Empathy is seen as a virtue or even a necessary skill in many professions. However, while proponents of the concept argue that it plays a fundamental role in our moral judgements, critics have objected that our empathy is easily manipulated and that our dispositions to empathise more strongly with those close to or resembling ourselves makes it a poor moral guide. We argue that while not necessary for professional moral judgement, professional moral reasoning would be fundamentally amiss without the ability and willingness to perceive the situation from the perspective of those they are trained to serve.

Introduction
Empathy is seen as a virtue or even a necessary skill in many professions. In the health professions, empathy training has long been considered an integral part of the qualifying education and the ability and willingness to empathise is seen as essential for the provision of patient-centred care. But also in other professions, such as the teaching profession, there is a burgeoning interest in the merits of empathy (Demetriou 2018; Barton and Garvis 2019). As classrooms are becoming more multicultural and diverse the ability to grasp how things appear or feel from the perspective of the other – the vernacular definition of empathy – seems an increasingly important skill for budding teachers in the 21st century.

Even with respect to professions that have traditionally prided themselves of being unaffected by or unresponsive to emotions, such as the legal professions, it has recently been argued that empathy can and should play a role in guiding professional moral judgements (Hoffman 2011). Despite a newfound interest in empathy however, a number of philosophers and psychologists have warned against empathy, arguing that it is inherently partial to those close to or resembling ourselves and susceptible to manipulation, and thus, that we are ill advised to form moral judgements based on empathy. As some of the most vocal critics has it, is “by and large, bad for morality” (Prinz 2011a: 216) and that, “[f]rom a moral standpoint, we are better off without it” (Bloom 2016: 4). If their arguments are sound however, it would not only be bad for morality and our moral judgements, which have been shown to be more interwoven with our capacity to empathise than hitherto thought (Decety and Cowell 2014; Baron-Cohen 2011), but for the relational professions, which, as noted, often place a high value on the ability and willingness of its practitioners to empathise with their clients, and the theoretical discussion on a professional ethics in these professions.

The ability and willingness to adopt the perspective of the other is thus partly constitutive of professional moral reasoning.
to do involves forming judgments about what one ought, morally, to do. Moral judgement, in turn, can be understood as “judgments that apply some moral concept or other” (Cray 2007: 1). However, while we often focus on the moral judgement – the outcome of our reasoning – it may be equally significant to inquire how we arrive at those conclusions. “The characteristic ways we attempt to work through a given sort of moral quandary,” as Richardson (2018) argues, “can be just as revealing about our considered approaches to these matters as are any bottom-line judgments we may characteristically come to”. This seems particularly true about moral reasoning in the relational professions, where our moral judgements pertain not only or primarily to ourselves, but to those in our care. We argue, therefore, that the ability and willingness to empathize with clients is constitutive of the professional moral reasoning of practitioners in the relational professions, and that inability or unwillingness to empathize, but without thereby failing to perform that role as we should. Lacking empathy, we argue, professional moral reasoning would be inadequate, and the ability and willingness to adopt the perspective of the other is thus partly constitutive of professional moral reasoning, without which professionals would fail their most fundamental purpose. If not strictly speaking necessary for professional moral judgements, empathy, we claim, is the sine qua non of professional moral reasoning in the relational professions.

A contested concept

Empathy is on the rebound and is currently being rediscovered after having been neglected as a philosophical concept since it fell out of favour in the middle of the 20th century (Frazier 2013; Stueber 2006). Having caught the attention of scholars and non-scholars alike, the past two decades have seen a surge of interest in empathy from within a surprisingly wide range of disciplines and topics. The concept has been explored not only in philosophy and psychology, but in fields as distinct as neurology, education, history, political science, cultural history, and aesthetics, and invoked in political campaigns, therapeutic methods, and in engagement with art and the media (Coplan 2011; Matravers 2017; Malbom 2014, 2017). As a consequence of the diversity however, empathy has been understood in a variety of different, sometimes incompatible ways, thereby making a discussion of the role and function of empathy difficult.

Starting from an everyday conception of empathy, e.g. as the ability to use our “imagination as a tool so as to adopt a different perspective in order to grasp how things appear (or feel) from here” (Matravers 2017: 1-2), is a good way to bring some of the central dividing lines in the debate into view. Firstly, it is possible to distinguish between those who construct empathy primarily as an affective phenomenon, and those who emphasise its cognitive side. Interested in different aspects of the phenomenon, some scholars focus more or less exclusively on the ability to feel as the other does, what has become known in the literature as affective empathy, while others take empathy first and foremost to be our cognitive ability to grasp or understand the situation of another (Malbom 2017; Spaulding 2017). Secondly, a distinction may be drawn between those who think of empathy as pertaining to higher-level mental processes (Matravers 2017), and those who include in their definition of empathy subconscious processes, e.g. emotional contagion and mirror neurons (Hoffman 2011, Malbom 2017; Prinz 2011a, 2011b). And thirdly, a distinction may be drawn between those who separate sharply between empathy and sympathy, and those who do not. While most scholars distinguish clearly between empathy, which is often defined as being other-oriented in being presented as the feelings and perspective of the other, and sympathy, which is a first-person feeling towards the target (Coplan and Goldie 2011), some explicitly take empathy to involve a concern for the other (Baron-Cohen 2011) or at least as encompassing various types of empathic concern (Hoffman 2011).

