

Empathy Machines

Week 4, Unit 2 VR and Empathy

PHI3VRP Virtual Reality as Philosophy

VR, Immersion, and Empathy

Week4: Video Lecture 1

PHI3VRP Virtual Reality as Philosophy

Empathy and VR

- In 2015 in real an influential TED talk the VR developer Chris Milk called VR “**the ultimate empathy machine**”.
- Many organisations (the UN, the Guardian, Alzheimer’s UK, homelessness charities...) have poured money into VR experiences designed to give people insights into what it is like to have experiences they have never had themselves, often with the hope that this will lead to changes in attitudes and behaviour. [See the VR experiences for this week]
- Psychologists are doing all kinds of experiments that aim to connect VR, empathy, and pro-social behaviours in different ways. [We’ll look at some of these today, and see the further readings as well]
- And all sorts of industries and organisations (the military, shipping, nursing, prisons...) use VR simulations in various kinds of training exercises.

Immersion and VR

- Why would someone think that VR is an “empathy machine”?
- The answer obviously has something to do with the **immersive** nature of VR experiences which allow us (arguably) to walk in the shoes of other people—to see what they see, to feel what they feel, to do what they do.
- But what does it mean exactly to say that VR is immersive?

Visual Immersion

- One key aspect in which VR is immersive is that most VR simulations aim to simulate the **first-person viewpoint** of someone in a certain type of situation/having a certain kind of experience.
- The VR headset provides one with images (in the form of a 360 degree film or a computer animated simulation) that try to mimic what one would see if one were having that experience oneself.
- Unlike film, the viewer has some control over their viewpoint being able to change what they see by moving their head. And this helps to generate the sense of actually being in the simulated environment, rather than simply viewing it from the outside through a window.



I am from Syria,
in the Daraa Province, Inkhil City.

- “So, when you're inside of the headset. you're not seeing it like this. You're looking around through this world. You'll notice you see full 360 degrees, in all directions. And when you're sitting there in her room, watching her, you're not watching it through a television screen, you're not watching it through a window, you're sitting there with her. When you look down, you're sitting on the same ground that she's sitting on. And because of that, you feel her humanity in a deeper way. You empathize with her in a deeper way.
- Chris Milk ‘How virtual reality can create the ultimate empathy machine’

Illusions of Embodiment

- Many VR simulations only aim to give you the first-person viewpoint of someone in a certain type of situation.
- But others also aim to create **illusions of body ownership**, that is, to trick one's mind into regarding a virtual body (e.g. the limbs of a computer generated avatar) as one's own body.
- This kind of illusion can also be induced without VR at all.
- Rubber Hand Illusion video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxwn1w7MJvk>
- <http://beanotherlab.org/>

Illusions of Embodiment and Empathy

- The mind can not only be tricked into identifying a physical rubber hand as its own. It can also be tricked into regarding a virtual arm (and full body) as its own.
- Many VR simulations have tried to use this feature to induce empathy by giving people illusions of being in the body of someone else who differs from them in some socially significant way, e.g. race, gender, class.
- Let's consider a couple of examples.

- A photo from Peck et al. (2013) “Putting yourself in the skin of a black avatar reduces implicit racial bias”. In this experiment the participants (all light skinned females) were placed into one of four groups:
- Embodied-Light-Skinned (EL)
- Embodied-Dark-Skinned (ED)
- Non-Embodied Dark-Skinned (ND)
- Embodied-Alien-Skinned (EA)
- The participants were given [implicit association tests](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/aboutus.html) before doing the simulations and again after. Scores from the (ED) group suggested less influence of implicit bias on their second tests.
- If you want to learn more about IATs and even take a test yourself see:

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/aboutus.html>



Fig. 1. The virtual body and scenario. (a) The light-skinned virtual body (EL) as seen in the mirror. (b) The dark-skinned virtual body (ED) in the mirror and directly. (c) The purple-skinned body (EA) as seen in the mirror. (d) A dark-skinned virtual character walks by – the first person viewpoint and corresponding view in the mirror for the ED condition. (e) A participant wearing the HMD and body tracking suit.

