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Meta-Emotions in the Context of Affective Empathy

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Abstract

Meta-emotions are emotions about emotions, such as, for example, shame about anger. An important subset of meta-emotions constitutes a special case of co-experienced emotions, in which one emotion is directed at another emotion experienced by a subject at the same time. By making us reflectively aware of our own first-order emotions and suggesting an evaluation of them, meta-emotions enable reflection on our own emotional sensibility. In this paper, I explore the roles of meta-emotions in the context of affective empathy. I show that, whereas meta-emotions on the side of the target person increase the complexity of empathy's success conditions, meta-emotions on the side of the empathiser expand the role of meta-emotions for self-reflection and give rise to parallel phenomena of other-directed reflection. Exploring the roles of meta-emotions in the context of affective empathy allows us to better understand the significance of meta-emotions, as well as the functions of affective empathy.

Keywords: emotions, meta-emotions, empathy, affective empathy, endorsement, reflexivity

1. Introduction

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” said President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during his 1933 inaugural address. “And I hate how much I love you, boy,” sings Rihanna. These quotes indicate a phenomenon that is familiar from everyday experience: in addition to a range of other kinds of objects, our emotions can be directed at each other. We can, for instance, feel ashamed about our anger, or relieved by our joy. These cases constitute instances of “meta-emotions,” that is, emotions about emotions. Another phenomenon that is familiar from everyday life is that emotions can be “co-experienced,” that is, we can experience different (and sometimes even conflicting) emotions at the same time. Although not all meta-emotions are co-experienced with their target emotions, meta-emotions about one's own emotions that occur at the same time as their target emotions constitute a special case of co-experienced emotions, in which one emotion is directed at another emotion.

Despite a recent increase in philosophical interest in emotions, meta-emotions, as well as co-experienced emotions more generally, have not yet received much attention.¹ In this paper, I discuss meta-emotions as a special kind of co-experienced emotions. My aim is to contribute to a better understanding of (co-experienced) meta-emotions by investigating the roles of meta-emotions that occur in the context of affective empathy. While some authors have pointed to potentially interesting connections between meta-emotions and empathy (Jäger and Bartsch 2006: 195, n. 20; Mendonça 2013: 393), they have left these connections unexplored. My core thesis is that investigating the roles of meta-emotions in the context of affective empathy will lead to a better understanding of meta-emotions as well as affective empathy. On the one hand, it will deepen our grasp of the significance of meta-emotions for the complexity of our mental lives, as well as for how we reflect on ourselves and others. On the other hand, it helps us better understand the mechanisms underlying some of the epistemic and interpersonal functions of affective empathy.

I begin by characterising meta-emotions and providing an overview of recent discussions (Section 2). Next, I highlight the role of meta-emotions in reflecting on our own emotional sensibility (Section 3). After introducing the notion of affective empathy (Section 4), I then bring out several implications that meta-emotions have for thinking about affective empathy. I show that meta-emotions on the side of the target person add complexity to empathy's success conditions (Section 5). If a target person experiences not only anger, but also shame about their anger, empathy will only be successful if it is responsive to both of these emotions. Subsequently, I show that meta-emotions on the side of the empathiser expand the role of meta-emotions for self-assessment (Section 6) and give rise to parallel phenomena of other-directed reflection and evaluation (Section 7). For example, if, in empathising with a target person's anger, an empathiser experiences a meta-emotion directed at this anger, this may constitute an assessment of the target person's emotion, or their own empathic reaction. In addition to expanding their role in self-reflection, and giving rise to parallel phenomena of other-directed reflection, meta-emotions that occur in the context of episodes of affective empathy figure in some of the mechanisms underlying important epistemic and interpersonal functions of affective empathy. Meta-emotions thus constitute an interesting special case of co-experienced emotions that accounts for part of the complexity of our emotional experience, and which plays an important role in our relationships to ourselves and others. Exploring the roles of meta-emotions in the context of affective empathy allows us to better understand the significance of meta-emotions, as well as the functions of affective empathy.

1 Recent philosophical contributions that are devoted entirely to the topic of meta-emotions include Jäger and Bartsch 2006; Mendonça 2013; Jäger and Bänninger-Huber 2015; Howard 2017; Mitchell 2020. Authors writing about emotions in general also sometimes note the possibility of emotions being directed at other emotions and briefly discuss potential implications of this case (see e.g. Deonna and Teroni 2012: 18). The term “meta-emotion” (as well as “meta-mood”) is also used in psychological research. However, in this context it sometimes refers to a broader set of attitudes towards emotions (of oneself and others)—what John Gottman, Lynn Fainsilber Katz, and Carole Hooven call a “meta-emotion structure” (Gottman, Katz, and Hooven 1997)—rather than just to emotions about (one's own) emotions. Of course, meta-emotions more narrowly construed will normally be in part determined by one's overall attitudes about emotions.

