**The Other - a troublesome dyad?**

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**Introduction**

We see two conceptions of “The Other” in moral philosophy and we contend that they might be in tension. The “near other” is like me, someone with whom I can intuitively empathise, to whom, if less-fortunate than me, I can attribute a sense of “there but for the grace of God …”, and with whom I can agree to do unto them as I would have them do unto me. The “far other” is different to me, not within my in-group loyalty optic, and is (often times) “over there”, out of my near view, and to be honest, I don’t want them nearer. We challenge the ease with which this view is proffered. We contend that evidence suggests we do not reliably transfer our transcendent metaphysical empathy for the near-other to the far-other. We justify this position and consider reasons that might explain it. It has been argued that consensus after dialogue has moral force, and that it is therefore appropriate that moral decision-making is positioned in a space cognizant of the other, one in which we need to have an inclusive and non-coercive reflective dialogue aiming to achieve consensus (Walker and Lovat 2022). Near-otherness makes consensus easier, while far-otherness makes consensus more difficult. Nonetheless, in our post-modern era, we need to find a way to find consensus. Aware of differences when considering the far-other, we need to be alert to, listen, and feel for, the perspective of the other in order to engage in constructive dialogue.

**The near-other**

Plotinus wrote that all souls in the universe are one as an omnipresent unity (Plotinus 1952), and ‘the one soul … contains all souls and all intelligences; this, because it is at once a unity and an infinity’ (Plotinus 1952). Each of our bodies is located within this soul. Arguably, it is the individual’s body which differentiates one soul from another, because bodies are different from each other, in place, movements, additions or circumstances (Ousager 2004, 19; Gurtler 2008, 117). Despite the particularities in our bodies, there is a oneness or unity which allows our gaze to take on the perspective of all.

Immanuel Kant, understood *noumenon* as ‘an object of a non-sensuous intuition’ (Kant 1952, 96-7). *Noumenon* is distinguished from *phenomenon*, something recognisable by our senses. *Phenomenon* is both mutable and subjective; *noumenon* is neither. *Noumenon* connotes the essence which lies behind the appearance of the *phenomenon*. Husserl’s suggests that empirical science is sufficient for ascertaining *phenomena* but an entirely different method, eidetic science, is essential to understanding the essence that lies within them (Husserl 1964), (Husserl 2012). He employs Otto’s notion of the *numinous* – – a non-sensory awareness whose primary and immediate reference is to an object outside of the self. (Norenberg 2017; Otto 1970). Thus, it might be that moral goodness dependent upon human nature in the *phenomenon* is subjective and relative, while moral goodness drawn from the metaphysical in the *noumenon*, independent of human nature, is absolute and so is properly the place from whence a system of morals might emanate.

Schopenhauer underscored the natural empathy amongst human beings when he wrote ‘[a]ll genuine virtue proceeds from the immediate and *intuitive* knowledge of the metaphysical identity of all beings’ (Schopenhauer 1969, 600-1). When giving alms to help a stranger, the alms-giver ‘recognises that it is his own self which now appears before him in that doleful and dejected form, and hence that he recognises again his own inner being-in-itself in the phenomenal appearance of another’ (Schopenhauer 1965, 212). It is also present when, on the spur of the moment, without much reflection, one person helps another - I ‘*feel it with him*, *feel it as my own*, and yet not *within me*, but *in another person’*; which, as a moral motivator, neither our reason nor our empirical experience can account for (Schopenhauer 1965, 165-6). For Schopenhauer, the moral significance of an action lies only in its reference to others (Schopenhauer 1965, 142) and his basis for a moral philosophy was compassion - participation in the suffering of another (Schopenhauer 1965, 142-4), which sees-through the illusion of our separateness and thus destroys the distinction between I and not-I, ego and not-ego.

