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A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE BABY IN THE WELL

The case against empathy.

BY PAUL BLOOM

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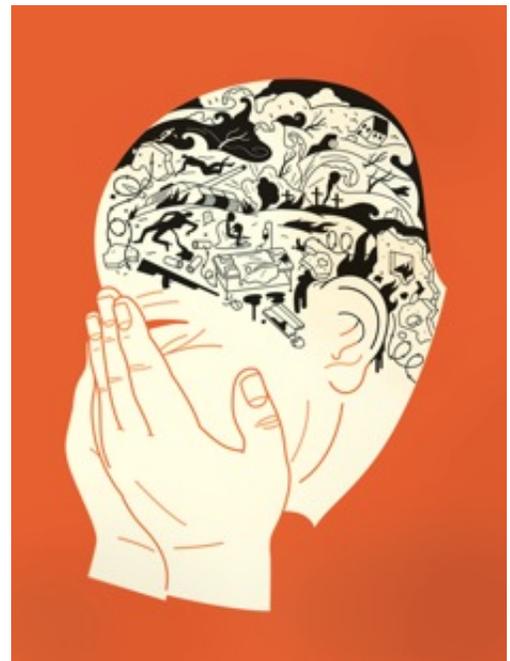
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In 2008, Karina Encarnacion, an eight year-old girl from Missouri, wrote to President-elect Barack Obama with some advice about what kind of dog he should get for his daughters. She also suggested that he enforce recycling and ban unnecessary wars. Obama wrote to thank her, and offered some advice of his own: “If you don’t already know what it means, I want you to look up the word ‘empathy’ in the dictionary. I believe we don’t have enough empathy in our world today, and it is up to your generation to change that.”

This wasn’t the first time Obama had spoken up for empathy. Two years earlier, in a commencement address at Xavier University, he discussed the importance of being able “to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us—the child who’s hungry, the steelworker who’s been laid off, the family who lost the entire life they built together when the storm came to town.” He went on,



Empathy is deaf to facts and figures; it’s engaged by the “identifiable victim effect.”
Illustration by Harry Campbell.

“When you think like this—when you choose to broaden your ambit of concern and empathize with the plight of others, whether they are close friends or distant strangers—it becomes harder not to act, harder not to help.”

The word “empathy”—a rendering of the German *Einfühlung*, “feeling into”—is only a century old, but people have been interested for a long time in the moral implications of feeling our way into the lives of others. In “The Theory of Moral Sentiments” (1759), Adam Smith observed that sensory experience alone could not spur us toward sympathetic engagement with others: “Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers.” For Smith, what made us moral beings was the imaginative capacity to “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.”

In this sense, empathy is an instinctive mirroring of others’ experience—James Bond gets his testicles mashed in “Casino Royale,” and male moviegoers grimace and cross their legs. Smith talks of how “persons of delicate fibres” who notice a beggar’s sores and ulcers “are apt to feel an itching or uneasy sensation in the correspondent part of their own bodies.” There is now widespread support, in the social sciences, for what the psychologist C. Daniel Batson calls “the empathy-altruism hypothesis.” Batson has found that simply instructing his subjects to take another’s perspective made them more caring and more likely to help.

Empathy research is thriving these days, as cognitive neuroscience undergoes what some call an “affective revolution.” There is increasing focus on the emotions, especially those involved in moral thought and action. We’ve learned, for instance, that some of the same neural systems that are active when we are in pain become engaged when we observe the suffering of others. Other researchers are exploring how empathy emerges in chimpanzee and other primates, how it flowers in young children, and the sort of circumstances that trigger it.

This interest isn’t just theoretical. If we can figure out how empathy works, we might be able to produce more of it. Some individuals staunch their empathy through the deliberate endorsement of political or religious ideologies that promote cruelty toward their adversaries, while others are deficient because of bad genes, abusive parenting, brutal experience, or the usual unhappy goulash of all of the above. At an extreme lie the one per cent or so of people who are clinically described as psychopaths. A standard checklist for the condition includes “callousness; lack of empathy”; many other distinguishing psychopathic traits, like lack of guilt and pathological lying, surely stem from this fundamental deficit. Some blame the empathy-deficient for much of the suffering in the world. In “The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty” (Basic), Simon Baron-Cohen goes so far as to equate evil with “empathy erosion.”

