

# How Does Empathy Become Morally Energising for Agents? ——Michael Slote Emotionalist Ethics of Care Study

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## Abstract:

In the face of the moral decline exacerbating problems such as “indifference” and “ignorance” in present times, this article takes into account the background of the times, starts from the perspective of stimulating the moral action of the agents, and takes the empathy of the contemporary ethicist Michael Slote’s affective caring ethics as the core of the study, and further clarifies and elaborates the operation mechanism and its superiority and limitations of the “empathy-caring” emphasised by Slote in the moral life from the individual to group, by comparing it with rationalism. Through a comparative study with rationalism, the paper further clarifies and elaborates the operation mechanism of “empathy-caring” emphasised by Slote in the moral life from individual to group, as well as its superiority and limitations, especially, the Slote’s ethics has absorbed and developed the concept of yin and yang in Chinese thought, and provides a new way of thinking for explaining moral behaviours, solving moral dilemmas, and improving moral literacy.

**Keywords:** Empathy; ethics of care; moral agency; emotionalism; yin and yang.

## 1. Introduction

How to stimulate the moral agency of agents is a long-standing concern of ethics. According to mind perception theory, human beings are defined by two dimensions of mental perception: agency and experience. Agency is the capacity for self-control, memory, emotional recall, planning, communication and thinking. And experience is the capacity for hunger, fear, pleasure, anger, desire, awareness, pride and joy [1]. In this regard, the contemporary ethicist Michael Slote proposes an empathy-based ethic of affective care, which focuses on the moral agent’s inherent capacity for “empathy,” and attempts to demonstrate that there is no metaphysical dichotomy between agency and experience within the perspective of empathic care, through the introduction of the concepts of yin and yang and their relationship in Chinese philosophy [2]. Empathy as a virtue within the ethical perspective has both receptive and active aspects, as well as a unity of receptivity and initiative. It can serve both as an intrinsic motivation for moral agents to help others and as a practical dynamic that urges individuals to perform moral behaviour.

## 2. Empathic Care and Moral Agency of Agents

In psychology, “empathy” refers to an individual’s sharing

of the emotional feelings of one or more individuals when confronted with (or imagining) their emotional situation [3]. In the view of moral emotivists, empathy can be applied not only to psychology, but also plays an important role in the interpretation and development of human morality.

### 2.1 Origins and Definition of Empathy

The word empathy is derived from the transliteration of the Greek word “*empathia*.” “The word “*Einfühlung*” which was originally used to describe an individual’s empathy for a work of art, was first translated in 1909 by the British psychologist Edward Titchener as “empathy.” A phenomenon of transferring feelings between people, empathy has been noticed by philosophers as early as in Ancient Greece, and Aristotle even found that there is a phenomenon of transferring feelings between people [4]. The 18th-century English philosopher David Hume did pioneering work on the construction of the implications for human psychology of ethics. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he defines sympathy as a psychological mechanism naturally inherent in human nature to perceive the psychological content of others, “allowing us to receive their mental dispositions and sentiments by conveying them, however different, or even opposite, to ours” [5]. In Hume’s view, the point of departure for any individual is the external experience of others, and with the help of

imagination, through natural relations such as analogy, proximity, and causation, one is able to transfer self-impressions or consciousnesses to ideas about the opinions and feelings of others and imagine them in the strongest and most vivid way, so as to let these ideas be transformed into the corresponding impressions in one's mind and then perceive the inner feelings of others. Through sympathy, Hume explains the notion of moral sense that ethicists, represented by Francis Hutcheson, believed that human beings possessed a perceptual capacity to perceive the moral virtues or vices of others[5].

In fact, although Hume used the term "sympathy," his exploration of this topic actually encompassed empathy. He did not make a clear distinction between these two in his text, leading to some confusion. American philosopher Michael Slote has provided a more precise differentiation of the two concepts which are that perceiving the pain of others falls under the category of empathy, while feeling sorry for those in pain falls under the category of sympathy [6].

