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Martin Hoffman's Theory of Empathy in the Mirror of Islamic Ethics

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Abstract

Hoffman's theory of empathy is classified as an emotion-based theory in moral psychology. Empathy as considered by Hoffman is an emotive state that fits the conditions of others better than the conditions of moral agents. Hoffman contends that empathic distress provides agents with a source of motivation by causing guilt. Believing that empathy leads to the morally right behavior in the five situations of social interactions, he suggests an inclusive moral theory of empathy. The present research aims to assess this claim from Islamic ethics perspective. Some drawbacks of this claim are identified by consulting religious sources: "empathy's focus is on present individuals", "empathy does not include individual ethics", "empathy does not cover the ethics of justice", "people's desires do not entail their good and welfare", "the continent poor people are ignored in the ethics of empathy", "justice would depend on the quality of individuals' relations", "deep empathy would have negative functions for moral life". As a result, one may say that empathy as an emotion is one of the virtues of a perfectly moral person but it can lay a sound foundation for ethics and moral judgment.

Keywords

Empathy, Hoffman's theory of empathy, Islamic ethics, moral emotions, positive psychology.

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