2. Meta-Emotions

Meta-emotions are emotions about emotions. Imagine that, after having witnessed the embarrassing failure of a rival, you experience the pleasure of *schadenfreude*. However, while you are still attending to the delectable aspects of your rival's mishap, you begin to notice the nagging feeling of guilt, which shifts your attention to your *schadenfreude*. You are experiencing a meta-emotion: guilt about *schadenfreude*.²

That emotions can be about other emotions is a consequence of the fact that they are intentional mental states that can be directed at different kinds of objects.³ Moreover, their intentionality is special in that they are not ways to apprehend their objects directly. Rather, they depend on other mental states, so-called “cognitive bases,” such as beliefs, perceptions, or imaginings, to provide information about their objects (Deonna and Teroni 2012). In addition, emotions have a characteristic phenomenology, present their objects in an evaluative light, and have effects on attention and motivation. From these observations we can derive that meta-emotions have cognitive bases and phenomenology, they suggest an evaluation of their target emotions, and are connected to characteristic patterns of attention and action-readiness.⁴

The characterisation of meta-emotions as “emotions about emotions” allows for a distinction between intra- and interpersonal cases of meta-emotion. In the intrapersonal case, I experience an emotion about my own emotion (such as anger about my own anger), while in the interpersonal case I experience an emotion about another person's emotion (such as anger about your anger). Most authors who have written about meta-emotion explicitly restrict their discussion to the intrapersonal case.⁵ In what follows, I will mainly focus on the case of intrapersonal meta-emotions as well. However, below, I will introduce a special case of meta-emotions, which arises in the context of affective empathy, and which straddles the boundary between intra- and interpersonal meta-emotion (Section 7).

Meta-emotions can be either “synchronous” or “asynchronous,” that is, they can either be about emotions experienced at the same time or about emotions experienced at a prior time. For example, I can be ashamed about the fear I am currently experiencing or about fear that I experienced in the past. This is not the same as

2 While iterations of meta-emotions beyond the second order are possible— we can, for example, feel content with our guilt about our *schadenfreude*—they are likely to be limited by cognitive capacity. Like most authors, I will mainly focus on second-order emotions. Because not every emotion is accompanied by a meta-emotion, no problem of regress ensues.

3 In addition to other emotions, emotions can also be about other affective states such as moods. I can, for example, feel guilty about the cheerful mood I find myself in despite the hardship of others. However, because moods are normally not conceived of as intentional mental states that can be directed at specific objects, moods cannot be about emotions. While some philosophers think of moods as being directed at a very general object—the whole world, or one's entire environment—others take them not to be intentional at all. The notion “meta-mood” also plays a role in psychology, where it refers to different kinds of mental states directed at one's mood (Mayer and Gaschke 1988).

4 For the purposes of this paper, I will not commit to a specific theory of the emotions, but rather rely on a general characterisation of emotions that is compatible with many accounts. Philosophers working on meta-emotions from the perspective of a specific theory about emotions have espoused appraisal theories (Jäger and Bartsch 2006; see also Jäger and Bänninger-Huber 2015) and perceptualism (Mitchell 2020). Jonathan Mitchell argues that feeling and judgement theories encounter problems when applied to meta-emotions. Because, according to feeling theories, emotions are perceptions of bodily changes, they are indeed at odds with the idea that emotions can be about other emotions (Mitchell 2020: 508). Insofar as being able to account for meta-emotions is a criterion for theories of emotion (Mendonça 2013), this might present a problem for feeling theories. Mitchell's arguments against judgement theories, however, do not depend on anything specific to meta-emotions (Mitchell 2020: 511–2). They thus do not provide reason to think that judgment theories struggle to account for meta-emotions in particular.

5 Mitchell is an exception to this rule; he distinguishes between “reflexive” and “nonreflexive” meta-emotions and aims to provide a unified account for both kinds (Mitchell 2020).

saying that meta-emotions can involve occurrent or dispositional emotions. One can distinguish dispositional emotions (for example, the love for another person over many decades that involves a disposition to feel a range of emotions in different contexts and at different times) from occurrent emotions (for example, the feeling of sadness experienced at a moment of parting). Meta-emotions (as well as their target emotions) can be either occurrent or dispositional. In addition to feeling currently ashamed about my occurrent anger, I can, for example, be angry at my friend (in a dispositional way) and ashamed of this anger (in a dispositional way).

Co-experienced emotions are, by definition, experienced simultaneously by a subject. Therefore, only intrapersonal, synchronous, occurrent meta-emotions (only a subset of meta-emotions overall) constitute a special case of co-experienced emotions. In the case of co-experienced meta-emotions, the cognitive base of a meta-emotion is awareness of one's own occurrent first-order emotion.⁶ In what follows, I will mainly be concerned with meta-emotions of this kind.

Emotions can be positive or negative, both in the sense of hedonic valence (experiencing them can feel pleasant or unpleasant) and in the sense of their content (whether they present their object in a positive or negative evaluative light). Experiencing fear, for example, is unpleasant, and, when we are in the grip of fear, its object appears dangerous to us. In some cases of meta-emotions, first- and second-order emotions are of the same type. We can fear fear, be angry about anger, be happy about our happiness or sad about our sadness. In these cases, the valences of the respective first- and second-order emotions are the same. In cases where first- and second-order emotions are of distinct types, we can further distinguish *valence-congruent* and *valence-incongruent* combinations. We can, for instance, feel guilty about our jealousy or happy about our love (in which case the valences of first- and second-order emotions are congruent, either both negative or both positive). But we can also be ashamed about our joy or content about grief (in which case the valences of first- and second-order emotions are incongruent, either negative-positive, or positive-negative).