- In Pick et al (2013) the virtual body one is identifying is a computer animated avatar.
- The 'machine to be another' is a VR system which allows two actual people to each experience an illusion of being in the other person's body.
- Website link for the Be Another Lab with more information and videos:
<http://beanotherlab.org/>
- Video I'm using now: <https://www.pbs.org/video/kcts-9-machine-be-anotherempathy-virtual-body-swapping/>



What is Empathy?

Week 4: Video Lecture 2

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What is Empathy?

- **Activity:** Consider the following example:
 - Imagine that you meet a friend for lunch. She seems distracted, staring into space, not very talkative, a bit down. Gradually, she begins to speak, then to cry. She explains that she just learned that she is losing her job because of downsizing. She says that she is not angry but that she is hurt, and a bit scared. You feel very sorry for her, and say so. You are also reminded that there has been talk of job cuts where you work as well. Seeing your friend so upset makes you feel a bit anxious and uneasy. You also feel a brief flash of relief—“Thank God it wasn’t me!” (Batson 2009: 4)
- Questions: (1) Which of the thoughts and/or feelings here would you identify as being forms of empathy?
- (2) Which of the thoughts and/or feelings here would be more likely to lead to you offering some kind of assistance to your friend?

What is Empathy?

- Empathy is both an important and a highly contested concept in philosophy (both analytic and continental), psychology, anthropology, history, nursing, and many other disciplines, with lots of different accounts of what it is, and lots of distinctions between different kinds of empathy.
- Let us tip our toes into these murky waters...

History of Empathy

- The term ‘empathy’ was first introduced by the psychologist Edward Titchener in 1909 as an English translation of the German term “Einfühlung” (or “feeling into”), which was itself a technical term used first by Robert Vischer and then, more prominently, by Theodore Lipps.
- But the concept of empathy (without the word) is usually traced back to the earlier writings of David Hume (1711–1776) and Adam Smith (1723–1790) on “sympathy”.

History of Empathy: Hume

- David Hume in *The Treatise of Human Nature* (1739/40):
 - When I see the *effects* of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion, as is presently converted into the passion itself. (T 576)
- Suggests a three stage model: (i) observing certain behaviours in another person, (ii) an inference based on those observations that the other is experiencing a certain kind of emotion/“passion”, which then causes on to (iii) experience that same emotion/“passion”.

History of Empathy: Smith

- Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759):
 - By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something, which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.
- Smith adds the idea of imagining oneself in the situation of the other person.

Affective Versus Cognitive Empathy

- There is no one canonical way of drawing this distinction but what people usually have in mind is something like this:
- **Cognitive empathy** is to do with our knowledge or understanding of the other person's mental life. ("I understand how you are feeling" "I know what it is like" "I imagine that feels terrible")
- **Affective empathy** is a matter of feeling the same thing as what the other person feels ("I feel what you feel")

Affective Dimensions of Empathy

- Maibom's (2017) list of kinds of affect that get referred to as 'empathy':
- **Affective empathy (proper)**: Person *S* empathizes with person *O*'s experience of emotion *E* in situation *C* if *S* feels *E* for *O* as a result of believing or perceiving that *O* feels *E*, or imagining being in *C*.
- **Sympathy/ empathic concern**: Person *S* sympathizes with person *O* when *S* feels sad for *O* as a result of believing or perceiving that something bad has happened to *O*, or *S* feels happy for *O* as a result of believing or perceiving that something good has happened to *O*.
- **Emotional contagion**: Person *S*'s feeling *E* is a case of emotional contagion if *S* feels *E* as a result of believing that person *O* feels *E*, perceiving that *O*'s expressing *E*, or of imagining being in *O*'s situation.
- **Personal distress**: Person *S* is personally distressed by person *O*'s experience of emotion *E* in situation *C* if *S* feels *E* – not for *O*, but for herself (*S*) – as a result of believing or perceiving that *O* feels *E*, imagining being in *C*, or as a result of believing that something bad has happened to *O*.