Hamilton suggests that when our eyes look into those of a beggar and that look is returned, there is often a realisation of a shared humanity, recognising equal dignity but in differing circumstances (Hamilton 2008, 149). For Hamilton, metaphysical empathy has two components in the phenomenon - compassion and the will to justice (Hamilton 2008, 150-2). Similarly, Habermas grounds morality in the inherent vulnerability of people – whom he sees in a situation of ‘a densely woven fabric of mutual recognition … of reciprocal exposedness and vulnerability’ (Habermas 1990, 199). Habermas understands that the identity of the individual and that of the collective are thus interdependent. This impels mutual and bilateral consideration to defend the integrity of the individual as well as the collective – ‘individuals *reciprocally* stabilize their identities’ (Habermas 1990, 200). Habermas argues that systems of morality must simultaneously emphasize the inviolability of the individual by postulating equal respect for the dignity of each individual, and concern for the well-being of members of a community who inter-subjectively share the same lifeworld. Hence, he derives his twin principles of morality - justice and what he terms solidarity – empathic compassion and care for our neighbours.

# This compassion, philanthropy, or ‘loving-kindness’ and the ‘will to justice’, both grounded in empathy, are intimately associated with human nature itself. Thus, the two-fold injunction of Schopenhauer ‘[i]njure no one *[the principle of justice] …* help everyone as much as you can *[the rule of compassion]*’ (Schopenhauer 1965), which for him is the ‘true and genuine substance of all morality’ (Schopenhauer 1965, 92). Blum defines compassion as deriving from ‘a sense of shared humanity, of regarding the other as a fellow human being’ (Blum 1994, 177). For Blum, the suffering *per se* of another human is the viewpoint, not the specific cause of the suffering. This suffering is understood as something that can happen to any human being, including oneself. He differentiates this notion from pity. The essence of Blum’s compassion is ‘feeling with’ the suffering of another human (Blum 1994, 179).

Gaita refers to another contrast – where someone helps another, and when asked why, responds that they saw no other choice, no other option; they had to help. Rather than think that this person might have been motivated by something other than or additional to compassion, it could be that the person’s compassion is ‘perfected by a proper understanding of its object - the reality of a suffering human being’, another member of our species *homo sapiens* (Gaita 1991, 2004, 76). Thus, in its purest distillation, metaphysical empathy segues into an obligatory duty because there is simply no other choice.

Nortvedt (Nortvedt 2003), in considering the foundations of ethical sensitivity, reiterates the question posed by Korsgaard (Korsgaard 1996, 148) - when the pain of another person causes some kind of empathic distress, why help? Why not just take a tranquilizer? Nortvedt answers in terms of the pain of another being perceived as ‘a reason for *you* to change the person’s condition’ (Nortvedt 2003, 223). Rather than leaving this as a mere psychological motivation, however, Nortvedt develops arguments from Husserl via Emmanuel Levinas, that, prior to a reflective moral impulse, a pre-reflective consciousness acts as the moral impetus. In paraphrasing Levinas, Nortvedt thus develops an ‘ethical metaphysics that elucidates the awakening of moral consciousness by the vulnerability of the other person, as suffering for his suffering’ (Nortvedt 2003, 224). In the “face” of the other, we see vulnerability and are motivated to act.

Phenomenology is grounded in the perspective of the first person looking outward. Edmund Husserl recognizes the other, phenomenologically, as “like me” but “over there” (Husserl 1960, 117-9), a veritable *alter* ego (Husserl 1960, 110). Levinas exposits that the self is born not through differentiation from others but through union with them; that is, the ontological condition to be human means ‘to live as if one were not a being among beings’ (Levinas 1985, 100). He further argues, in distinction to Husserl, that ‘ethics is before ontology. Behind the arrival of the human there is already the vigilance for the other’ (Levinas 1999, 98). In that sense, we are vulnerable when faced with the other, vulnerable because we see the other as a reflection of ourselves and so as responsible for the other as we are for ourselves (Fleming and Lovat 2013). Levinas used the term *alterity* to connote the extent of this vulnerability for the self. It connotes the ability to distinguish between self and not-self (Levinas 1999, 97-103), and, hence, crucially, to assume that an alternative viewpoint exists and bears down on the self to the point of the self being inherently vulnerable in the face of the not-self.

