

Opinion

Empathy and Its Discontents

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What role does the experience of feeling what you think others are feeling – often known as ‘empathy’ – have in moral deliberation and moral action? Empathy has many fans and there is abundant evidence that it can motivate prosocial behavior. However, empathy is narrow in its focus, rendering it innumerate and subject to bias. It can motivate cruelty and aggression and lead to burnout and exhaustion. Compassion is distinct from empathy in its neural instantiation and its behavioral consequences and is a better prod to moral action, particularly in the modern world we live in.

Challenging Empathy

In a speech given in 2006, Senator Barack Obama said ‘We have an empathy deficit. It’s time for a sense of empathy to infuse our politics . . .’ [1]. Many psychologists, neuroscientists, philosophers, and policymakers would agree, believing that the only problem with empathy is that we do not have enough of it [2–6]. Accordingly, there is considerable focus on interventions intended to increase empathy in individuals and communities as well as concern about people who lack empathy and situations that erode it. For many, the value of empathy is like the evil of racism, a position too obvious to have to defend.

Is this a reasonable perspective? In part, it depends on what one means by empathy. As a previous review in this journal noted, ‘there are probably nearly as many definitions of empathy as people working on this topic’ [7] (Box 1). If the word refers to kindness and compassion, its value really does seem obvious. However, many people use ‘empathy’ in a narrower sense corresponding to what the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment called ‘sympathy’. As Adam Smith put it, we have the capacity to think about another individual and ‘place ourselves in his situation. . . and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them’ [8]. You hit your thumb with a hammer and I flinch; you imagine a refugee crossing the border into another country and feel, in a reduced and diminished way, her fear and anxiety. This sense of empathy – putting yourself in other people’s shoes, feeling what you think they are feeling – is what I will talk about here.

Even in this narrow sense, empathy might seem like an obvious force for good. Commonsense tells us that experiencing someone else’s pain will motivate us to care about and help that person, and there is abundant empirical support for this intuition. In numerous studies Batson and his colleagues put subjects in situations where they have the opportunity to engage in actions that help others, such as donating money, taking over an unpleasant task, or cooperating at a cost. When subjects are encouraged to feel empathy for those who need help, they are more likely to behave prosocially [9]. Plainly, then, empathy can motivate good actions. It can be seen as akin to a spotlight, making salient the suffering of others.

However, some have argued that empathy has a dark side, in both personal relationships and public policy [10–12]. This focus of this brief Opinion article is how empathy guides us in the modern world, where we live with billions of strangers, are exposed to endless depictions of suffering through mass media, and are targeted by many organizations and individuals

Trends

The act of experiencing what you believe others are experiencing – sometimes known as ‘empathy’ – is often viewed as having positive effects, motivating kindness and inhibiting aggression. In support of this, the experience of empathic distress increases the likelihood of prosocial action toward a suffering individual.

Empathy has serious limitations, however, particularly when it comes to moral decision-making in the modern world. Both laboratory studies and examples from everyday life suggest that it leads to biased and innumerate decisions – choices that clash with our considered moral judgments. Also, while empathy can motivate kindness, it can also spur cruel and irrational actions, including atrocities and war.

There are alternatives to empathy. In particular, compassion – in the sense of valuing other people and caring about their welfare but without necessarily feeling their pain – may have all the advantages of empathy and few of its weaknesses.

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Box 1. What Do We Mean by 'Empathy'?

Discussions of 'empathy' are bedeviled by the word's many meanings – one article lists eight of them [43] – everything 'from yawning contagion in dogs, to distress signaling in chickens, to patient-centered attitudes in human medicine' [44]. Some even suggest that we abandon the word altogether and replace it with a series of more precise terms [45]. To introduce some distinctions that are important for the discussion here, the following are what I see as the four most common senses of 'empathy'.

- Understanding the thoughts and feelings of others, as when you infer that someone is anxious, without necessarily feeling anxiety yourself. This is sometimes called 'theory of mind', 'naïve psychology', or 'mindreading' but is also known as 'cognitive empathy'.
- Experiencing the feelings of those in your immediate vicinity, as when spending time with an anxious person makes you anxious. This is sometimes known as 'emotional contagion'.
- Experiencing the inferred feelings of others, as when thinking about a person who is anxious makes you anxious. Unlike in emotion contagion, this person does not have to be present, or even exist – we can have this feeling toward fictional characters. This is also known as 'affective empathy' or 'emotional empathy' and it is how I use the term 'empathy' in this Opinion article.
- Positive feelings toward others, a desire that others do well and do not suffer, as when you wish that an anxious friend would feel more calm without necessarily feeling any anxiety yourself. This also known as 'kindness', 'compassion', or 'concern' and is what I argue should replace emotional empathy as a moral motivation.