Part of the appeal of reflecting on meta-emotions is that it helps us to understand some of the complexity of our emotional experience. In particular, *valence-incongruent* meta-emotions account for complex overall affective experiences that are otherwise difficult to understand. For example, Christoph Jäger and Anne Bartsch explain *survivor guilt* as a meta-emotion of guilt, directed at one's own sense of relief or gratitude about having been spared, which is at the same time experienced as inappropriate in light of the catastrophe (Jäger and Bartsch 2006: 196–9).⁷ In addition, Jäger and Eva Bänninger-Huber understand *righteous indignation* in terms of a meta-

6 Scott Alexander Howard argues that (what I am calling) co-experienced meta-emotions constitute a counterexample to the general rule that emotions depend on cognitive bases (Howard 2017: 408–13). Howard's argument depends on the controversial assumption that a cognitive base must be a separate mental state and that awareness of one's own occurrent emotion does not constitute a separate mental state but is somehow part of the first-order emotion itself. In what follows, I will not rely on this assumption. Howard discusses the intentionality of co-experienced meta-emotions as a reason to consider meta-emotions as a distinctive kind of emotions. Another potential reason concerns their phenomenology. Meta-emotions are said to "colour" their target emotions, in the sense that the presence of a meta-emotion affects the phenomenal quality of their target emotion (Mendonça 2013, 392). In contrast to emotions about other types of intentional object, they therefore have a causal effect on their object; they change it. However, because the presence of a meta-emotion will change the overall affective state of a person, it seems difficult to ascertain whether it in fact changes the phenomenology of the target emotion or just adds complexity to the overall affective experience. I thus do not take either of the arguments for thinking that meta-emotions are distinctive that I have considered—regarding their intentional structure or phenomenology—to be conclusive. Nevertheless, I hope that the following discussion shows that the distinctive roles that meta-emotions play in reflecting on ourselves and others make them a valid object of study.

7 Not all cases of survivor guilt must be explained in terms of a meta-emotion. Perhaps survivor guilt can also be directed at first-order attitudes that are not emotions, such as beliefs about the event, as an anonymous reviewer has pointed out. Rather than defending the specific account of survivor guilt offered, I am discussing it to illustrate the potential of considering meta-emotions to elucidate some complex affective phenomena.

emotion of pride or contentment a subject feels about their own indignation (Jäger and Bänninger-Huber 2015: 790; see also Jäger and Bartsch 2006: 180–1).⁸

3. The Role of Meta-Emotions for Self-Reflection

Meta-emotions can thus constitute a special case of co-experienced emotions that helps to explain a range of complex affective phenomena.⁹ In this section, I will highlight the role of meta-emotions in reflecting on our emotional sensibility.

Part of the complexity of our mental lives is due to the fact that, in addition to phenomena outside the self, our mental states can be directed at each other. That is, in addition to beliefs, desires, and emotions about objects in the world, I can, for instance, have desires about my emotions (such as the desire that an emotion persist or subside) or beliefs about my desires (such as the belief that my desire is morally problematic or laudable). This gives rise to “higher-order mental states,” both in a narrow sense (mental states directed at tokens of the same type of mental state, such as beliefs about beliefs) and in a broad sense (mental states directed at other mental states of any type, such as beliefs about desires). Meta-emotions are part of this range of higher-order mental states. In particular, they are part of a range of “meta-emotional” attitudes, including other types of mental states, such as beliefs, desires, and intentions, which are directed at our emotions.

Higher-order mental states are a prerequisite for reflexivity, self-assessment, and self-regulation. They enable us to become aware of our mental states, distance ourselves from them to reflect on their status, and—where possible—adjust them in accordance with our assessment. These capacities are often taken to be an important part of what it means to be a person. A higher-order mental state that has been ascribed a particularly important role in this respect is Harry Frankfurt’s notion of a second-order desire (Frankfurt 1971). Second-order desires are desires about desires, such as a desire to want to help another person or a desire not to want to take a drug.¹⁰ As Jäger and Bänninger-Huber argue, meta-emotions play an equally crucial role in self-assessment and psychic harmony as second-order desires (Jäger and Bänninger-Huber 2015).

The state in which I have a positive higher-order mental state about a first-order mental state is often characterised as “(self-)endorsement.” Endorsement thus refers to a specific constellation of mental states

8 Jäger and Bänninger-Huber also rely on the notion of meta-emotions to explain the data collected in a study that they conducted, regarding facial expressions of subjects during therapy sessions and diagnostic interviews. They found that, when discussing past emotions, subjects often showed a facial expression that did not match the emotion discussed, but which was rather expressive of contempt. Jäger and Bänninger-Huber explain this in terms of a meta-emotion directed at emotions experienced in the past (Jäger and Bänninger-Huber 2015: 795–805). Whereas their explanation of righteous indignation appeals to co-experienced meta-emotions, this study can only appeal to asynchronous meta-emotions. If both meta-emotion and target emotion were occurrent at the same time, we should expect this to bear on facial expressions. However, in the experimental setup, facial expressions that cannot be correlated with a unique emotion in the FACS (facial action coding system) were discarded. This raises some general questions about whether co-experienced emotions can be studied by relying on FACS.

9 Attending to the possibility of meta-emotions also provides a vantage point from which to address the puzzling phenomenon of aesthetic preferences for tragedy and horror stories, which elicit negative emotions. The general idea is that these fictions not only provide an opportunity for negative first-order reactions but also for positive meta-reactions. I will discuss one specific proposal along these lines below (Section 6). A similar approach is also adopted in media psychology (Bartsch et al. 2008).

10 For Frankfurt, a specific kind of second-order desire, what he calls a “second-order volition,” that is, a desire for one of one’s desires to determine one’s will, makes freedom of the will possible. However, independently of how to understand freedom of the will, second-order desires are important for psychic harmony and self-evaluation on any kind of account of the person that takes the capacity to distance oneself from one’s own attitudes and reflect on them to be essential for personhood.

that plays a role in many theories of agency (see Schroeter 2004; List and Rabinowicz 2014). It constitutes a state of psychic harmony, in which I make some of my first-order mental states truly my own by giving them my approval. The state in which I have a negative attitude towards my own first-order mental state is often described as “critical (self-)distance.” Critical self-distance is an important pre-condition of self-governance. Insofar as I cannot immediately make adjustments according to my own assessment and remain committed to the first-order mental state, critical self-distance constitutes a state of internal conflict, in which I become alienated from some of my own first-order mental states.

