

The Limits of Empathy

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We are surrounded by people trying to make the world a better place. Peace activists bring enemies together so they can get to know one another and feel each other's pain. School leaders try to attract a diverse set of students so each can understand what it's like to walk in the others' shoes. Religious and community groups try to cultivate empathy.

As Steven Pinker writes in his mind-altering new book, "The Better Angels of Our Nature," we are living in the middle of an "empathy craze." There are shelfloads of books about it: "The Age of Empathy," "The Empathy Gap," "The Empathic Civilization," "Teaching Empathy." There's even a brain theory that we have mirror neurons in our heads that enable us to feel what's in other people's heads and that these neurons lead to sympathetic care and moral action.

There's a lot of truth to all this. We do have mirror neurons in our heads. People who are empathetic are more sensitive to the perspectives and sufferings of others. They are more likely to make compassionate moral judgments.

The problem comes when we try to turn feeling into action. Empathy makes you more aware of other people's suffering, but it's not clear it actually motivates you to take moral action or prevents you from taking immoral action.

In the early days of the Holocaust, Nazi prison guards sometimes wept as they mowed down Jewish women and children, but they still did it. Subjects in the famous Milgram experiments felt anguish as they appeared to administer electric shocks to other research subjects, but they pressed on because some guy in a lab coat told them to. Empathy orients you toward moral action, but it doesn't seem to help much when that action comes at a personal cost. You may feel a pang for the homeless guy on the other side of the street, but the odds are that you are not going to cross the street to give him a dollar.

David Brooks/Josh Haner/The New York Times

There have been piles of studies investigating the link between empathy and moral action. Different scholars come to different conclusions, but, in a recent paper, Jesse Prinz, a philosopher at City University of New York, summarized the research this way: "These studies suggest that empathy is not a major player when it comes to moral motivation. Its contribution is negligible in children, modest in adults, and nonexistent when costs are significant." Other scholars have called empathy a "fragile flower," easily crushed by self-concern.

Some influences, which we think of as trivial, are much stronger — such as a temporary burst of positive emotion. In one experiment in the 1970s, researchers planted a dime in a phone booth. Eighty-seven percent of the people who found the dime offered to help a person who dropped some papers nearby, compared with only 4 percent who didn't find a dime. Empathy doesn't produce anything like this kind of effect.

Moreover, Prinz argues, empathy often leads people astray. It influences people to care more about cute victims than ugly victims. It leads to nepotism. It subverts justice;

juries give lighter sentences to defendants that show sadness. It leads us to react to shocking incidents, like a hurricane, but not longstanding conditions, like global hunger or preventable diseases.

Nobody is against empathy. Nonetheless, it's insufficient. These days empathy has become a shortcut. It has become a way to experience delicious moral emotions without confronting the weaknesses in our nature that prevent us from actually acting upon them. It has become a way to experience the illusion of moral progress without having to do the nasty work of making moral judgments. In a culture that is inarticulate about moral categories and touchy about giving offense, teaching empathy is a safe way for schools and other institutions to seem virtuous without risking controversy or hurting anybody's feelings.

People who actually perform pro-social action don't only feel for those who are suffering, they feel compelled to act by a sense of duty. Their lives are structured by sacred codes.

Think of anybody you admire. They probably have some talent for fellow-feeling, but it is overshadowed by their sense of obligation to some religious, military, social or philosophic code. They would feel a sense of shame or guilt if they didn't live up to the code. The code tells them when they deserve public admiration or dishonor. The code helps them evaluate other people's feelings, not just share them. The code tells them that an adulterer or a drug dealer may feel ecstatic, but the proper response is still contempt.

The code isn't just a set of rules. It's a source of identity. It's pursued with joy. It arouses the strongest emotions and attachments. Empathy is a sideshow. If you want to make the world a better place, help people debate, understand, reform, revere and enact their codes. Accept that codes conflict.