Nothing of value rests on which of these (if any) we choose to call 'empathy', provided that we are clear about what we are referring to.

It is, however, an important question about the extent to which these capacities (whatever we call them) correspond to distinct psychological systems. In the main text, I discuss evidence for the distinction between compassion and affective/emotional empathy; there is also evidence that affective/emotional empathy can be readily distinguished from cognitive empathy [19,36].

competing for our money, our votes, and our loyalty. I will argue that empathy does poorly. The spotlight nature of empathy renders it innumerate, favoring the one over the many and the specific over the statistical. Empathy is biased, pushing us in the direction of parochialism and racism. While empathy can motivate prosocial behavior, we will see that it can also spark atrocities. Even when it is put to good use, empathic distress can be an ineffective motivator, as it can lead to burnout and exhaustion.

Fortunately, there are alternatives. We can make moral decisions through a utilitarian cost-benefit calculus or by appealing to universal moral principles. Also, we can be motivated by compassion and concern – caring about other people's welfare, without necessarily feeling their pain – which can exist independently of empathy and has fewer of its costs.

Bias and Innumeracy

One problem with empathy is illustrated in a classic experiment in which subjects were told about a 10-year-old girl named Sheri Summers who had a fatal disease and was low on the waiting list for a treatment that would relieve her pain. Subjects were then given the option of moving her to the front of the list, although this would mean that another child, perhaps more deserving, would not get the treatment. The majority said no. However, if they were first asked to feel what Sheri Summers felt – an empathy prompt – their answers shifted and a majority chose to move her up [13]. Empathy clashed with fairness, leading to a decision that most of us would see as immoral.

Many studies find that people are largely unmoved by the number of individuals who are suffering when asked how much they would give to help them [14–17]. In some cases empathy can even guide us to favor the one over the many. People who are shown the name and picture of one child in need of a life-saving drug give more money than people who are merely told that there are eight children in need [16,17].

Such an effect can be seen as a manifestation of the 'identifiable victim effect', nicely summarized about 40 years ago by the economist Thomas Schelling [18].

'Let a six-year-old girl with brown hair need thousands of dollars for an operation that will prolong her life until Christmas, and the post office will be swamped with nickels and dimes to save her. But let it be reported that without a sales tax the hospital facilities of Massachusetts will deteriorate and cause a barely perceptible increase in preventable deaths – not many will drop a tear or reach for their checkbooks.'

Not all identifiable victims are equal. Empathy's bias is manifest in the many studies that look for its neural signature – usually an activation in brain areas corresponding to the experience of pain when one observes or imagines another person in pain [19]. In one such study, subjects were shown videos of people said to be suffering from AIDS. When the people were described as being infected through intravenous drug use, subjects felt less empathy – as reflected in both self-reports and lowered neural activation in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) – than when they were described as being infected by a blood transfusion. Also, the more the subjects explicitly blamed the drug users for their fate, the less empathy they said they had and the less ACC activation there was [20].

Empathy is also influenced by ingroup bias. One European study tested male soccer fans. The fan would receive a shock on the back of his hand and would then watch another man receive the same shock. When the other man was described as a fan of the subject's team, there was more of an empathic neural response – an overlap in self-other pain – than when he was described as a fan of the opposing team [21].

We see the same sort of innumeracy and bias in how individuals and nations respond to real-world events. Slovic notes that during the genocide in Darfur, far more attention in the USA was devoted to Natalee Holloway, an 18-year-old American student who went missing on vacation in Aruba [22]. There are many factors at play here, but one is likely to be the force of empathy, which renders the suffering of an attractive white American and her family more salient to white Americans than the suffering of many thousands of faraway strangers. In the domain of charitable giving, our choices are often driven by images of adorable, identifiable victims and lovable animals like polar bears and pandas and not based on the actual impact that our money can have [23,24]. Furthermore, when it comes to dealing with concerns about the future, our sentiments render us insensitive to concerns such as climate change – a crisis that, despite its seriousness, has no specific victims that we can think about and empathize with.