Slote agrees with and draws on the modern moral psychologist Hoffman's systematic study of empathy, which defines empathy as the emotional response of the same feeling in which a moral agent sees another individual in a distressing situation and wants to help that other individual [7]. The operation of this mechanism is also a subject of contemporary neuroscience research. In brain science, mirror neuron theory also suggests that empathy is the mirror response of an individual's mirror neurons to the emotions of the empathised person, i.e., when an individual is aware of another person's emotions, a certain brain region of the brain produces the same emotions as the other person [8]. For example, when empathizing with someone else's pain, the "pain mirror neurons" will activate certain neural structures in people when they see someone in pain. These neural structures overlap with those that are active during my own painful experiences. This means that when people perceive someone else's pain, they not only become aware of their pain but also feel it deeply.

### **2.2 An Empathy-Based Emotionalist Ethic of Care**

Michael Slote views "empathy" as central and crucial to ethics, arguing that moral behaviour can be evaluated or explained through differences in empathy and the degree of empathy. In terms of moral evaluation, an act is judged to be wrong or contrary to a moral obligation if, and only if, it reflects or exhibits a lack of caring motivation, for example, a lack of fully developed empathic concern for other objects. In terms of the explanation of moral behaviour, the reason why people develop motives and practices of moral behaviour such as respecting and helping

is because of the inherent empathic mechanisms within them that make humans feel similar when witnessing the suffering or pleasure of others and thus encourages a morally according action in order to relieve such suffering or fulfill such pleasure. Differences in the degree of moral concern are closely related to differences in the adequacy of empathy.

Slote summarises differences in the adequacy of empathy in three ways. First, the degree of relevance at the spatial and temporal level, i.e. perceptual immediacy, which relates to whether a dilemma can be perceived adequately and vividly, and which in turn affects the adequacy of our empathy for the person in a dilemma, and thus produces different moral behaviours. For example, the reason why we generally find it morally unacceptable to kill a face-to-face person with our own hands rather than to press an explosion button to kill someone we cannot see is that, on a spatial level, we are more strongly associated with the person killed in terms of distance in the former case than in the latter. The second is the effect of family identity: people tend to show a stronger sense of obligation to family members out of recognition of family ties and common roots, and differences in this sense of obligation are strongly correlated with differences in closeness. This is particularly evident between parents and children, where "we are more likely to identify with and empathise with our own children or parents than with strangers" [6]. Thirdly, the difference in shared experiences, by sharing our values in thinking and experiencing them together in life, is that we are more likely to have stronger empathic connections with friends and spouses than strangers, creating stronger moral obligations.

In addition, Slote realises the importance of empathy for human perception and understanding of moral behaviour, and argues that moral judgments of good and evil can be explained by the "warm" or "cold" feelings that empathy brings. People experience "warm" feelings when they witness others engaging in moral behaviour that reflects virtue; conversely, they experience "cold" feelings when they witness others engaging in moral behaviour that violates virtue [9]. Each of these two feelings suggests internal approval or disapproval of moral behaviour, which in turn has implications for the perceiver's own moral actions.

### **1.3 Empathy Contains Energised**

Slote introduces the wisdom of the Chinese philosophy of yin and yang and systematically explains the intrinsic connection between empathic awareness and caring action, i.e., the role of empathy in stimulating moral agency in agents.

In Chinese philosophy, the concept of yin and yang originated in the category of duality and correspondences,

which initially meant the back and direction of daylight. Therefore, yin is mostly associated with cold, damp, soft and secretive, while yang is associated with warm, dry, hard and obvious. Slote understood the relatively passive receptivity of the human mind as yin and the relatively active rational control as yang according to the characteristics of yin and yang, and tried to interpret the connection between receptivity and rational control by using the relationship between yin and yang in Chinese philosophy. Unlike the mutually exclusive dichotomy of the mainstream Western tradition, the yin and yang in Chinese philosophy are a set of complementary pairs. The two opposites contain each other, transform each other, and can be separated. Moreover, no matter how finely one “cuts the distinction between yin and yang, receptivity and the initiative of rational control, or no matter how far the vein of interpretation is extended” [2], it seems that they all necessarily contain each other in an interconnected and endless dialectic.