When Levinas wrote that ‘[r]esponsibility for the other, this way of answering without a prior commitment, is human fraternity itself, and it is prior to freedom’ (Levinas 1989, 106), he signaled that he also thought of it in terms of the significance (the value) of the Other as ~~‘~~the unique relation of ethical responsibility~~’~~, not an ethical framework *per se*, but an optic , a way of looking at things (Fleming 2013, 362-72).Rather than existing in isolation, we are connected with others - ‘a mode of being … where I am endlessly obligated to the Other, a multiplicity in being which … takes form … as fraternity and discourse’ (Hand 1989, 1). Expressing a certain antipathy towards Martin Buber, who finds reciprocity inherent within the I-You relation - ‘when I say you, I know that I am saying you to someone who is an *I*, and who says you to me’ (Levinas 1999, 100) and ‘[o]ne should try not to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity (Buber 1970, 58), Levinas contends that ‘I am responsible for the Other without waiting for his reciprocity … Reciprocity is *his* affair’ (Levinas 1985, 98). Levinas’ use of “face” is an extension of transcendence or universality and may be explained as a conception of ‘the fullness of the transcendent presences with which the self is encountered when the Other is in close proximity’ (Fleming 2013, 365). As such, it communicates infinity – encountered as both a phenomenon, which the self experiences and can grasp through consciousness, and as a transcendence that goes beyond this. Levinas argues that encountering the ‘face’ impels a pre-conscious response from the self.

For Heidegger there can be no conception of a human being ‘except as being in the midst of a world, an existent thing … in the middle of other things’ (Warnock 1970, 50). Heidegger’s word for human being is *Dasein*, literally, *Being there* (later, *Da-sein* to emphasise that this ‘entity, has its place, *there*, in the world’) (Warnock 1970, 50). *Dasein* is not a thinking thing, but is a caring-about thing (Kenny 2010, 819).

In summary thus far, empathy is the basis for valid morally-complete relationships amongst men and women in the phenomenon. Essential to this is individual and universal metaphysical empathy emanating from the *noumenon*, because from this is derived compassion and justice, the twin cornerstones of a system of ethical behaviour. This concept is derived from that of a single unifying nature in the Universe.

Consider the pragmatics deriving from metaphysical empathy towards the other. If there is a concept of an ethical epistemic primitive, by which we mean an ethical construct that is so fundamental that it cannot be subject to doubt, then the Golden Rule might be a candidate. The Golden Rule, as formulated in Christian scriptures, is: ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ (Gospel of Matthew 7:12, Gospel of Luke 6:31). There is a similar idea in most religious and moral traditions ...

Kant founded his idea of the Golden Rule on his practical imperative – treat others as ends in themselves and not as a means to our end. Parfit calls this ‘the formula of humanity’ (Parfit 2011, 177). Schopenhauer bases his Rule on the recognition of the Self in others – ‘Injure no one: on the contrary, help others as much as you can’ (Schopenhauer 1965). Hunsinger proposes the Golden Rule as a common morality – which need not be a morally correct solution for all morally dilemmatic situations – ‘it could well be a modest morality without being insignificant. It need not do everything in order to do something worthwhile’ (Hunsinger 2006, 375-9). One might have a relatively unsophisticated understanding about benevolence, non-maleficence, compassion, justice, fairness, dignity, and similar notions. One might intuitively apply these understandings to oneself, as a sufficient starting point, or a valid working set of definitions, for a morality one applies to others impartially. Hence, there is no necessity to philosophise deeply upon what those words actually mean. We are speaking of a common moral code which involves empathically walking in the shoes of the other. It satisfies Schopenhauer’s exhortation that underlying a true incentive to justice and philanthropy should be ‘something that requires little reflection, and even less abstraction and combination; something that … speaks to every man … resting merely on intuitive apprehension’ (Schopenhauer 1965, 120-1). Parfit restates the Golden Rule as ‘We ought to treat others only in ways in which we would rationally be willing to be treated, if we were going to be in these other people’s positions, and would be relevantly like them’ (Parfit 2011, 324). We suggest that Parfit’s “and be relevantly like them” is increasingly applicable in our current era, characterised by a pronounced diversity of people in our communities, with a pronounced plurality of values. This means that doing unto others as you would have them do unto you might not be at all appropriate, since the values which are important for you and for the other person can be widely different, and might indeed be mutually unknown or even unknowable.

**The far-other**

As just noted, our contemporary societies are different from those of earlier eras. This is partly because our world is characterized by far greater travel, and sophisticated and increasingly widely available connectivity, especially via social media. This assists global dissemination of widely diverse cultures and belief systems. Deep-reaching cultural, religious, social, ethno-political and value diversity follows (Walker and Lovat 2019, 72). Consequent upon immigration, our contemporary era is also characterized by an influx of people from widely disparate cultures and belief-systems into our communities. The resultant diversity is both deep-reaching and results in conflicting conceptions both of the Right and of the Good, which cannot easily be ordered into a context-independent hierarchy (Bader and Saharso 2004, 108).