While empathy, as noted, has been explored in relation to a number of phenomena, one of the most hotly discussed questions in the recent debate has been what role – if any – empathy plays and ought to play in ethics. While some of those contributing to the recent debate have seen empathy as fundamental to our moral reasoning, and as the “cement of the moral universe” (Blotte 2010: 13), others have been less sanguine about the purpose and usefulness of the concept as a moral concept. A particularly scathing criticism of empathy in moral reasoning has come from Paul Bloom (2016) and Jesse Prinz (2011b, 2011a). Addressing the claim that empathy is necessary for moral judgements, which can be understood either as the claim that empathy is a constitutive, causal, or epistemological precondition for moral judgements, Prinz (2011a, 2011b) constructs a series of counter-examples to show that empathy is not necessary for moral judgement in any of these ways. Since I may judge that you have done something wrong without empathising (i.e. feeling what you or, if there is one, your victim is feeling), Prinz argues, empathy cannot be constitutive of moral judgement. Nor, he argues, can empathy be a necessary causal precondition, as I may judge that something is wrong before empathising (Prinz 2011a). Meticulously addressing the various ways in which empathy has been claimed to be necessary for moral judgement, Prinz finds them all wanting and concludes that “we can have moral systems without empathy” (Prinz 2011b: 213). However, even if Grant the argument and accept that empathy is not necessary for moral judgement, it may be thought that empathy is beneficial to moral judgements and that we therefore ought to encourage the fostering of empathy. Empirical studies from moral psychology however, appears to support the conclusion that we feel greater empathy for those who are similar to ourselves, one study using brain imaging indicating “that Caucasians were more empathetic to the pain of other Caucasians than to ethnically Chinese participants – and conversely” (Prinz 2011a: 227). As

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empathy is also prone to manipulation— we respond emotionally e.g. to displays of regret— empathy, Prinz continues, “has limitations that make it ill-suited for some moral ends” (Prinz 2011a: 227).

Both Prinz and Bloom however, conceive empathy as affective, that empathising does not require the use of the imagination, and that empathy should be understood to include subconscious processes. This may immediately seem to present their objections against empathy—at least if we think of moral reasoning in the relational professions—as somewhat misguided. From the perspective of the relational professions, what is relevant is not a subconscious ability to feel as the other does, but the ability and willingness to achieve what Peter Goldie (2011) calls in-his-shoes perspective-shifting; a conscious attempt to understand the situation and feelings of the other by imagining being in that situation. Arguing that it is possible to “perspective-shift” in-his-shoes—instead of empathic perspective-shifting, as opposed to a more ambitious empathic perspective-shifting, where we imagine being the person in question, Goldie defends the claim that this allows us to come to a genuine, although limited understanding of others. It is possible to achieve knowledge of others minds through this kind of empathic imagining, it may be thought that a correct appreciation of the situation of the other would be valuable, even in some cases a prerequisite, for the ability to form moral judgement, and thus that empathy has a role to play in our moral reasoning. However, it— as evidence seems to suggest— we tend to empathise more strongly with those close to or resembling ourselves, it may be warned that in-his-shoes perspective-shifting may be easier to achieve with those resembling ourselves and thus lead us deeper into a moral quagmire. Even if empathy allows us to understand one another, it may therefore be argued that empathy ought not to play a role in our moral reasoning; that the inherent partiality of empathy makes it a bad and unreliable moral guide.

The moral domain:

Natural and special obligations

The objections against conceiving a role for empathy in moral reasoning may seem decisive, leaving any hope of an empathy-infused morality looking like a muddled attempt to have one’s cake and eat it too. We are so accustomed to the idea that moral judgements—in order to be moral judgements—are required to be impartial and universal, that any suggestion that our judgements may be less than impartial seems to disqualify them as such. In fact, so ingrained is this view, that in the analytic tradition “moral point of view” and “impartial (or ‘impersonal’) point of view”, as Jollimore (2017) argues, “are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the imagined impersonal perspective from which, it is supposed, moral judgements are to be made”. Despite the force of this line of thought, common sense morality, as Diane Jeske (2019) points out, also has it that we bear special obligations. Most of us occupy a number of roles, e.g. father, husband, nurse, which, at least according to our common sense, requires us to give moral priority to a significant other. As a consequence of the commitment of moral philosophy in the analytic tradition to the impartiality of morality however, “the tradition has struggled to accommodate role-obligations, such as those of lawyers towards their clients or parents towards their own children” (Dare and Swanton 2020: 1). A central question in much recent moral philosophy has thus been how to square the two thoughts: How can we both be obliged to judge from an impartial perspective while also fulfilling our special obligations?