On this basis, Slote argues that the sensory and motivational aspects of the virtue of empathy (or benevolence, etc.) are bound to each other on non-contingent grounds that are “conceptual and, on the metaphysical level,” i.e., there is no “metaphysical divide between the sensory and motivational aspects” of empathy. When someone empathises with another person’s emotions, it is not just an acceptance of the other person’s emotions, but also involves an intentional object of feeling for the other person. Slote argues that all emotions have a yin-yang characteristic, a unity of receptivity and agency, which constitutes the essence of what constitutes an emotion as such. Empathy is not just the perception of another person’s situation and emotions, but also includes the willingness to actively care for others and provide them support. Just as the relationship between yin and yang reveals, empathy’s unnoticed receptivity (yin) contains a dynamic (yang) that actively cares about the other’s condition. It is not the act of caring for others that occurs after empathy, but the act of caring for others begins at the same time that we empathise with them (albeit in a way that is less obvious in action, as the qualities of yin represent).

### **3. Empathic Care and the Position of „Integration“**

Empathy, at the centre of Michael Slote’s moral and ethical thought, is itself both “yin and yang,” a unity of receptivity and initiative. Under the empathy-centred perspective of affective ethics of care, the objects that moral agents face in their moral lives are not abstract moral laws or norms, but concrete individuals and groups. Through empathy, it seems that the moral agent establishes a direct

connection with the recipient, thus forming an emotionally united whole. Such emotional unity is more likely to inspire moral responsibility for others and better resolve real-life moral dilemmas.

#### **3.1 Integration and Demarcation: Empathic Care, Emotionalism vs. Rationalism**

In contrast to the rationalist tradition’s emphasis on moral norms as well as the outcomes of behaviour, the ethics of caring reflects a focus on the motivations that precede behaviour. In other words, the real concern of emotionalist ethics of caring is whether or not it embodies empathic concern for the other, whether or not it puts the self in the shoes of the other, whether or not it establishes a connection with the emotions of the other. The ethics of care centred on “empathy” hopes that through “empathy” the distance between the moral agent and the recipient can be brought closer, and even the unity of the two can be established, just like “treating others as part of one’s own body”, reflecting a kind of “empathy for the other .” This embodies a position of “integration .” As feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan suggests, this is an explanation of separation based on the assumption of connection [10].

Rationalism, on the other hand, is based on a ‘demarcation’ position, i.e. an explanation of connection with others that assumes separation. For example, in the case of Heinz’s drug theft, also mentioned by Gilligan, Jack, who holds a rationalist position, reasoned rationally and logically between life and justice, and ultimately came to the conclusion that he should steal the drug in the middle of a dilemma; whereas Amy, who holds the position of empathetic care, did not see the dilemma as a rational mathematical problem, but rather, she took into account the relationship between the wife and the husband, and thought that Heinz should find out together, through consultation with his wife, what to do other than steal the medicine [10].

It can be seen from this case that, unlike rationalism, which ignores the thoughts of the other party to a moral act, the empathy-based ethics of care reflects a concrete and real respect for the other party. Although rationalism also suggests that ‘respect’ is an integral part of morality, rationalist respect is more ‘atomistic’ in its concern for the moral agent’s own hypothetical well-being, and ignores the autonomous will of the other party to the moral act. In the view of the empathetic ethics of care, “one can show respect for others if and only if one shows appropriate empathetic concern for them” [6]. In contrast to the condescending bystander or rescuer attitude of rationalism, the ethic of empathic caring chooses to enter into the relationship with others, which is not a dichotomous subject-object ethic focusing only on the “I”, but rather is based on the emotional community established with others, and

puts itself into the shoes of others, so as to take a more comprehensive and thorough way of solving the problem. In the process of moral practice, it is not uncommon for morality to be reversed as a phenomenon of moral degradation, i.e., the reversal of the status of the human being and morality, turning the human being into a servant and a tool for the realisation of morality, and depriving the human being of his or her identity as a moral subject. Whereas the various norms provided by rationalist ethics often put man in a dominated position where he can hardly make a choice, the ethic of empathic concern is based on the position of the human being, and always starts from the innate arousal mechanism or innate component of empathy, which is inextricably linked to the human being himself. On the basis of guaranteeing the moral subjectivity of the human being, it brings the moral agent and the recipient closer together without the mediation of external regulation, giving full play to the will and autonomy of the moral agent.