Both the agent’s tendency to in-group loyalty and the proximity of the agent to special other persons can act as moral motivators. Special other persons, to whom we might feel we have a particular duty of care or obligation, include our children, our wider family, other people close to us personally or professionally, our compatriots, or, to generalize, people-like-us. This means that those who are different from us, in terms of distance, geographical locale, physical appearance, or in their cultural, religious, sexual, social or moral values, might be perceived by us as unlike-us. Although we are one in the *noumenon*, arguably, perceived differences in the *phenomenon* lessen our metaphysical empathy with others, because we are distracted by distance, colour, language, or another artefact. We might then make moral decisions influenced by these in-group/out-of-group factors, rather than on a values-neutral, meritorious assessment of the action in its context. As we will argue below, one important way to avoid this situation is to engage in dialogue amongst those affected, so as to come to recognize and minimize these errant moral motivators.

Our discussion about the near-other underlined our inter-connectivity as human beings. Three things need to be made clear regarding the “far-other” (Staszak 2009). First, the far other means more than geographical location at a distance from us. The concept includes those in my neighbourhood who look different, who speak differently, who have different religious or political or cultural inclinations, or sexual proclivities. Second, a large part of this unlike-me-because-different optic, is from my subjective perspective only. For example, biological sex is a fact, whereas gender-identity is a perceived difference. Third, those groups of people judged to be unlike-me, are vulnerable to marginalisation or discrimination by the dominant group. Historically, Western colonial powers have subjugated those peoples who are not like them. It is the dominant group that can specify, and act upon, categories of “difference” – by devaluing the particularity of the other. Organised religion has often reinforced differences according to colour and culture by categorising those white, civilised and God-fearing peoples who would be saved, as different from coloured, uncivilised heathens who would not be saved.

“Othering” is the term applied to categorising or assigning a difference into “otherness” in order to create an in-group and an out-group – which we can then distance ourselves from and value less than our in-group. These might not be single differences - for example, ethnicity or religion - but multiple differences, some of which can be recycled from historical grievances. These perceived differences might be combined to subtly and not-so subtly substantiate the othering. At least two consequences will follow. First, we possess a justification for framing inequality and marginality. Second, we possess a proclivity to impose poor treatment on the unequal and marginalised, all the time constructing ourselves as basically good people doing the right thing, via othering them with some difference which justifies our poor treatment of them.

fMRI studies have been performed in the context of out-groups ... Thus, they posited that this extreme outgroup is de-humanised to the level of an object (Harris and Fiske 2006).

In contradistinction, we believe that, since human beings are necessarily in relationship with each other, in order to flourish as societies, recognition of these inter-subjective bonds is essential, despite our differing ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. While sympathy implies a sharing of a common emotion or experience, empathy involves trying to understand the other without merging identities – without feeling the depth of the other’s emotion. Empathy, in the sense of cognitive understanding, does not imply approval, or even liking the other. Understanding someone different from me, yet similar in their humanity, might be the precondition for having respect for the other, the foundation for a moral philosophy. Empathy implies awareness that the individual self is being addressed by this particular other.

Verlinden notes the inherent divide for agents, ethically, between the personal standpoint (the first-person agent-relative ethical monologue) and the impersonal objective standpoint (the third-person agent-neutral prescription) (Verlinden 2010, 87). By these terms, dialogue amongst those in the morally dilemmatic situation constitutes the second-person approach. Both Buber’s “I-thou” and the resultant “interhuman” space, as well as Levinas’ “the face of the Other” and his argument that ethics is a first philosophy, recognize the moral relationship in terms of an encounter, a meeting, a dialogue, an exchange, or a conversation, and so privilege the dialogical approach to morality (Verlinden 2010, 92-101) as a means to come to understand the other’s values and meanings. For Buber, inter-subjectivity provides meaningfulness to our lives. For Levinas, relation to the “face” of the other is a moral imperative (Verlinden 2010, 95-6). For both Buber and Levinas, it provides normativity. Both articulate that morality is to be found ‘not within the realm of impartial justice, but in the silent, fragile “here I am” of the other that creates an intersubjectivity to be understood as an infinite responsibility for the other’ (Verlinden 2010, 99).

