

Empathy and moral cognition: A Buddhist philosophical perspective

Our current question of philosophical enquiry is that how emotion, mostly empathy, plays a key role in moral cognition. The role of feelings in cognition is a subject of investigation in philosophy. The cognitive, aesthetical, ethical and psychological functions of feelings are discussed among others to underline our behavioural, cognitive, ethical and existential meaning. In the text books of philosophy moral cognition has often been considered a rational activity where one makes moral judgments based on a rational assessment. Rational explanation of moral behaviour posits that moral cognition is based on a conscious and rational assessment of different rules, norms and other factors. However, emotions 'are not just impulses, but contain appraisals that have an evaluative content' (M. Nussbaum). Cognition through empathy, a certain kind of cognition based on 'observation filled with emotions' (R. Ingarden), will enable one to judge what is right and wrong in a given situation, for rational and notional knowledge does not create a direct access to existential predicament. And empathy is the experience of the other 'consciousness' irrespective of the experiencing subject or of the subject whose consciousness is experienced (Edith Stein). And when it comes to the notion of justice or just society, it is not based on some rational or notional abstractions, but 'the question of emotion is integral to the arguments justifying the principles of justice' (M. Nussbaum).

Empathy has a significant take in the moral cognition in Buddhism. In the Buddhist literature one can find the various facets of 'empathy' in a set of four ethical-psychological feelings (social emotions) which are called mysteriously Brahma-viharas (the excellent states / stations), namely, love or friendliness (*maitri* or *metta*), compassion (*karuna*), empathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity or impartiality (*upeksa* or *uekkha*). In Buddhism, this set of four psychological *cum* ethical feelings is meant to regulate one's empathetic attitude towards the other, facilitating the process of moral cognition. Empathising is a direct first-hand experience, a direct identification with the other person, by putting on her/his shoes and walking in her/his shoes, identifying oneself with the other when it comes to existential predicament. The research looks at the role of empathy in moral cognition, where empathy operates as the basis of moral cognition enabling one to take an ethical stance, and thus, empowering one to be an ethical being.