In a thoughtful new book on bullying, “Sticks and Stones” (Random House), Emily Bazelon writes, “The scariest aspect of bullying is the utter lack of empathy”—a diagnosis that she applies not only to the bullies but also to those who do nothing to help the victims. Few of those involved in bullying, she cautions, will turn into full-blown psychopaths. Rather, the empathy gap is situational: bullies have come to see their victims as worthless; they have chosen to shut down their empathetic responses. But most will outgrow—and perhaps regret—their terrible behavior. “The key is to remember that almost everyone has the capacity for empathy and decency—and to tend that seed as best as we possibly can,” she maintains.

Two other recent books, “The Empathic Civilization” (Penguin), by Jeremy Rifkin, and “Humanity on a Tightrope” (Rowman & Littlefield), by Paul R. Ehrlich and Robert E. Ornstein, make the powerful argument that empathy has been the main driver of human progress, and that we need more of it if our species is to survive. Ehrlich and Ornstein want us “to emotionally join a global family.” Rifkin calls for us to make the leap to “global empathic consciousness.” He sees this as the last best hope for saving the world from environmental destruction, and concludes with the plaintive question “Can we reach biosphere consciousness and global empathy in time to avoid planetary collapse?” These are sophisticated books, which provide extensive and accessible reviews of the scholarly literature on empathy. And, as befits the spirit of the times, they enthusiastically champion an increase in empathy as a cure for humanity’s ills.

This enthusiasm may be misplaced, however. Empathy has some unfortunate features—it is parochial, narrow-minded, and innumerate. We’re often at our best when we’re smart enough not to rely on it.

In 1949, Kathy Fiscus, a three-year-old girl, fell into a well in San Marino, California, and the entire nation was captivated by concern. Four decades later, America was transfixed by the plight of Jessica McClure—Baby Jessica—the eighteen-month-old who fell into a narrow well in Texas, in October, 1987, triggering a fifty-eight-hour rescue operation. “Everybody in America became godmothers and godfathers of Jessica while this was going on,” President Reagan remarked.

The immense power of empathy has been demonstrated again and again. It is why Americans were rivetted by the fate of Natalee Holloway, the teen-ager who went missing in Aruba, in 2005. It’s why, in the wake of widely reported tragedies and disasters—the tsunami of 2004, Hurricane Katrina the year after, or Sandy last year—people gave time, money, and even blood. It’s why, last December, when twenty children were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Newtown, Connecticut, there was a widespread sense of grief, and an intense desire to help. Last month, of course, saw a similar outpouring of support for the victims of the Boston Marathon bombing.

Why do people respond to these misfortunes and not to others? The psychologist Paul Slovic points

out that, when Holloway disappeared, the story of her plight took up far more television time than the concurrent genocide in Darfur. Each day, more than ten times the number of people who died in Hurricane Katrina die because of preventable diseases, and more than thirteen times as many perish from malnutrition.

There is, of course, the attention-getting power of new events. Just as we can come to ignore the hum of traffic, we become oblivious of problems that seem unrelenting, like the starvation of children in Africa—or homicide in the United States. In the past three decades, there were some sixty mass shootings, causing about five hundred deaths; that is, about one-tenth of one per cent of the homicides in America. But mass murders get splashed onto television screens, newspaper headlines, and the Web; the biggest ones settle into our collective memory—Columbine, Virginia Tech, Aurora, Sandy Hook. The 99.9 per cent of other homicides are, unless the victim is someone you’ve heard of, mere background noise.

The key to engaging empathy is what has been called “the identifiable victim effect.” As the economist Thomas Schelling, writing forty-five years ago, mordantly observed, “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.”