In our current era, ‘the claims of the particular other must be balanced against the nameless needs of myriad others ... the voice of the particular must be heard’ (Verlinden 2010, 99). We have an ethical responsibility to be alert to the particularity of the other, and hence strive to correct inequity rather than inequality. Equity means allocating resources based on the needs of the recipients. Equality means giving everyone exactly the same resources (Walker 2021, 147). Verlinden writes: ‘Justice should not look for its justification in universal principles applied equally to all, but upon the priority of the other for whom I am responsible in his incommensurability … Ultimately, our responsibility for the other is endless’ (Verlinden 2010, 99).

Specifically with regard to international aid, Williams argues that we need to refocus our language away from the language of charity towards the language of justice and what is properly due to those far-others who are deprived and disadvantaged, (Zournazi and Rowan 2020, 25) not the least because the lottery of birth is inequitable. Thus, the materially disadvantaged are approached by those more fortunate, with a sort of covenantal obligation, in which the poor are recognised as occupying a legitimate place in our world view (Zournazi and Rowan 2020, 28).

Wells, with reference to the ‘drowning season’ in the Mediterranean, reminds us of the ongoing humanitarian crisis around refugees fleeing towards perceived sanctuary in Europe, but drowning in the attempt (Wells 2015). He argues that governments appear to believe that the geographical boundaries of their country delimit a moral boundary. In his words, one possible solution is to ‘support their specific human rights by upholding the meta-right to migrate to a state [which is not broken]’, and then, justly, support them to re-establish themselves.

In considering the pragmatics of moral decision-making about, for example, the allocation of resources amongst the world’s peoples, compassionately (or justly) dealing with refugees, or ameliorating the impact of climate change on future generations, we argue that what is required is a process of inclusive, non-coercive and reflective dialogue amongst the communities relevantly impacted by the decision. The aim is to reach a consensual decision in the context of the situation at hand. This process is termed “dialogic consensus” (Walker and Lovat 2016). Consensus implies respect for, and tolerance of, ‘the full range of human goods and lives, including those we cannot accommodate within our own decisions’ (Crowder 2003, 15). Consensus is attuned to alternative perspectives—aware of alterity as well as being aware of inter-subjectivity—an intermeshing of the perspective of each with those of the other (Habermas 2001, 12). Strategic action orientated to success, power, and aiming to influence is disavowed by the participants. Participants hold each other to be accountable and willing to reach mutual understanding. Awareness that the discourse is a moral encounter among persons means that being open to difference, dissonance, and ambiguity is a necessary disposition for moral action orientated to responsibility for others (White 1991, x). Individuals might need to withdraw some way from their preferred position, in order to agree that it is the best decision for all those in the dialogue.

Raus et al. suggest that, rather than seeing others as people needing to be convinced, Habermas sees others as potential partners in a joint quest for the truth (Raus, Mortier, and Eeckloo 2018, 372). When considering the place of minority beliefs in a wider society, Parekh has argued that the only way a society can decide which minority practices to allow is an ‘open-minded and morally serious dialogue with the minority spokesman and to act on the resultant consensus’ (Parekh 1996, 255). He recognises that the outcome might not be ideal for all but it that does allow for the showing of respect, deepening of mutual understanding, and arriving at a realistic and broadly acceptable decision; which is then action-guiding. In the face of moral conflict, we argue that both the process of dialogue, properly constituted, and the consensual outcome itself, have moral authority vested within them in the situation at hand (Walker and Lovat 2022).

**Conclusion**

We are necessarily in-relation to other human beings, whether they be near or far. For the near-other, arguably metaphysical empathy, with twin manifestations in the phenomenon of compassion and justice, is a moral motivator. Reaching a decision about what to do in morally dilemmatic situations involving far others is more difficult – partly because of our proclivity towards othering. Moral decision-making in these situations requires a process of properly-constituted inclusive and non-coercive reflective dialogue. Difficulties in dialogue and consensus notwithstanding, there is a clear need in our multicultural, multifaith era for a moral philosophical approach which contains principles of conduct towards others - no matter how far the other is from our own ethical values, conceptions of the good, or life-choices.