Meta-emotions give rise to specific affective versions of self-endorsement and critical self-distance. The state in which I have a negative meta-emotion about one of my emotions constitutes “affective critical self-distance.” The state in which I have a positive meta-emotion about one of my own emotions constitutes “affective self-endorsement.” Jäger and Bänninger-Huber distinguish strong and moderate versions of affective self-endorsement. An agent enjoys “*moderate* affective self-endorsement” as long as they do not experience a negative meta-emotion about their first-order emotion; they enjoy “*strong* affective self-endorsement” if they experience a positive meta-emotion about this emotion (Jäger and Bänninger-Huber 2015: 808).

Emotions play an important role in our lives; they guide our attention, motivate us, and suggest an evaluation of their objects. Sometimes, emotions can play these roles without us noticing them, such as when emotions attract and repulse us in ways that are beneficial for us or when curiosity and the aesthetic pleasure a hypothesis elicits lead to scientific discovery. However, for emotions to realise their full potential, it is often crucial that we become reflectively aware of them. Meta-emotions, and meta-emotional attitudes more generally, are what enables us to do so. They are a prerequisite for reflective awareness, critical reflection, and regulation of our emotions. While we will often not be able to change our own first-order emotional reactions at will, we have more indirect strategies available. If I am alienated from my own emotional responses, I can attempt to regulate my emotional response by focusing on certain features of my situation while ignoring others, reframing the situation, or repressing the emotion. In the long run, regulating our emotions and reflecting on why they occur gives us partial control over the development of our emotional sensibility, that is, our tendency to react emotionally in characteristic ways.¹¹

Meta-emotions are a special kind of meta-emotional attitude. Like other meta-emotional attitudes, they enable us to reflect on a specific aspect of our personality: our emotional sensibility. However, they contribute to reflection and self-assessment in a distinctive way. Emotions present their objects in an evaluative light. Accordingly, meta-emotions present their target emotions in an evaluative light. As Jonathan Mitchell points out, the evaluation suggested by a meta-emotion often relates to whether the target emotion is taken to be appropriate (Mitchell 2020: 515–7).¹² For example, embarrassment about anger presents anger as embarrassing. This is closely connected to whether it is appropriate to feel anger in a given situation.

11 The point of trying to develop our emotional sensibility is not only to suppress and weed out unwanted first-order emotions (and affirm accepted reactions), but also to cultivate new emotional reactions. In general, emotions can be directed at the absence of emotions. For instance, I can be proud of not experiencing jealousy or ashamed at not feeling saddened by a natural disaster. While these reactions do not qualify as meta-emotions narrowly understood, they are part of a wider range of attitudes towards my emotional reactions and can enable and motivate us to develop our sensibilities in this respect.

12 Emotions can be appropriate or inappropriate in different respects. We can distinguish whether an emotion is appropriate, in the sense that the object has the evaluative property it suggests, from whether it is morally or prudentially appropriate to feel it (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000). Whether these different senses of appropriateness can come apart is an open question that need not be settled here; we can allow for subjects to consider different senses of appropriateness in their assessment of their own emotions. Mitchell suggests a specific perceptualist account of how appropriateness figures in the content of meta-emotions (Mitchell 2020: 516), which I do not here subscribe to.

By suggesting an evaluation of our emotion, and guiding our attention to features of the situation (Brady 2013), meta-emotions can enable insight into the status of our first-order emotion. However, to gain insight into the status of our first-order emotion, we must be independently motivated to engage in self-assessment. In addition, we must rely on capacities for critical reflection that go beyond our emotional sensibility. Nevertheless, because they constitute a form of reflective awareness of our first-order emotions, meta-emotions can initiate reflection on our emotional reactions. Because they suggest an evaluation of our emotions, they provide input to this reflection. Therefore, at least in some cases, meta-emotions can contribute to insights about our first-order emotions which we would not have had without the occurrence of a meta-emotion.

While meta-emotions can thus enable insight, as Howard emphasises, meta-emotions need not be epistemically privileged over their target emotions (Howard 2017: 416). We can easily imagine a case in which an emotion is appropriate, while a meta-emotion (perhaps in the grip of societal expectations) provides a negative assessment of this target emotion. For instance, under the influence of gender stereotypes, a person might, in general, be ashamed about feeling sadness on any occasion. In this kind of case, in which a meta-emotion evaluates a first-order emotion negatively, the subject can resolve the conflict in two different ways. They can either adopt the view that their sadness is shameful, and regulate their emotions so that they no longer feel sad—in which case meta-emotions would be in the service of a form of emotion repression—or they can reflect on their meta-emotion and determine that their sadness is in fact appropriate and not shameful—in which case they might cease to feel shame. This kind of reflection on and regulation of meta-emotions might be especially difficult to achieve, given the complexity of the situation and the fact that meta-emotions are often inconspicuous. However, if successful, it can teach the subject something about their own attitudes towards emotions. While meta-emotions thus enable reflective awareness and assessment of our emotional reactions in a distinctive way, there is no guarantee that the presence of meta-emotion will lead to insight.¹³

4. Affective Empathy

Having characterised meta-emotions and discussed their significance for reflecting on our own emotional sensibility, I now turn to the main topic of the paper: examining the roles of meta-emotions in the context of affective empathy. In this section, I introduce the notion of affective empathy I will be working with.

The term “affective empathy” is used to denote a range of different but related states and processes. In what follows, I will be concerned with a particular kind of affective empathy—a range of closely related processes that consist of the following three elements. An empathiser:

- imagines being in a target person’s situation from the target person’s point of view (“imaginative perspective-taking”);
- experiences a genuine emotional reaction to an aspect of this imagined situation (“affective matching”); and
- intends their emotion to represent the target person’s own emotional reaction (“representation”).¹⁴

¹³ In addition to being swayed by the assessment implicit in an inappropriate meta-emotion, we might misidentify our own first-order emotions, or misidentify or fail to identify a meta-emotion. In such cases, the presence of a meta-emotion might give rise to distinctive kinds of misunderstandings or contribute to confusion.