You can see the effect in the lab. The psychologists Tehila Kogut and Ilana Ritov asked some subjects how much money they would give to help develop a drug that would save the life of one child, and asked others how much they would give to save eight children. The answers were about the same. But when Kogut and Ritov told a third group a child’s name and age, and showed her picture, the donations shot up—now there were far more to the one than to the eight.

The number of victims hardly matters—there is little psychological difference between hearing about the suffering of five thousand and that of five hundred thousand. Imagine reading that two thousand people just died in an earthquake in a remote country, and then discovering that the actual number of deaths was twenty thousand. Do you now feel ten times worse? To the extent that we can recognize the numbers as significant, it’s because of reason, not empathy.

In the broader context of humanitarianism, as critics like Linda Polman have pointed out, the empathetic reflex can lead us astray. When the perpetrators of violence profit from aid—as in the “taxes” that warlords often demand from international relief agencies—they are actually given an incentive to commit further atrocities. It is similar to the practice of some parents in India who mutilate their children at birth in order to make them more effective beggars. The children’s debilities tug at our hearts, but a more dispassionate analysis of the situation is necessary if we are going to do anything

meaningful to prevent them.

A “politics of empathy” doesn’t provide much clarity in the public sphere, either. Typically, political disputes involve a disagreement over whom we should empathize *with*. Liberals argue for gun control, for example, by focussing on the victims of gun violence; conservatives point to the unarmed victims of crime, defenseless against the savagery of others. Liberals in favor of tightening federally enforced safety regulations invoke the employee struggling with work-related injuries; their conservative counterparts talk about the small businessman bankrupted by onerous requirements. So don’t suppose that if your ideological opponents could only ramp up their empathy they would think just like you.

On many issues, empathy can pull us in the wrong direction. The outrage that comes from adopting the perspective of a victim can drive an appetite for retribution. (Think of those statutes named for dead children: Megan’s Law, Jessica’s Law, Caylee’s Law.) But the appetite for retribution is typically indifferent to long-term consequences. In one study, conducted by Jonathan Baron and Ilana Ritov, people were asked how best to punish a company for producing a vaccine that caused the death of a child. Some were told that a higher fine would make the company work harder to manufacture a safer product; others were told that a higher fine would discourage the company from making the vaccine, and since there were no acceptable alternatives on the market the punishment would lead to more deaths. Most people didn’t care; they wanted the company fined heavily, whatever the consequence.

This dynamic regularly plays out in the realm of criminal justice. In 1987, Willie Horton, a convicted murderer who had been released on furlough from the Northeastern Correctional Center, in Massachusetts, raped a woman after beating and tying up her fiancé. The furlough program came to be seen as a humiliating mistake on the part of Governor Michael Dukakis, and was used against him by his opponents during his run for President, the following year. Yet the program may have *reduced* the likelihood of such incidents. In fact, a 1987 report found that the recidivism rate in Massachusetts dropped in the eleven years after the program was introduced, and that convicts who were furloughed before being released were less likely to go on to commit a crime than those who were not. The trouble is that you can’t point to individuals who *weren’t* raped, assaulted, or killed as a result of the program, just as you can’t point to a specific person whose life was spared because of vaccination.

There’s a larger pattern here. Sensible policies often have benefits that are merely statistical but victims who have names and stories. Consider global warming—what Rifkin calls the “escalating entropy bill that now threatens catastrophic climate change and our very existence.” As it happens, the limits of empathy are especially stark here. Opponents of restrictions on CO₂ emissions are flush with identifiable victims—all those who will be harmed by increased costs, by business closures. The

millions of people who at some unspecified future date will suffer the consequences of our current inaction are, by contrast, pale statistical abstractions.

The government's failure to enact prudent long-term policies is often attributed to the incentive system of democratic politics (which favors short-term fixes), and to the powerful influence of money. But the politics of empathy is also to blame. Too often, our concern for specific individuals today means neglecting crises that will harm countless people in the future.