Similarly, empathy guides us to put great weight in the victims of policies – someone who is assaulted by a prisoner released on furlough, a child who gets sick due to a faulty vaccine, someone whose business goes under because of taxes and government regulation – but is silent when it comes to the suffering that such policies might avert. A furlough program might lead to an overall drop in crime, for instance, but you cannot feel empathy when thinking about a statistical shift in the number of people who are not assaulted. Empathy resonates to the suffering of identifiable victims but is largely silent when it comes to both future costs and statistical benefits [10].

Other cognitive and emotional systems are biased in similar regards – if the capacity for empathy were somehow excised from our brains, we would still be drawn to individual victims, be influenced by race and attractiveness, and so on. However, empathy is particularly vulnerable to these biases, given its spotlight nature. One can empathize with a single individual, and perhaps two or three, but not a thousand or a million, and so empathy is inherently innumerate. Empathy is also silent when it comes to statistical concerns such as, as Schelling put it, 'a barely perceptible increase in preventable deaths' [18].

Most of us believe, on reflection, that such empathy-driven judgments are mistaken, that it is wrong to give a girl priority for a medical treatment simply because we are imagining her suffering,

that one life is not worth more than eight, and that a crisis that can devastate the lives of billions of people matters greatly even if there are no immediate identifiable victims. To the extent that empathy clashes with these considered moral views, it is a poor guide to moral decision-making. The same is true for other emotions and sentiments, such as anger, guilt, and even compassion – while I argue below that compassion serves as a better motivation for moral action, it too should be put aside when we make moral decisions. We should instead apply procedures, such as cost–benefit analyses and application of moral principles, that yield judgments that we can rationally defend, both to other disinterested parties and to ourselves in the future [25,26].

Empathy As Tool

One can concede that empathy is a poor guide to deciding how to act, but defend it as an important motivating force. Given that we can shift our empathic focus [27,28], empathy can be used as a tool to encourage all sorts of good actions. That is, we can decide the right thing to do based on cost–benefit analyses or certain moral principles, but then empathy can step in and make us actually do it. For instance, once I decide that it is morally right for me to give much of my money to starving children in faraway lands, I can motivate myself by feeling empathy for those children – and perhaps go on to motivate others to give to the same cause through use of empathic appeals. As Zaki puts it, once people have made moral decisions, they can ‘choose to align their empathy more with their values’ (http://www.edge.org/conversation/jamil_zaki-choosing-empathy).

The motivational force of empathy is hard to doubt. It is easy to think of examples, such as certain worthy charitable appeals, where empathic appeals have had positive results. Virtually any emotion or sentiment can be exploited to do good – not just empathy, but also anger, fear, envy, shame, religious fervor, and so on. (Indeed, Prinz has argued that when it comes to positive social change, anger is a more powerful motivator than empathy [11].)

Thus, empathy can be used to motivate action. However, as with these other emotions and sentiments, empathy's flexibility can be a curse. Empathy can be exploited to motivate us to do things that do not help, as when empathic pleas lead people to give billions of dollars to charitable causes that have few positive benefits, and sometimes make the world worse [23,24,29]. Empathy can also be exploited to motivate people to harm others. In one study that illustrates this point, subjects were told about a financially needy student who was entering a competition for a cash prize [30]. When motivated to feel empathy for the student, subjects were more prone to administer a greater dose of hot sauce to her competitor, although this person did nothing wrong.

This relationship between empathy and aggression was noted by Adam Smith, who wrote ‘When we see one man oppressed or injured by another, the sympathy which we feel with the distress of the sufferer seems to serve only to animate our fellow-feeling with his resentment against the offender. We are rejoiced to see him attack his adversary in his turn, and are eager and ready to assist him’ [8]. There are ample illustrations of this phenomenon in the modern world, as empathy is often used by those who wish to generate animus toward outgroups. Lynchings in the American South, for instance, were motivated in part by stories told about white women raped by black men. When contemporary politicians want to evoke hatred towards immigrants, they often tell moving stories about the innocent victims of crimes that individual immigrants have committed [10]. When democratic countries want to gain public support for a war, they do the same, as when lurid tales of the atrocities committed by Saddam Hussein and his sons [31] were used to support the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Now, the suffering of innocents can often be a reasonable and moral motivation for action, even violent action. However, empathy tilts the scale too far in one direction, as it focuses us on the welfare of specific individuals we care about and on the pleasure of retaliation toward those who

made them suffer. The costs of such violence do not strike us in the same way; they are often abstract and statistical and often fall on those we do not care about and hence do not empathize with in the first place [10].

The Only Game in Town?

Some might worry that without empathy people would be apathetic. We need the experience of shared suffering to motivate us to help others. It is not enough to simply care about people; we have to feel their pain.