¹⁴ In emphasising the role of perspective-taking, the notion of empathy I will be working with resembles those employed by Olivia Bailey and Amy Coplan (Bailey 2018; 2022; Coplan 2011), among others, and is more restrictive than the influential notions of empathy developed by Heidi Maibom and Hannah Read (Maibom 2020; Read 2021). For an argument in favour of understanding affective empathy along these lines, see (Coplan 2011).

Affective empathy thus understood can be a fairly automatic and routine process, but it can also require effort. On the view presented, it is not a matter of a single mental state, but a process involving a complex of mental states (imaginative engagement, an emotional reaction, and an intention to represent the target person's emotion). Typically, affective empathy as described will start with imaginative perspective-taking, but this sequence is not necessary. A subject can also, for example, start feeling a certain way and only later become aware that this is how another person is feeling, relate it to this person's situation, and treat it as a representation of this person's emotion. Therefore, affective empathy denotes a range of closely connected processes rather than a single process.¹⁵

Affective empathy serves a range of epistemic and interpersonal functions. Empathy's main epistemic role is that it enables us to understand others. It can allow us to find out about which emotions they are currently experiencing and how it makes them feel (Stueber 2006; Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo 2021). Empathy can also lead us to learn about the world. Adopting another person's emotional perspective can make new evaluative aspects of situations salient to us that we had previously been insensitive to (Bailey 2018; Betzler and Keller 2021). However, as some have stressed, by the same means, empathy can also corrupt our own perspective, leading us to have a less accurate view of the situation than we previously had (Betzler and Keller 2021; Paul 2021). What is less frequently noticed is that empathy can also enable us to learn about ourselves. By attending to whether and with how much ease or struggle we can empathise, we can gain insight into our "empathic sensibility," that is, our tendency to empathise or fail to empathise with certain others on certain occasions.¹⁶

Another important range of functions of empathy is interpersonal. Empathy is frequently experienced as a form of support. It can communicate *acknowledgment* of one's own emotional reactions but also *reassurance* regarding them. Acknowledgment means that one's emotions are seen and taken to be real and intelligible by others (Song 2015; Bailey 2022). Reassurance goes beyond that; it means that one is affirmed regarding the appropriateness of one's emotional reaction (see Betzler 2019). Both can be interpersonally important. For empathy to fulfil either of these functions, the empathiser must communicate with the target person, conveying that they can share their reaction, as well as whether they take it to be appropriate. This will typically only be the case where the empathiser is motivated by concern for the target person. Moreover, affective empathy can motivate us to act in accordance with others' projects and concerns (Maibom 2007). Because they are due to its affective dimension, empathy's effects on motivation might occur independently of antecedent concern. However, since the subject can regulate these effects, empathy will often only lead to actual support if attitudes of concern are present. Affective empathy can thus be understood in terms of a range of closely related processes that play many important interpersonal and epistemic roles.

¹⁵ It bears noting that the notion of perspective-taking involved can be fairly minimal. In less complete cases of empathy, an empathiser might not know which aspect of a situation a target person is reacting to, but still come to share their emotional reaction and relate it to their situation under a very general description. Moreover, this schema can also be extended to cover cases of apparent empathy in which a target person does not experience any emotional reaction (perhaps because they are unconscious or lack relevant information) by appealing to the target person's reaction under counterfactual circumstances.

¹⁶ I discuss this point in more detail below (Section 6).

5. Meta-Emotions and the Success Conditions of Affective Empathy

Having clarified the notion of affective empathy that I will be assuming, I can now begin to explore the role of meta-emotions that occur in the context of affective empathy. In episodes of affective empathy, meta-emotions can occur either on the side of the empathiser or on the side of the target person. In this section, I will focus on an implication of meta-emotions that occur on the side of the target person for thinking about affective empathy. This implication concerns empathy's success conditions.

As indicated by the above discussion, at least typically, an empathiser tries to recreate a target person's emotional reaction through imaginative engagement with their situation. This raises the question of how closely (and in which respects) the empathiser's empathic emotion must correspond to the target person's initial emotional reaction for empathy to be successful. In complete cases of affective empathy, in addition to having a similar phenomenology, an empathiser's emotion should also match the object of the target person's emotion. Whether they achieve either can depend on the detail and accuracy of their imaginative effort.

In general, correspondence is a matter of degree, and the degree of correspondence necessary for empathy to fulfil its function is a matter of context. In some situations, a relatively basic level of matching will suffice for understanding and will enable the empathiser to support the target person. In other cases, only a very high level of matching will do; anything less than that might, for example, be considered an affront by the target person. While wildly inaccurate empathy will fail to fulfil its functions, complete matching is unlikely ever to occur. Too wide-ranging are the differences between individuals and the nuances of emotional reactions. In addition, the fact that the empathiser knows that the situation is only imagined rather than actual for them will almost certainly temper the intensity of the emotional reaction felt.

It is often assumed that for empathy to be successful, an empathiser must at the very least experience an emotion of the same type as that of the target person (Coplan 2011). This can already be difficult to achieve, as it may require adjustment for differences between oneself and the target person, and opportunities for projection abound. We can easily overlook relevant differences between ourselves and others, illegitimately assume that they would react in the same way we (think we) would, and ascribe this reaction to them (Goldman 2011). The possibility of the presence of meta-emotion on the side of the target person intensifies this difficulty. To completely empathise with a target person who experiences a meta-emotion, an empathiser must experience both the second-order and the first-order emotion, experience the second-order emotion as directed at the first-order emotion (and the first-order emotion as directed at the object of the target person's first-order emotion), and take both emotions to represent the target person's emotions. This is a difficult achievement. However, it will often be necessary for empathy to be successful.