### 3.2 Empathic Care and Ethical Practice

In the affectivist ethics of care, empathy is considered to be the explanatory mechanism by which people produce ethics. Michael Slote argues that the cultivation and enhancement of empathy can be achieved through education and other means, thereby promoting harmony and goodness in the moral lives of individuals and in contemporary society as a whole.

At the level of individual moral education and cultivation, empathy-based ethics of care emphasise respect for and encouragement of individual autonomy and awareness of the individual's inherent emotional feelings about morality. In the context of an ethic of empathic care, virtue is not an externally imposed modification of the human person, but a return to the human person in the moment of "facing" the human person. It requires us to be fully empathetic to others and to cultivate an awareness of the other, i.e., an individual's concern, understanding, and care for another individual. At the same time, it requires us to be acutely aware of our inner moral feelings (emotions) at all times. This is because the "warm" or "cold" feelings we have when faced with different moral situations and moral behaviours contain in themselves our judgement of the rightness or wrongness of the moral behaviour. The idea of empathy encourages us to go back to the human being himself, to be aware of our own different moral feelings towards different situations, and to make moral choices that are in line with our own emotional tendencies [9].

In addition, the ethics of caring also offers specific solutions based on its own characteristics for the enhancement of human empathy and thus the promotion of individual moral awareness and competence. According to Slote,

parents and schools can use literature, film and art, and television programs to bring to life the encounters and dilemmas of strangers in the distance. They can also guide the children to put themselves in their shoes and imagine, thus increasing their sensitivity to such things. At the same time, providing them with more opportunities to visit different cultural areas gives them a more personal experience and teaches children to be able to think and care more about the impact of their actions or inactions and those of their community on the lives of others.

At the level of the moral good for society, empathy provides an opportunity to create a warm world. On the one hand, a focus on empathy can effectively address the current prevalence of moral indifference. Since "a certain degree of self-interest and concern for one's own (long-term) welfare represents the criterion of practical rationality" [6]. Therefore, when a moral agent is indifferent to the needs of others or public life in order to protect his or her own interests (e.g., completely ignoring an elderly person who has just fallen down on the road), rationalists cannot criticise him or her for being "irrational."

An affectivist ethic of care, nevertheless, can make the criticism that the behaviour is 'callous' because the moral agent's behaviour does not show sufficient empathetic concern, which is the criterion for an empathy-based ethic of care as a moral judgement. Of course, an ethic of care does not assume that an act is immoral or wrong if it fails to show care for others, which would be a moral abduction. Rather, it holds that an act is wrong if it shows indifference or fails to be sufficiently empathetic. The ethic of care's moral demands on individuals are reflected in actions, i.e., people are not morally responsible from the motivation of caring, as long as they do not act from "unkind and unrighteous motives" [6], but instead show a lack of empathic concern for others is not a breach of ethics. Even if someone lacks empathic concern in his or her heart, but still shows empathic concern in his or her actions under certain circumstances, then it is not a violation of moral obligation.

### 3.3 Empathy for the Moral Good of Society

Ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre's book *After Virtue* charts the history of a series of rational arguments for moral failure in Western academia over three hundred years, seeking to demonstrate that the downward cycle of demoralisation occurs primarily because of the proliferation of rational applications [11]. At the level of the harmonious promotion of goodness in contemporary society as a whole, the rationalist tradition tends to attribute moral imperatives to group consensus due to the material world needs of productive co-operation. However, in today's highly developed material production, individual human beings are

no longer as inextricably linked as they were in the past. Faced with the question that how can individuals with differences reach consensus and bring about social harmony in the current human society? The emphasis on “empathy” in an emotivist ethic of care provides a revealing way of thinking for the upward development of ethics and morality.

