What is Empathy?

The previous chapter mentioned eight different ways that empathy has been defined in philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience. How should empathy be defined in philosophy and normative ethics in particular? Several proposals have been made. Ethicist Justin D’Arms defines empathy as both an act and a capacity: empathy involves responding “to the perceived feelings of another with vicarious emotional reactions of one’s own, and empathy is the capacity for, or the occurrence of, such a vicarious experience.”¹ This definition captures the idea that empathy involves responding to another’s emotion by acquiring a similar emotion, and focuses on the “feeling another’s emotion” aspect of empathy.

On the other hand, philosophers of mind Peter Goldie and Robert Gordon emphasize the imaginative or simulative aspect of empathy. Goldie defines empathy as “a process or procedure by which a person centrally imagines the thoughts, feelings, and emotions (what I will call the *narrative*) of another person.”² And Gordon says that an empathetic simulation involves an “imaginative shift in the reference of indexicals’ where the imaginer ‘recenters his egocentric map.’”³ While Goldie and Gordon’s definitions are plausible, they fail to include the affective dimension of empathy—arousing feelings or transferring emotion—which D’Arms includes, and which developmental psychologists, cognitive neuroscientists, and laypersons take to be characteristic of empathy. Goldie and Gordon imply that empathy involves “stepping into another’s shoes,” but does not require feeling a resulting, congruent emotion.

Excluding the affective dimension of empathy is a mistake, and my goal here is to explain why definitions of empathy should include the idea that empathy involves experiencing a congruent emotion in regard to another’s perceived state, but not necessarily the other’s exact emotion.⁴
Although this feature may seem unimportant, if empathy is understood to be mere simulation, then it is possible to interpret a sadist’s simulation or imagination of her victim’s pain as “empathy.” But this interpretation goes contrary to common usage of the term empathy; what is different in this case is that the sadist does not really “feel” her victim’s pain. Psychologists who study empathy recognize that this type of simulation is not empathy as we usually think of it, and thus define empathy in a way that involves an affective dimension. Philosophers ought to do the same, and so my goal is to clarify the concept of empathy by defending a functional account of empathy that has already been adopted by a number of psychologists. This definition outlines the features required for empathy, and at the same time allows for a wide range of experiences to be called empathy. The functional account defines empathy as a multidimensional process involving (a) mental events such as imitation, projection or pictorial representation, (b) affective components, and (c) epistemic or behavioral outputs.

To articulate this view of empathy, I explain the difference between empathy and sympathy, describe the philosophical roots of the idea of empathy, and differentiate the two dominant conceptions of empathy, emotional contagion (which involves the spontaneous transfer of emotion) and imaginative perspective-taking (which involves perspective-swapping or role-taking). Then I distinguish three main types of perspective-taking empathy: other-focused empathy, self-focused empathy, and dual-perspective empathy. Next I describe the importance of shared emotional response, and explain why empathy should be understood as including an emotional response of matching another’s emotion. Finally, I articulate the functional definition of empathy and outline the advantages of using this definition in the philosophical study of ethics.

2.1 Empathy as emotional contagion

Although the term empathy did not emerge into the English language until the 20th century, both Adam Smith’s and David Hume’s discussions of sympathy mention qualities that are now considered to be empathy. Thus, the two dominant approaches empathy outlined at the beginning of the chapter can be traced to Smith and Hume. The first conception of empathy—an affective response to another person’s feeling, namely, feeling the other’s emotion—can be traced to David Hume’s definition of sympathy: a capacity of human nature to “receive by communication” the “inclinations and sentiments” of others,