

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## The Limits of Empathy

By David Brooks  
2011

*Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. Empathy is usually viewed as a positive trait and as motivating helpful social involvement, but not all researchers share this viewpoint. In this opinion piece, David Brooks discusses his views on empathy and whether or not it influences our actions. As you read, identify the claims David Brooks makes about empathy.*

- [1] 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<sup>1</sup> empathy.



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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<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup> 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.

- [5] 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<sup>4</sup> 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.

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1. **Cultivate (verb):** to develop  
 2. A neuron is a nerve cell in the brain. A mirror neuron is a neuron that fires both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed by another.  
 3. **Morality (noun):** principles concerning the difference between right and wrong or good and bad behavior.  
 4. **Anguish (noun):** severe mental or physical pain

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.

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<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> It subverts<sup>7</sup> 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.

[10] Nobody is against empathy. Nonetheless, it's insufficient.<sup>8</sup> 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<sup>9</sup> 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<sup>10</sup> or a drug dealer may feel ecstatic, but the proper response is still contempt.<sup>11</sup>

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5. small or insignificant

6. the unfair practice of favoring relatives

7. **Subvert (verb):** to undermine the power and authority of a system

8. **Insufficient (adjective):** not enough

9. **Virtuous (adjective):** having or showing high moral standards

10. a person who is unfaithful to their partner

11. **Contempt (noun):** a feeling that someone is not worthy of respect or approval

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<sup>12</sup> and enact their codes. Accept that codes conflict.

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12. **Revere (verb):** to feel deep respect or admiration for something

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes Brooks' central claim in the text?
  - A. Empathy provides people with the emotional capacity to care for those who are suffering and drives them to help others.
  - B. While empathy encourages caring feelings towards others, it alone does not drive people to act on their feelings in the same way as a sense of responsibility.
  - C. Feeling empathy for others is a self-serving emotion, as it provides people with the sense that they are good even when they ignore suffering.
  - D. It is best not to feel empathy for others, as people tend to take advantage of the sympathy they know they can inspire in empathetic people.
  
2. PART B: Which TWO details from the text best support the answer to Part A?
  - A. "School leaders try to attract a diverse set of students so each can understand what it's like to walk in the others' shoes." (Paragraph 1)
  - B. "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." (Paragraph 4)
  - C. "Moreover, Prinz argues, empathy often leads people astray. It influences people to care more about cute victims than ugly victims." (Paragraph 9)
  - D. "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." (Paragraph 10)
  - E. "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." (Paragraph 11)
  - F. "The code tells them that an adulterer or a drug dealer may feel ecstatic, but the proper response is still contempt." (Paragraph 12)
  
3. PART A: Which of the following best describes how the author makes his claim?
  - A. The author compares how likely empathetic people are to take moral action with people who have a sense of duty.
  - B. The author draws on personal experiences of witnessing empathetic people not taking action in immoral situations.
  - C. The author emphasizes how much better people with a sense a duty are than people with empathy.
  - D. The author provides scientific evidence for why empathetic people are less likely to take actions than people with a sense of duty.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "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." (Paragraph 2)
  - B. "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." (Paragraph 5)
  - C. "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." (Paragraph 8)
  - D. "Empathy is a sideshow. If you want to make the world a better place, help people debate, understand, reform, revere and enact their codes." (Paragraph 13)

5. How does the detail about the Nazi prison guards in paragraph 5 contribute to the text?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Is self-interest more powerful than empathy? Do you think that people are generally more self-interested or empathetic?
2. What code do you live by? How does it shape your actions towards others?
3. Do you consider yourself an empathetic person? Why or why not? How has being empathetic shaped your behavior?
4. According to the text, people with empathy still neglect to help those in need. Have you ever seen someone neglect someone in need? If so, describe the experience.