In general, whether a person endorses or critically distances themselves from their own emotional reaction can be important for understanding them and being able to offer support. If, for instance, a target person experiences jealousy and at the same time embarrassment about their jealousy, an empathiser who manages to recreate the jealousy but not the embarrassment will not succeed. Not only will they not arrive at an accurate enough understanding of the other person for most purposes, they will also not be in a particularly good position to offer them support either. Emphasising the perspicuity of their jealous reaction and the good reasons they have for it will likely only increase their embarrassment rather than alleviate it. The possibility of meta-emotions on the side of the target person thus increases the complexity of empathy's success conditions.

What about the case in which an empathiser only recreates a target person's meta-emotion but is aware of the first-order emotion through other means (or the other way around)? For instance, we can imagine a subject empathising with a target person's meta-emotion of guilt about feeling gratitude about having been spared in a disaster, without affectively sharing the first-order emotion of gratitude. Instead, empathic guilt is experienced as a result of contemplating the fact that the target person experienced gratitude. While this kind of case might fare better for the purposes of understanding, as well as in giving support, it constitutes a less complete form of empathy. It will not, for example, match the overall phenomenology of the target person's experience. In the experience of the target person, the phenomenology of first- and second-order emotions will intertwine. In particular, in the case of *valence-incongruent* meta-emotions, this can lead to a complicated overall affective state. Accurately sharing this complex overall affective state requires empathy with the meta-emotion as well as the target emotion.

While the presence of meta-emotion thus increases the complexity of empathy's success conditions, it is no reason for general scepticism about the possibility of affective empathy. Although cases in which an empathiser shares both meta-emotion and target emotion in the way described might be rare due to the complexity of the case, it is in principle possible. In addition, partial empathy, when combined with an awareness of the complexity of the target person's experience, can go a long way.

6. Meta-Emotions and Reflection on Our Empathic Sensibility

As noted above, in the context of episodes of affective empathy, meta-emotions can occur both on the side of the target person and on the side of the empathiser. After discussing an implication of meta-emotions on the side of the target person for thinking about affective empathy, I now turn to investigating the role of meta-emotions that occur on the side of the empathiser.

Because, in affectively empathising, I experience an emotion myself and am at the same time concerned with another person's emotion, episodes of empathy provide an opportunity for intra- as well as interpersonal meta-emotions to arise. The evaluation suggested by a meta-emotion that arises during an episode of affective empathy on the side of the empathiser can either be self-directed—it can concern the fact that one is empathising with this emotion—or other-directed—it can be a reaction to the target person's emotion. In this section, I examine the role of self-directed meta-emotions that occur in the context of affective empathy.

For simplicity, I will focus on a case in which the target person does not experience a meta-emotion. Let's assume that the target person experiences *schadenfreude* about the misfortune of a rival, but does not relate to this emotion through a meta-emotion either through affective self-endorsement or critical self-distance. In such a case, for empathy to be successful, an empathiser must only recreate this emotion sufficiently well and construe it as a representation of the target person's emotion. However, it is possible that the empathiser comes to experience a self-directed meta-emotion directed at their empathic *schadenfreude*.

The case of a self-directed meta-emotion that arises in the context of empathy constitutes a special case of a co-experienced (i.e., synchronous, occurrent, intrapersonal) meta-emotion, in which the target emotion is an empathic emotion. The meta-emotion's cognitive base is awareness of one's empathic emotion. In this case, only the first-order emotion is taken to represent the target person's emotion, while the second-order emotion

is experienced as the empathiser's own emotion.¹⁷ Therefore, in this case, the meta-emotion is not part of the empathic process proper, but rather of the way in which an empathic emotion is processed. I will refer to meta-emotions of this type as “meta-empathic emotions.”

The evaluation suggested by a meta-empathic emotion can either be negative—for instance, I can feel ashamed of my empathic *schadenfreude*—or positive—I can be proud of my empathic *schadenfreude*. Meta-empathic emotions enable awareness and critical reflection on one's empathic emotion in the same way that meta-emotions enable assessment of one's own first-order emotional reactions. By suggesting an evaluation of our empathic emotion, and by guiding our attention to features of the situation, they can enable insight into the status of our empathic emotion. However, to gain this insight, we must be independently motivated to assess our empathic sensibility and rely on capacities for critical reflection that go beyond our emotional reactions. If we come to an assessment of our empathic reaction, this can lead to attempts to revise our empathic sensibility by drawing on mechanisms of emotion regulation. As in the case of reflection on our first-personally felt emotions, it bears noting that, while meta-emotions can enable reflection and evaluation, they can also give rise to distinctive kinds of misunderstandings.

But is it plausible that empathisers react emotionally to their empathic emotions and spend time reflecting on them? What purpose could reflection on our empathic sensibility serve? I will approach these questions by considering a context that invites reflection on our own empathic reactions: engagement with fiction.