Consider, however, that there are all sorts of behaviors that we judge as morally wrong – and that we are motivated to stop – where empathy does not apply. For instance, we are capable of appreciating wrongs that have no identifiable victims. We disapprove of people who shoplift, cheat on their taxes, throw garbage out of their car windows, and so on – even if there is no specific person who suffers because of these actions and nobody to empathize with [10,11]. Even when there is a single identifiable individual in distress, empathy need not play a role. Consider that an adult might comfort a child who is terrified of a small, yipping dog even if the adult does not experience the child's fear in the slightest – there can be compassion for the child, a desire to make his or her distress go away, without any shared experience or empathic distress [32].

Many psychologists and neuroscientists believe, however, that such compassion is necessarily intertwined with empathy. In critical responses to an earlier article I wrote on this topic [33], Christov-Moore and Iacoboni claimed that 'affective empathy is a precursor to compassion' [34] and O'Connor and Berry wrote 'We can't feel compassion without first feeling emotional empathy. Indeed compassion is the extension of emotional empathy by means of cognitive processes' [35]. Similarly, Hoffman proposes that while adults are capable of non-empathic moral judgments and moral motivations, empathy is the developmental foundation of morality – 'the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible' [5].

These are intriguing claims well worth further research. However, there is evidence that, at least for adults, empathy can be meaningfully distinguished from compassion. Matthew Jordan, Dorsa Amir, and I created an Empathy Index that measures individuals' propensity to feel what they believe others are feeling (empathy in the sense used here – affective/emotional empathy) and we explored how this relates to measures of individuals' concern or compassion. A series of factor analyses found that empathy and compassion consistently load on different factors. Furthermore, we found that concern for others predicts prosocial action in economic games whereas empathy is either not predictive or negatively predictive of prosocial actions [36].

Consider also the experiments of Singer and her colleagues [37–39] in which people were given either empathy training (instructions to try to feel what others were feeling) or compassion training (in which the goal is to feel positive and warm thoughts toward others without vicariously experiencing their suffering). There was a neural difference, with different brain areas becoming active during the two sorts of training. More relevant to the concerns here, there was also a practical difference. Empathy training led to empathic distress, which is a risk factor for burnout and where the unpleasant nature of an experience can lead people to avoid situations that would trigger such distress. By contrast, 'compassion training not only promotes prosocial behavior, but also augments positive affect and resilience, which in turn fosters better coping with stressful situations' [39].

Other research finds that training in mindfulness meditation makes people kinder to others and more willing to help [40,41]. The authors speculate that this is because of reduced activation in neural systems that simulate the feelings of others and one of the authors summarizes this by point by quoting the Buddhist scholar Thupten Jinpa: 'meditation-based training enables

Box 2. What Sort of Person Is Low in Empathy?

Advising people to lower their empathy might seem perverse. Many believe that low-empathy individuals are callous and cruel. Baron-Cohen argues that evil is nothing more than 'empathy erosion' [4] and many scholars and clinicians see lack of empathy as the core deficit of psychopaths [46]. Indeed, one of the items on the standard checklist for psychopathy is 'callous/lack of empathy' [47] and psychopaths show low empathy when tested using both behavioral and neurophysiological methods [48,49].

However, psychopaths' low empathy may reflect a more general deficit in emotional processing; another item on the checklist is 'shallow affect'. More to the point, scores on both of these items are weak predictors of future violence and crime [50]. The features of psychopathy that predict bad behavior have little to do with affect, empathic or otherwise; instead, they are: (i) criminal history and antisocial behavior; and (ii) lack of inhibition and poor impulse control.

What about non-psychopaths? It makes sense to assume that low-empathy individuals are more cruel – if you do not feel the pain of others, you are presumably more likely to hurt them. Surprisingly, however, this does not appear to be the case. A recent meta-analysis reviewed the findings from all available studies of the relationship between empathy and aggression, including physical aggression, sexual aggression, and verbal aggression, and the results are summarized in its title: 'The (non)relation between empathy and aggression: surprising results from a meta-analysis' [51]. The authors report that only about 1% of the variation in aggression is accounted for by lack of empathy. As they conclude, 'There are emotions and considerations outside of empathy, and there are many reasons to care about others.'

Consider also that individuals with Asperger's syndrome or autism typically have low cognitive empathy – they struggle to understand the minds of others – and have been argued to have low emotional empathy as well. Yet, as Baron-Cohen himself points out, they show no propensity for exploitation and violence. Indeed, he argues that they often have strong moral codes [4].

