

Sounds simple, but there are some twists to the story, some neural complications that affect how we ultimately respond to what we see, hear, and imagine. The prefrontal cortex has regions particularly active during the exercise of judgment. These regions contain neurons that are active when we are performing some particular action and less active when we see someone else performing the same action. It is hypothesized that this gives us the capacity to modulate our empathy—to lessen it or turn it off in certain cases. The mirror neuron system thus connects us emotionally to others, but can in certain cases also distance us emotionally from others.

The prefrontal cortex is active in another neural system, too—one that I'll call the well-being/ill-being system. This is the system that releases certain hormones in your brain when you have experiences that make you feel good, and releases others when experiences make you feel bad. In essence, this system regulates whether you have a sense of well-being or ill-being at any given time. It is also the system that presumably is involved in making judgments on the basis of your imagination of what will or won't bring you well-being.

The well-being system and the empathy system can interact in complex ways. Some people feel satisfaction both when they are personally satisfied and when those they empathize with feel a sense of well-being.

Other people do not have the two systems connected in that way. (1) They may have the well-being system overriding the empathy system—with their interests overriding the cares and interests of others. Or (2) they can have a complex interaction in which they maintain their own well-being and balance it with contributing to the well-being of others. Or (3) they may be self-sacrificing, always placing the well-being of others ahead of their own well-being. Or (4) they may be part of an in-group, and may place their well-being and that of in-group members first, without empathizing at all with out-group members. This can vary, depending on what counts as a given person's in-group.

Since morality is about well-being, your own and that of others, these four alternatives define different moral attitudes.

Can the mirror neuron system be affected by inborn factors? Apparently,