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## Commentary on Friemann

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**In Response To:** Richard Friemann's [A consideration of empathy in argumentation](#)

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One of Mr. Friemann's goals is to "provide an account of empathy by seeing it in multi-modal terms". In order to help us reflect on this account, I will first present a few thought experiments that explore the relations of cognition and feeling to empathy.

For my first thought experiment, imagine that we have the kind of computer program that allows us to feed into a computer the following information: all the details of the context of a person's actions; all the visual, kinesthetic, and physiological details of his or her actions and bodily state in that context; all the auditory details of his or her voice in that same context; all his or her occurrent and dispositional beliefs, all his or her thoughts, images, associations, and memories in that context. Suppose that this computer correctly identifies that person's emotions and its causes, and communicates this information to that person in a way that is comforting and soothing. Is this an empathetic computer? I don't think so.

For my second thought experiment, imagine a human being who feels absolutely nothing, but who has the same information described in the preceding passage, and who is just as successful in identifying and explaining someone's emotions, and who always communicates that explanation in a manner that is soothing and comforting to the person. Let us call this human, an "exclusive thinker". Is this exclusive thinker responding in an empathetic way? If the absence of an affective experience in the first thought experiment is sufficient to say that the computer is not responding empathetically, despite all its information communicative abilities, then by parity of reasoning, the exclusive thinker is also not responding empathetically.

These thought experiments are one way of supporting Mr. Friemann's position that empathy involves more than thinking, that "merely thinking" is not "deep enough". One must feel what the other is feeling.

The next two thought experiments support the view that that merely feeling is similarly not "deep enough".

For my third thought experiment, imagine a human being who physically (viscerally, physiologically) feels everything any other human feels with the same intensity, frequency and duration, but who has absolutely no knowledge of the context, no knowledge of the occurrent or dispositional beliefs, thoughts, images, associations, or memories of a person experiencing an emotion, and who does not identify the emotion. Let's call this individual the "exclusive feeler". For example, if an angry or fearful person experiences a tightening of stomach muscles, the exclusive feeler experiences all the details of the tightening stomach muscles, but does not know anything about the context or

the person's beliefs and thoughts. Would the exclusive feeler know whether the person is experiencing fear or anger? Here is another example. If an angry or joyful person experiences the sensations of increased heart beat, blood pressure, perspiration, and tensed muscles, the exclusive feeler has the very same physical experiences, but without any knowledge of the context of those experiences, and without any knowledge of the person's beliefs and thoughts. Would the exclusive feeler know whether the person is experiencing anger or joy? If someone cries from joy or sadness, the exclusive feeler experiences the very same crying, but without the information mentioned in the two preceding examples. Would the exclusive feeler know whether the person is experiencing joy or sadness?

Even though the exclusive feeler would know *how* the other felt, he would not know *what* is felt or *why* it is felt. Is the exclusive feeler responding *empathetically*? If we answer negatively, it follows that mere feeling is not sufficient (or not "deep enough") for understanding what others experience, or for responding empathetically to others' experiences.

Let us now consider cases that are more realistic. In my fourth thought experiment, imagine someone walking toward you, and who has tears falling down his cheeks. Imagine that you experience similar tears, and you interpret them as tears of sadness. But suppose the person is just having a very bad day of hay fever, and is not experiencing any sadness. Are you responding empathetically in such a case? Suppose that the person is experiencing tears of joy (for example he or she has just won a lottery, and will thus finally be able to realize an extremely meaningful goal). If you experience similar tears, but interpret them as tears of sadness, are you responding empathetically to that person? In both cases you are physically experiencing exactly what the other is experiencing, you *know how* it feels *physically*, but you don't know *what* emotion is experienced, or *why* it is experienced. If, despite one's experiential knowledge, one's failure to identify the emotion experienced precludes empathy toward the person experiencing the emotion, then empathy does require knowledge of *what* is experienced, and so empathy requires a cognitive component. In other words, merely feeling is not enough.

My fifth and final thought experiment provides further support for the necessary cognitive component of empathy. Imagine a situation where someone has tears of sadness, you experience the same tears, and this time you correctly identify the emotion of sadness, but fail to identify the causes of the sadness. I would be inclined to say that in such cases one does respond with some degree of empathy, some degree of understanding of what is experienced, but it is limited when compared to the cases where one also correctly identifies the causes of the sadness. This suggests that there are degrees of empathy, and it is proportional to the depth of one's understanding.

