's own experience.

Judgement, thinking and moral action:

However, the activity of visiting the other, engaging in the activity of understanding in a way that opens up for the possibility of difference and constant appearing, does not in and of itself solve the problem of moral judgement and action in the encounter with the stranger. Understanding the other does not necessarily point to what we must *do*. Acting morally well does not necessarily entail fulfilling the wish of the other, although it of course does not exclude it. We will here briefly touch upon the Arendt's ideas of thinking, and judging and how this is connected to moral action. Arendt points to the notion of judging that goes hand in hand with visiting. Hart (2002) describes Arendt's perspective of visiting and judgement by arguing that,

> "…while putting myself in the place of the others, I do not simply replace my judgement with theirs; in fact, my judgement might not even be the same as theirs…. I retain my own voice and do not count noses in order to arrive at what is right" (p. 103).

Acting morally well requires taking up ones responsibility by making independent judgements – by retaining one's own voice. Understanding the other thus does not mean taking over their perspective of the world.

Arendt points to thinking, as a necessary tool for making moral judgements, and the ability to act well. In her exposition of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem (1963), Arendt was struck by what she

termed the 'banality of evil.' Eichmann was not in any way vicious or diabolic. He was simply, according to Arendt, thoughtless. Thoughtlessness is not the same as stupidity. Thinking is for Arendt not "a highly developed intelligence or sophistication in moral matters, but rather the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, to have intercourse with oneself, that is, to be engaged in that silent dialogue" (Arendt 1964/2003, p. 45). Thinking is thus, for Arendt, merely the faculty of engaging in an investigation.

However, in 'The life of the mind' Arendt quotes Heidegger:

> "Thinking does not bring knowledge as do the sciences. Thinking does not produce usable practical wisdom. Thinking does not endow us directly with the power to act." (1971, p. 1).

Hart (2002) explains the role of thinking for Arendt as follows:

> "Although thinking as an activity in such cases [i.e. cases where "the center cannot hold… when the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity"] can put obstacles in the way of action, it itself is not an action and therefore is an ethics of impotence; it does not tell us what to do, but where to stop." (p. 93 & 94).

Thinking can thus suspend action and point out where action ought to stop. But it cannot point us further. Much like empathy, thinking on its own is an insufficient moral compass. Thinking in a distanced manner does not solve the problem. This must be undergone in joint action.

In The Human Condition (1958/1998), Arendt shows that the verb "to act" has two corresponding words in both Greek and the Latin. In Greek the two verbs are *archein* which means "to begin/lead/rule" and *pratein* which means "to pass through/achieve/finish." The Latin verbs are *agere* meaning "to set into motion/lead" and *gerere* meaning "to bear." Arendt argues that each action was divided into two parts, "the beginning made by a single person and the achievement in which many join by "bearing" and "finishing" the enterprise, by seeing it through" (p. 189). Action is thus constituted by a doubleness: the singular beginning of a unique subject *and* the joint enterprise of seeing an activity through.

This pertains to the argument we have been making in the following way: Rather than empathizing with the other in the sense of affectively feeling the other, or projecting oneself into the shoes of the other, risking the collapse of subjectivities into sameness, Arendt would point to the ongoing process of natality, where the other appears by starting/setting into motion. This is done by a unique singular human being. To act morally well in a given situation requires thinking about this beginning in a disconnected manner that allows one to stop if necessary, and to maintain one's own position. Yet it simultaneously requires always seeking understanding of the other by visiting the other and allowing for continued appearance, and not diminish the other by receding to and settling on familiarities and sameness. This visiting is an action and not a passive stance of mere reception. Understanding has to do with coming to terms with plurality and accepting difference of experience, difference of values, difference of norms and difference of thought. Ultimately, the moral question is a question of solving the problem at hand – together, in action. The unique

beginning (explored through understanding) and the joint bearing/finishing must be maintained simultaneously in action.

Conclusion:

For Arendt *difference* is an ontological condition. It is through perpetual beginnings that each individual appears as a unique individual. Difference is thus not merely an ontological condition for Arendt, but also a moral imperative. There *ought* to be spaces of difference. Without these spaces of difference social life would be totalitarian and would constitute a suppression and stifling of human being. If we return to the introductory example of the man spitting at the refugees on the high way, the general sentiment in the Facebook feed was that this man lacked empathy. One logical conclusion drawn from this could be to give the man empathy-training. This is in fact a common approach in moral education. There is a pervasive call in education for focusing on so-called 'non-cognitive skills' that are connected to moral action (Gabrieli, Ansel & Krachman, 2015). The techniques used are for instance mindfulness, gratitude training and mentalization training. These all claim to enhance the empathy of pupils (see for instance Bak, Midgley, Zhu, Wistoft, & Obel, 2015; Weare, 2010). However, the main point in this paper is that empathy in itself (and certainly knowledge in itself) cannot carry the burden of moral judgment. Instead, according to the theory of Arendt, moral education should strive to teach pupils to understand the world from multiple perspectives in a continuous never-ending manner, whilst developing their own voice and ability to take responsibility.

Furthermore, the approach we have described above has implications for all practitioners who encounter the stranger, be it psychologists, educationalists, law enforcers, nurses etc. We have argued that a central problem concerning empathy and moral action is the way in which empathy – as well as what one ought to do – becomes a knowledge endeavor. Knowing the other and knowing what is right. It becomes a matter of achieving a sense of certainty. In such a view action must be delayed until clarity is achieved. Not only does life 'go on' without waiting for such clarity to appear, but the idea of possessing the means to know beforehand what is right excludes the fact that the *other* and the self are unique individuals that differ. This also has consequences for working with refugees and ethnic minority groups in a variety of different professions. It means that the call for professionals to emotionally engage with the suffering of others, often leading to emotional burnout, may be exaggerated (Bloom, 2016). Instead the approach of Arendt calls for professionals that create spaces of *appearance* – i.e. refrain from creating simple stagnant narratives of who the other is (someone just like me, or someone acting just like anyone else would in their position).

Creating spaces of appearance means allowing the other to disclose herself as a *unique* without the totalizing endeavor of *knowing* the other. And only by joint action is it possible to act in relation to that difference or otherness. Understanding, thinking and taking responsibility are key components in moral action. This includes issues of values, morals and social justice. These are all issues that psychology as a discipline struggle with. We want to stress the need for a psychology that explicitly deals with values and discusses moral questions as well as the role of the discipline in issues of justice, equity and dignity.

Acting well in the face of difference is thus not about knowing – but understanding – the other; and not feeling his or her feelings, but visiting, enduring the agonizing unpredictability and uncertainty. This requires a perpetual acknowledgement of the fundamental difference and plurality of the other in our shared world. And it requires the risky business of taking responsibility as a unique individual through continuous moral value judgements. The discomfort of the unpredictable and uncertain world cannot be dissolved. One can only come to terms with it.

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[i] David Hume and Adam Smith, writing in the 1700's, both believed that the core capacity to enter into and share the emotions of others was central to social life specifically and humanity in general. Both denoted this capacity "sympathy." For a discussion of their understanding of sympathy and the relationship to the contemporary term "empathy," see Ilyes (2017).

[ii] The definition of empathy in this quote is a case in point about the problems regarding the unclear notion of what empathy actually consists of. Here Kauppinen slides into a commonsense definition that has to do with putting oneself in the shoes of another – yet there is not clarity of what this exactly entails.

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