The notion of special obligations seems particularly troublesome for consequentialism, which, for simplicity, can be characterised as the view that the good equals “that action which, of all alternatives available to the agent, produces the greatest net sum of intrinsic value” (Jeske 2019). On the face of it, consequentialism thus seems to mandate that we treat everyone the same, as all things being equal, the amount of value I may produce by saving a is the same as if I were to save b instead. As Jeske (2019) points out however, “the consequentialist can argue that, in fact, each person acting so as to benefit her friends, loved ones, promisees, etc., will have the best overall consequences”. This line of reasoning however, is not open to those who take partiality in moral reasoning to be basically bad. And given that the strongest arguments against empathy is that it engenders partiality, it seems that a dismissive attitude to empathy in moral reasoning makes it hard to see how we can have special obligations at all. But does the converse hold? Does the idea that we have special obligations also require that we are able and willing to empathise? Or could our special obligations be discharged without empathy?

Special obligations and professional roles

The answers to the above seem to depend on the content of the special obligation in question. But what exactly are we obliged to in virtue of standing in relations that generate special obligations? Special obligations come into play in a range of aspects of our lives, and different relations will carry different obligations. In some cases, spelling out the content of the obligation may be more straightforward than in others; some of the roles we occupy are more strictly regulated than others, wearing their obligations ‘on their sleeves’, as Tim Dare (2020) writes. Others are less formal, with implicit role-expectations which may be more or less open to interpretation and subject to shifting contexts. Social roles, such as that of being a father or brother, come with special obligations that are largely implicit, with few or any formal requirements. Professional roles, on the other hand, are often more clearly defined and may include specific legal obligations and vows or pledges by the professional, undertaken either through written or oral acts of promising as part of granting the professional his or her licence.

Much has been written about the political-functional grounding of professional roles and how it shapes professional obligation. Unlike social roles, professional roles is the product of an authoritative institutional design intended to serve some societal function or greater purpose (Grimen 2006), and it is a widely held view that, as Alexandra and Seimus (2009: 109) argue, “to understand the specific content of professional role morality, then, we need to examine the purposes that the various professions have been formed to serve, and the way in which professional roles must be constructed in order to achieve those purposes”.

Some have taken this even further, arguing that “a role obligation” is a moral requirement, which attaches to an institutional role, whose content is fixed by the function of the role” (Hardimon 1994: 334).

On the face of it therefore, the answer to the above question seems to be that one may fulfill the moral obligation of one’s role without taking a particular interest in how things look or feel from the perspective of the other. Thus, a physician or nurse may administer health services and care according to protocol without being able or willing to appreciate the feelings of the patient, but without thereby being morally blame-worthy. Likewise, a teacher that teaches according to the requirements, treats all her pupils fairly (e.g. equally, avoiding discrimination, with respect, etc.), and
The failure to empathise is thus not to fail in a particular moral judgement but to fail more fundamentally as a professional.

While clearly constitutive of social roles however, the signalling function also plays an important role in our conception of and the continuous transformation of professional roles – as can be seen from the gradual shift in the relation between the professional and the client in the relational professions in the second half of the 20th century. From being dominated by a paternalistic outlook, these professions have been forced to change their attitudes to their clients and to adopt a more inclusive attitude. However, while it seems that expectations do contribute to shaping professional roles, they do not do so exclusively, as they do in shaping social roles, nor do they contribute to shaping professional roles in exactly the same way as they do in shaping social roles. Overstating the similarities between social and professional roles, Dare (2020) ignores the constitutive relation between intentional design and role obligations, taking both social and professional moral roles to be the product of social expectations ‘all the way down’.

This does not mean however, that professionals are obliged to judge in accordance with how the client perceives the situation. In many cases, that would be irresponsible and in conflict with professional expertise, potentially resulting in disastrous outcomes. Professionals are expected to judge on the basis of their expertise, experience, and knowledge of laws and regulations, and empathy may not be necessary for or even play any role in the moral conclusion, allowing that the professional may discharge his or her moral obligations without empathising. Nevertheless, this does not mean that empathy plays no significant role in professional ethics: Expected to be able and willing to assume the perspective of the client, empathy plays a constitutive role in professional moral reasoning, in deliberating about the right course of action. Professionals flouting this expectations are reduced to expert bureaucrats; automaton vested with the responsibility of serving a particular social function and authoritative institutional design. Lack of empathy in professional exercise thus undermines, not the validity or correctness of individual moral judgements, but the process of moral deliberation constitutive of professional moral reasoning.
‘Ethics’ is generally defined as “the philosophical study of morality” (Deigh 1999), and so arguments against the role of empathy in morality would not only affect individual moral judgements, but (more widely) the philosophical study of morality in the relational professions. We argue that empathy has a role to play in professional moral reasoning, e.g. reasoning about what one, morally, ought to do. This is distinct from professional reasoning about what it would be prudential, efficient, economical, legal etc. to do in a given situation.

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