One of the complex affective phenomena that meta-emotions help understand is aesthetic preference for works of fiction that elicit negative emotions, such as tragedies and horror stories. While these kinds of fiction invoke emotions that are clearly negative—sadness or fear—the overall experience seems to offer something valuable to many. Attending to the possibility of meta-emotions provides a fruitful avenue of explanation. Susan Feagin, for example, explains the value of tragedy in terms of a “meta-response” to the “direct-response” of sadness (Feagin 1983). The direct response is empathic sadness, elicited by empathising with the fictional character.¹⁸ The meta-response, which makes the whole experience worthwhile, is a complex positive affective state, a type of pleasure that constitutes a sense of common humanity. This solution allows Feagin not only to explain why engaging with tragedies is valuable, but also why engaging with art we take to be immoral does not provide the same kind of aesthetic pleasure. In the case of immoral art, we either do not have the relevant meta-response to our direct-response (because we disapprove of our direct response) or fail to have the direct-response in the first place (because we disapprove of the outlook presented by the work).¹⁹

While Feagin focuses on why we seem to enjoy sadness in engaging with tragedy, she suggests a strong discontinuity between the case of fictional and real-life tragedies. She argues that, while reflecting on our

17 By contrast, in the case where an empathiser tries to match a target person's meta-emotion, as discussed above, they must take both the meta-emotion and the first-order emotion as a representation of the target person's emotions.

18 Whether empathy and imagination play a role in our engagement with fiction, and if so which, is a difficult question, beyond the scope of this paper. I will assume that, at least sometimes, our first-order reactions to fictional scenarios are based on empathy with fictional characters. Feagin uses the term “sympathy” to characterise our direct response to tragedy. Because she does not elaborate on the notion of sympathy at issue, it is not entirely clear whether she has a similar mechanism in mind.

19 This connects the discussion of meta-emotions in the context of fiction to the topic of “imaginative resistance” (Gendler 2000). Whether Feagin's account is successful depends on details of the view, for instance, concerning how to understand the meta-response that constitutes a sense of common humanity. These questions are beyond the scope of this paper. Rather than defending the account in detail, I rely on Feagin's account in broad outline to motivate the idea that meta-empathic emotions can play a role in self-reflection.

own direct response is appropriate in the context of fiction—after all, we know the events not to be real—as a reaction to real tragedy, it would be a quite appalling testament to one’s self-involvement. Feagin’s remark has plausibility.²⁰ Nevertheless, while it seems right, as Feagin suggests, that, when attending to a real-life tragedy, our emotional energies should be consumed by our first-order reactions, reflecting on our empathic reactions can sometimes be appropriate. We can, for instance, imagine a person being content with their empathy with reactions to more subtle forms of insult that they were previously unable to empathise with, because this indicates a certain development of their own sensibility, which they were trying to achieve. We can also imagine a person being relieved that they can empathise with their friend’s joy, because they had to overcome obstacles to be able to do so. Spontaneous empathy with reactions one finds appalling can be a proper occasion for meta-empathic feelings of shame or guilt, and inability to empathise with such reactions can be a proper occasion for meta-empathic contentment.

While the main epistemic function of empathy is that it enables us to learn about others and the world from their perspective, a less frequently discussed epistemic function of empathy is to enable us to learn about ourselves by attending to our own empathic reactions. Meta-emotions that occur during episodes of affective empathy are part of what enables us to do so. Engaging with our empathic sensibility in this way is useful because, given the epistemic and interpersonal functions of empathy, who we empathise with in which situation matters. Attending to our own empathic emotions constitutes an important form of self-assessment, which is enabled by meta-empathic emotions.

While meta-emotions that arise in the context of episodes of affective empathy on the side of the target person make successful empathy even more difficult to achieve, meta-emotions that occur on the side of the empathiser thus expand the role of meta-emotions for self-reflection. Attending to this role of meta-emotions helps explain an important epistemic function of affective empathy, to wit, how empathy enables us to learn about ourselves.

7. Meta-Emotions and Reflection on Others’ Emotional Sensibility

As noted above, meta-emotions that occur on the side of the empathiser in the context of affective empathy can either be self-directed or other-directed. Having discussed the case of self-directed reflection through meta-emotions that occur in the context of affective empathy above, in this section, I examine the role of other-directed meta-emotions that occur in the context of affective empathy.

While meta-emotions that arise during an episode of affective empathy can be in the service of taking a stance on one’s own empathic sensibility, they can also suggest an evaluation of the target person’s emotional reaction. It is, for instance, equally possible that an empathiser experiences indignation about the target person’s *schadenfreude*, which they empathise with. While in this case the cognitive base is, again, awareness of one’s empathic emotion, it constitutes a different kind of meta-empathic emotion, in which the focus is on the target person’s emotional reaction, represented by the empathic emotion. This constitutes a special case of meta-emotion, which is not easily classified with respect to the distinction between intra- and interpersonal emotions. On the one hand, the subject experiences both an empathic first-order and the second-order

²⁰ In fact, in the context of a structurally similar analysis, Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft suggest that, because we attend to our own response rather than the work itself, even in the context of engaging with fiction, “cultivated responses to tragedy never entirely evade the suspicion of self-congratulation” (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002: 203).

emotion, which suggests that it is a case of intrapersonal meta-emotion. On the other hand, they take their empathic first-order emotion to represent the target person's emotion, which they are concerned with, suggesting that it is a special case of interpersonal meta-emotion. The case of other-directed meta-empathic emotions thus straddles the boundary between intra- and interpersonal meta-emotions.

Other-directed meta-emotions that occur in the context of affective empathy enable an empathiser to reflect on and assess the target person's emotional reaction in the same way that self-directed meta-emotions enable them to assess their own emotions, including their empathic emotions. By suggesting an evaluation of the target person's emotion, and by guiding our attention to features of the situation, they can enable insight into the status of this emotion. However, to gain this insight, we must be independently motivated to assess the target person's emotional sensibility and to rely on capacities for critical reflection that go beyond our emotional reactions. While, in this case, there is no possibility of regulating emotions in the sense that we regulate our own emotions—for instance, by refocusing attention or reframing—we might be able to use emotion regulation strategies in a more encompassing sense. For instance, we might be able to help the target person process their own emotions by suggesting interpretations of their emotions and offering comfort and emotional support.²¹ In addition to enabling reflection and evaluation, meta-emotions can contribute to misunderstandings in this case as well.