Similar kinds of thought experiments would show that the degree of empathy is also proportional to the degree to which one's physical experience corresponds to the intensity, duration, and frequency of the physical aspects of

the other's emotional experience.

The results of these thought experiments can be summarized as follows. Just as a complete and thorough exclusive thinker is not empathetic because he or she fails to feel *how* another person is feeling, a complete and thorough exclusive feeler is not empathetic because he or she fails to know *what* and *why* the other is feeling. And the depth of one's empathy toward another person seems to be proportional to three things: (1) the depth of understanding of the causes of the other person's emotions; (2) the precision with which one identifies an emotion; (3) the extent to which one's physical experience of an emotion corresponds to the other's physical experience of the same emotion.

Though Mr. Friemann does not explicitly state such claims, his language strongly suggests that he agrees with what follows from the preceding thought experiments. For example, he says that "for a genuine act of empathy to take place, we must understand *why* [my italics] someone who is in a particular situation would feel the way he or she does, *and* feel something analogous to what the other feels".

Let us keep these ideas in mind as I offer a few comments on his attempt to "provide an account of empathy by seeing it in multi-modal terms". (The reader should keep in mind that the following comments are based on Mr. Friemann's paper prior to the OSSA conference; they might not apply to subsequent revisions of that paper. For that reason, I will keep my comments brief.) There are three modes: logical, emotional, visceral. Unfortunately, he does not explicitly describe the meaning of these terms. So my discussion of them is based only on my understanding of their use in his paper. Since the emotional and visceral modes have an affective dimension to them, and there is an affective component to empathy, it is reasonable to examine to what extent these two modes can help us to understand empathy. He speaks of "exploring modes", just as we would explore different kinds of information, and this exploration of modes "occurs in the context of gaining an understanding of someone's position". And someone's position includes not only the given reasons, but include other kinds of information. This information seems to be expressed by his use of "modes".

(1) The logical mode, as used in the context where he describes Kelly as attempting to understand Terry's inconsiderate behavior, is used to refer to reasons that fail to explain well Terry's behavior.

(2) The "visceral [mode], [is] the material context someone is in". Notice how this mode is simply a certain kind of information.

(3) "In a typical exploration of the emotional mode we would not only want to know *what* someone was feeling, but *why*". Again notice the cognitive element in the emotional mode. However, exploring the emotional mode is not just an invitation to grasp the cognitive aspects of an emotion, but also to be open to experiencing the emotion.

One problem I find with these labels is that the emotional and visceral modes are typically presented in contradistinction to a so-called logical mode, but they do not clearly exclude the logical mode. For as I have just indicated in the preceding paragraph, each mode includes an important cognitive component. To "move in" the visceral and emotional modes is just another way of saying that one is looking for information either in addition to or instead of the given reasons. But the information designated by the visceral and emotional modes can easily be subsumed by the logical mode. The only thing that differentiates the logical and emotional modes is that only the latter denotes the experience of emotions.

The words "emotional and visceral modes" seem to just label the process of obtaining more relevant information in our attempt to understand more completely someone's emotional experiences. But when given reasons on a different issue or topic are considered inadequate, and require us to find better reasons, we do not say that we are exploring a non-logical mode. We are just trying to find better or more relevant, or more complete reasons. And this might require us to explore other areas not typically considered when examining that issue or topic. In the case of empathy, and human behavior and emotions in general, the reasons given by a person experiencing an emotion or behaving in a certain way are sometimes inadequate, and so one must look for better reasons. But is taking into consideration information that deals with visceral or emotional aspects of a person sufficient to render the investigation non-logical, visceral, or emotional? Are these labels really helpful?

This leads me to raise a number of questions. How does the label, "emotional mode" help us to understand empathy? If it is an approach or a process, what precisely is this approach? How different is it from our usual attempts to have thorough understanding of what someone is experiencing? How does the multi-modal approach allow or help us to "come to grips with the affective part of ourselves"?

In these comments I have proposed a few thought experiments that strengthen some of Mr. Friemann's ideas, and raised some problems and questions regarding the usefulness of his "multi-modal terms" to give an account of empathy.

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