Finally, there is evidence that individuals with low empathy are more rational and less biased moral deliberators [52]. While this would support the argument I am making here, some skepticism is warranted given concerns about both the empathy measures that this study used [10,36] and how it assessed moral judgment [53]. Still, it is a fascinating direction to pursue.

practitioners to move quickly from feeling the distress of others to acting with compassion to alleviate it' ([http:// www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/07/mindfulness-meditation-empathy-compassion/398867](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/07/mindfulness-meditation-empathy-compassion/398867)).

These findings not only suggest that one can dissociate empathy and compassion; they indicate that empathy can have negative effects, including exhaustion and burnout as well as diminished engagement with individuals in distress. The meditation research further hints that we can learn to staunch our empathy in certain circumstances, something that might have considerable practical benefits (Box 2).

Box 3. Empathy and Intimate Relationships

Many people believe that empathy is central to being a good friend, spouse, and parent. Nothing I have discussed so far implies that this is mistaken. The features of empathy that make it so worrisome in the policy domain – its biased, parochial, and innumerate nature – might not be problems when it comes to family and friends. Many of us, I assume, want those who we love to be biased toward us. Consider also that empathy may have evolved to facilitate certain close relationships, such as between parents and babies [9,45], and so while it might falter in a world of strangers, it is well suited for more intimate interactions.

Still, the importance of empathy – as opposed to understanding, compassion, and love – can be overstated. Often, it is not empathy that we really want. Imagine feeling anxious or sad and going to a loved one for support. Do you want this individual to become anxious or sad along with you? Here, it is understanding and compassion we need, not empathy; we would prefer for our anxiety to be met with calm support and our sadness to be met with kindness and caring and perhaps even with a bit of good cheer. If my son is panicking because he has too much homework and not enough time, it is not good parenting for me to exercise my empathy and panic along with him.

Nonetheless, even the most rabid foe of empathy has to concede that sometimes people really do want others to feel what they feel. This occurs both for pleasant feelings, like curiosity and delight, and for more negative ones, such as indignation, sadness, and grief. Such dissolving of the boundaries between one person and another can be an important part of intimacy and love [10,54,55].

Concluding Remarks

Nobody could argue that we should get rid of empathy. Empathy is an important source of pleasure; it can amplify the joys of friendship, of parenting, of sex. Even empathic distress has its appeal; there is a fascination we have with experiencing the lives of others, even if the others are suffering – this is one of the pleasures of fiction [42]. Also, empathy plays a role in intimate relationships, although the situation here is more complex than it might first appear (Box 3).

The concern about empathy is only that it makes us morally worse. Many questions remain about the relationship between empathy and morality (see Outstanding Questions) but there are reasons to believe that, when it comes to making the world a better place, we are better off without it.

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Outstanding Questions

Why did empathy (in contrast to compassion and kindness) evolve at all? Is it related to parenting, as hinted by the relationship between empathy and oxytocin, a hormone connected to childbirth and breastfeeding? Or is empathy an accidental byproduct of cognitive systems evolved to understand and predict the behavior of others? That is, did empathy evolve because it is useful to feel what someone else is feeling when trying to figure out what that person is going to do next?

How does empathy, and especially empathic distress, influence child development? Does an unempathic child grow up to be a less kind and less compassionate adult?

What is the relationship between empathy and other sentiments related to the feelings of others, such as guilt and shame? For instance, is a very empathic person also very prone to feeling guilt?

Are highly empathic individuals who work in the helping professions more prone to burnout? More generally, do the best doctors, nurses, therapists, and so on tend to have low empathy, normal empathy, or high empathy?

What about the best policymakers? Can we find an objective and unbiased method to determine whether the best leaders have low empathy, normal empathy, or high empathy?

How can we manipulate, and perhaps dampen, our empathic reactions? What role can mindfulness meditation play in this process?

What is the best way to employ non-empathic means, such as appeals to more general concerns about human welfare, to motivate ourselves and others to do what we believe is right?

When thinking about overcoming our racist and sexist biases, we consider interventions at the social and policy level; we do not ask people to try their best not to be influenced by biasing information – rather, we use procedures like blind reviewing so that the decision maker never gets access to the biasing information in the first place. Can similar interventions be made in

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the domain of empathy? For instance, can policymakers instantiate procedures so that certain governmental actions, like disaster relief and military intervention, are triggered by objective criteria rather than motivated by those irrelevant factors that trigger empathic reactions?