On the other hand, an empathetic explanation of ethics can better establish a moral environment of goodness in society as a whole. Emotionalist ethics of care can provide a better explanation than rationalism for the “extra devotion” in morality (which Kantianism, utilitarianism, and subaltern ethics usually rule out), i.e., the ability of a very small number of people to demonstrate empathy beyond the norm. The behaviour of those who show a high degree of empathy for others is regarded as ‘extra-giving’ in the ethics of care. In terms of setting ethical requirements, since rationalism promotes universalism in morality, i.e., it expects such morality to be observed and practised by all human beings, and such universalist morality is based on people’s consensus. To ensure universality, the moral consensus covers only the fewest, most important, and lowest line norms, which ultimately are almost equivalent to legal norms. The moral standards of humanity are getting lower and lower, and the moral world is getting poorer and poorer. In the face of the phenomenon of moral indifference in society, rationalism is not only difficult to avoid, but also leaves room for its growth. Contrary to the low-line thinking of rationalism, which is accompanied by moral degradation, empathic caring ethics as a kind of high-line thinking puts forward a reasonable demand for human ethics based on the inherent empathic ability of human beings, and preserves the unique noble values of the human spirit in a unique way of human emotions, instead of breaking down the so-called “dispelling” social procedures and dismantling the “moral” values of human beings for rationality.

#### 4. Conclusion

Contemporary ethicist Michael Slote proposes an ethics of care based on empathy, in which the rightness or wrongness of moral behaviour is judged by whether or not the behaviour demonstrates a caring attitude or motivation towards others. In Slote’s view, empathy plays a key role in ethical life as a moral foundation that is more central than reason. He combines the theory of empathy with the traditional Chinese philosophy of yin and yang, and proposes a system of emotivist ethics that cuts across personal and social ethics. Slote’s ethics of empathic concern is of great significance in stimulating individual moral agency and promoting harmony and goodness in today’s society.

It should be noted, however, that although the emphasis on empathy is extremely important for stimulating the moral agency of moral agents and is highly instructive for the development of contemporary ethics, it does not seem to be sufficient for the construction of an entire moral system. Firstly, as a natural emotional and psychological mechanism inherent in individuals, the strength of empathy varies from person to person. For the general public, it seems difficult for an emotivist ethic of care to provide a universally recognised standard. Second, some scholars argue that the function of empathy is exaggerated by Slote, they thought that because the other’s pain is not the agent’s pain, it usually serves only as a psychological diversion and does not substitute for the original experience, as if someone being physically cut or emotionally wounded is not the same as the agent being similarly cut or wounded [6]. Thirdly, empathy places more emphasis on the motivation that precedes the moral agent’s behaviour, i.e. whether the individual has developed sufficient empathic concern for others, or whether the individual’s behaviour reflects his or her empathic concern for others as a criterion for judgement. In the reality of moral evaluation, the basis for such a judgement is relatively vague, and it is currently difficult to give practical guidelines for behaviour.

Perhaps, as Slote emphasises in the Chinese yin-yang relationship, emotionalism and rationalism are not completely opposite ends of the moral spectrum, but rather mutually inclusive and mutually reinforcing. Combined with Slote’s discussion of yin and yang philosophy, we may dare to assume that, in the perspective of a larger ethical discussion, emotionalism can be regarded as a kind of flexible and secretive ethical proposition, which belongs to the category of “yin”, while rationalism, as a kind of rigid and explicit moral demand, belongs to the category of “yang.” Rationalism, on the other hand, as a rigid and explicit moral demand, belongs to the category of “yang.” Both play an indispensable role in the same moral behaviour. The Chinese philosophy of yin and yang often interprets the connection between yin and yang in terms of the growth of grass and trees, with “yin” being rooted downwards and “yang” growing upwards. If the “root” of emotionalism is lacking, then moral demands will inevitably be external and confined to form; and if the “stem” of rationalism is missing, then ethics can hardly provide us with a tangible and concrete moral programme. Only by combining the two can the ethical tree of our world truly thrive.

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