Cognitive Dimensions of Empathy

- Knowledge of another person's mental life can take many different forms just in relation to different facts . You might e.g. know facts about what they believe, desire, hope for, feel, think, imagine...
- An important form of knowledge that often is at issue when people talk about 'empathy' is **knowing what it is like** to have a certain type of experience that the other person is having.
- People often talk about **imagining what it is like** to have a certain type of experience.
- Some theorists think there is an important difference between *imagining being the other person* versus *imagining being yourself but with many of the other person's properties*.

More on ‘what it is like’-knowledge

- The concept of ‘what it is like’-knowledge plays important roles in the philosophy of mind where it is used to define the type of consciousness—**phenomenal consciousness**—which is central to “mind body” debates.
- Without taking a stance on those debates we can agree that the phenomenal or ‘what it is like’-properties of experiences are those properties which characterise the subjective feel of experiences.
- Relatedly, it is normally assumed that ‘what it is like’-knowledge is subject to an **experience condition** such that you cannot know what it is like to Φ unless you have Φ -ed yourself. E.g. you cannot know what it is like to eat durian, or smell coffee, or be a parent, or live in a refugee camp, unless you done or been those things yourself.

Back to VR

- But VR puts some pressure on this assumption.
- A perfect VR simulator—like Nozick's hypothetical *experience machine*—would provide one with simulations that would be indistinguishable from the real thing. That is, what it is like to have the experience in real life would be indistinguishable from what it is like to have the simulation of that experience in the machine.
- But what about the imperfect VR simulations we have in the real world?
- Can they provide us with what it is like knowledge?
- Can they help us to have affective forms of empathy?

Empathy and Ethics: What is the connection?

Week 4: Video Lecture 3

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Empathy and Ethics

- It is widely assumed that empathy is connected in some important way(s) to ethical and pro-social behaviour.
- But what are the supposed connections exactly?
- And do these connections actually hold?
- We'll get into the second question next week but, for now, let's just take a look at some of the ways that empathy (affective and cognitive) has been thought to be important ethically.

Affective Empathy and Sentimentalism

- Hume and Smith are part of a tradition in ethics called **sentimentalism**. This tradition fell out of favour for a long time but is currently experiencing something of a revival (e.g. Slote, Kauppinen)
- Often when we judge someone to have e.g. acted wrongly we also have certain feelings or sentiments towards that person or their actions.
- Sentimentalists hold that there is an intimate connection between the later and the former.
- Sentimentalism then comes in different forms depending on what connections it posits between, on the one hand, ethical judgements/thoughts/facts and, on the other hand, emotions/sentiments.

Affective Empathy and Sentimentalism

- Following Kauppinen's SEP entry ([here](#)):
- **Explanatory sentimentalists** hold that moral judgments are fundamentally explained by sentiments or emotions.
- **Judgment sentimentalists** hold that moral judgments are constituted by emotions, or alternatively are judgments about emotional responses.
- **Metaphysical sentimentalists** hold that moral facts are facts about what causes or merits emotional responses.
- **Epistemic sentimentalists** hold that emotions are the basic source of moral justification or knowledge.

Cognitive Empathy and Ethical Judgement

- Whether any form of sentimentalism is true is a contentious issue.
- And it is contentious more generally what role affective empathy plays in explaining moral judgments and helping behaviours.
- But most would agree that sometimes cognitive empathy can be useful for helping us to know what the right thing to do is *even if cognitive empathy alone isn't sufficient to motivate us to do the right thing*.
- Knowing what a certain kind of experience is like for another person, or understanding what another person is thinking or feeling, can help us to see how we ought to act towards that person.

Cognitive Empathy and Ethical Judgement

- Bloom (2016: 37) discussing Colby's defence of former US President Obama's claim that a capacity for empathy is an essential attribute of a good judge:
 - 'Colby discusses a case involving whether a thirteen-year-old's Fourth Amendment rights were violated by school officials who had her strip-searched because they suspected that she was bringing drugs into the school. Under established doctrine, such a search must be "not excessively intrusive," and Colby notes that judging whether or not this is so involves, in part, knowing what the situation feels like from the standpoint of a thirteen-year-old girl. The judges need cognitive empathy.'