The way in which self- and other-directed assessment through meta-emotion can figure in episodes of affective empathy has interesting consequences for thinking about empathy. For one, it elucidates the connection between empathy, endorsement, and critical distance. Other-directed meta-emotions that occur in the context of affective empathy give rise to phenomena of other-directed affective endorsement and critical distance that run parallel to affective self-endorsement and critical self-distance. In the case where the empathiser experiences indignation about the target person's emotion, which they nonetheless empathise with, they critically distance themselves from the target person's emotion. Were the empathiser to experience, for example, admiration towards the target person's *schadenfreude*, which they empathised with, instead, this would constitute affective endorsement.

This shows that empathy can be accompanied by critical distance as well as endorsement (where both endorsement and critical distance can be implemented through a meta-emotion or another type of meta-emotional attitude). However, as Jäger and Bänninger-Huber argue for the case of affective self-endorsement, having an emotion and failing to critically distance oneself from it already constitutes a moderate form of endorsement (Jäger and Bänninger-Huber 2015: 808). Maintaining critical distance while empathising is thus cognitively more demanding than endorsing the target person's emotion. It requires an additional attitude directed at one's empathic emotion, whereas moderate endorsement is the default. This explains why, although empathy need not come with endorsement, it tends towards endorsement.

Attending to the connection between empathy and endorsement further helps explain the mechanisms underlying some of the interpersonal and epistemic functions of affective empathy. For one, it helps explain the potential for empathy to enable us to learn about the world from another person's perspective. In affectively empathising, we take on another person's emotional perspective on the object of their emotion. While it is possible to distance ourselves from this reaction, doing so is cognitively more demanding. The default is a moderate form of endorsement. There is thus at least some pressure to align our own assessment with the one implicit in the target person's emotion, which we share in empathy (Bailey 2018; Betzler and Keller 2021).

²¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

In cases where the target person's emotional reaction is appropriate, this can lead us to gain new evaluative insights. However, attending to the connection between empathy and endorsement also helps us explain how empathy can corrupt our own perspective, as some have stressed (Betzler and Keller 2021; Paul 2021). In cases where the target person's emotion is inappropriate, empathy might lead us to adopt the assessment suggested by that emotion, nonetheless. In spite of this risk, attending to the connections between empathy and endorsement helps us to understand an important epistemic function of affective empathy: learning about the world by taking up others' perspectives.

Attending to the connections between empathy and endorsement also enables us to spell out some of the mechanisms underlying an important interpersonal function of empathy. Unless the empathiser distances themselves from their empathic emotion, empathy comes with at least moderate affective endorsement. Therefore, empathy can play the important interpersonal role of reassuring a target person concerning the appropriateness of their emotional reactions.²² Moreover, empathy that is accompanied by a positive meta-emotion and thus strong affective endorsement can fulfil the function of reassurance particularly well. While empathy that does not come with either moderate or strong endorsement cannot fulfil the role of reassurance, it can still fulfil the role of acknowledgement.

In addition to expanding the role of meta-emotions for self-reflection, meta-emotions that occur in episodes of affective empathy on the side of the empathiser thus give rise to parallel phenomena of other-directed reflection. Attending to this role of meta-emotions helps to elucidate the connection between empathy, critical distance, and endorsement. This, in turn, helps in understanding the mechanisms underlying an important epistemic function of empathy—learning about the world from the point of view of other. However, it also elucidates how taking on others' perspectives can affect our own perspective negatively. In addition, it helps to explain an important interpersonal function of empathy—providing reassurance regarding the appropriateness of one's emotional reactions. Exploring the role of meta-emotion in the context of affective empathy thus not only deepens our grasp of the role of meta-emotion for self- and other-directed reflection and evaluation; it also contributes to our understanding of affective empathy and its epistemic and interpersonal functions.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed meta-emotions as a special case of co-experienced emotions that play an important role for reflection. My main aim was to contribute to a better understanding of (co-experienced) meta-emotions by investigating the roles of meta-emotions in the context of affective empathy. My core thesis was that investigating the roles of meta-emotions in the context of affective empathy leads to a better understanding of meta-emotions as well as affective empathy.

I have shown that, while meta-emotions on the side of the target person increase the complexity of empathy's success conditions, meta-emotions on the side of the empathiser expand the role of meta-emotions for self-reflection and give rise to parallel phenomena of other-directed reflection and evaluation. Exploring these roles of meta-emotions in the context of affective empathy thus deepens our grasp of the significance of meta-emotions for the complexity of our mental lives, as well as for reflecting on ourselves and others. At the same time, it helps us to better understand the mechanisms underlying some of the epistemic and interpersonal

²² Elsewhere, I discuss the importance of reassurance through empathy in contexts of emotional gaslighting (Sodoma 2022).

functions of affective empathy. Attending to the role of meta-empathic emotions in reflecting on our own empathic sensibility elucidates the way in which empathy can enable us to learn about ourselves. Attending to the role of meta-emotions in other-directed assessment through empathy helps us to better understand the connection between empathy, endorsement, and critical distance. This, in turn, helps us to understand how empathy enables us to learn about the world, as well as how it can corrupt our perspective. In addition, it allows us to clarify how and when empathy can play the important interpersonal role of reassurance. Reflecting on the role of meta-emotions in the context of affective empathy thus improves our understanding of both meta-emotion and affective empathy.

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