Moral judgment entails more than putting oneself in another's shoes. As the philosopher Jesse Prinz points out, some acts that we easily recognize as wrong, such as shoplifting or tax evasion, have no identifiable victim. And plenty of good deeds—disciplining a child for dangerous behavior, enforcing a fair and impartial procedure for determining who should get an organ transplant, despite the suffering of those low on the list—require us to put our empathy to one side. Eight deaths are worse than one, even if you know the name of the one; humanitarian aid can, if poorly targeted, be counterproductive; the threat posed by climate change warrants the sacrifices entailed by efforts to ameliorate it. “The decline of violence may owe something to an expansion of empathy,” the psychologist Steven Pinker has written, “but it also owes much to harder-boiled faculties like prudence, reason, fairness, self-control, norms and taboos, and conceptions of human rights.” A reasoned, even counter-empathetic analysis of moral obligation and likely consequences is a better guide to planning for the future than the gut wrench of empathy.

Rifkin and others have argued, plausibly, that moral progress involves expanding our concern from the family and the tribe to humanity as a whole. Yet it is impossible to empathize with seven billion strangers, or to feel toward someone you've never met the degree of concern you feel for a child, a friend, or a lover. Our best hope for the future is not to get people to think of all humanity as family—that's impossible. It lies, instead, in an appreciation of the fact that, even if we don't empathize with distant strangers, their lives have the same value as the lives of those we love.

That's not a call for a world without empathy. A race of psychopaths might well be smart enough to invent the principles of solidarity and fairness. (Research suggests that criminal psychopaths are adept at making moral judgments.) The problem with those who are devoid of empathy is that, although they may recognize what's right, they have no motivation to act upon it. Some spark of fellow-feeling is needed to convert intelligence into action.

But a spark may be all that's needed. Putting aside the extremes of psychopathy, there is no evidence to suggest that the less empathetic are morally worse than the rest of us. Simon Baron-Cohen observes that some people with autism and Asperger's syndrome, though typically empathy-deficient, are highly moral, owing to a strong desire to follow rules and insure that they are applied fairly.

Where empathy really does matter is in our personal relationships. Nobody wants to live like

Thomas Gradgrind—Charles Dickens’s caricature utilitarian, who treats all interactions, including those with his children, in explicitly economic terms. Empathy is what makes us human; it’s what makes us both subjects and objects of moral concern. Empathy betrays us only when we take it as a moral guide.

Newtown, in the wake of the Sandy Hook massacre, was inundated with so much charity that it became a burden. More than eight hundred volunteers were recruited to deal with the gifts that were sent to the city—all of which kept arriving despite earnest pleas from Newtown officials that charity be directed elsewhere. A vast warehouse was crammed with plush toys the townspeople had no use for; millions of dollars rolled in to this relatively affluent community. We felt their pain; we wanted to help. Meanwhile—just to begin a very long list—almost twenty million American children go to bed hungry each night, and the federal food-stamp program is facing budget cuts of almost twenty per cent. Many of the same kindly strangers who paid for Baby Jessica’s medical needs support cuts to state Medicaid programs—cuts that will affect millions. Perhaps fifty million Americans will be stricken next year by food-borne illness, yet budget reductions mean that the F.D.A. will be conducting two thousand fewer safety inspections. Even more invisibly, next year the average American will release about twenty metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and many in Congress seek to loosen restrictions on greenhouse gases even further.

Such are the paradoxes of empathy. The power of this faculty has something to do with its ability to bring our moral concern into a laser pointer of focussed attention. If a planet of billions is to survive, however, we’ll need to take into consideration the welfare of people not yet harmed—and, even more, of people not yet born. They have no names, faces, or stories to grip our conscience or stir our fellow-feeling. Their prospects call, rather, for deliberation and calculation. Our hearts will always go out to the baby in the well; it’s a measure of our humanity. But empathy will have to yield to reason if humanity is to have a future. ♦

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