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A NOTE ON EMPATHY

This essay gathers some thoughts on the first NHLP-EU Digital Event on Empathy.

Saying you're against empathy is like saying you're against kittens, because of its strong associations with kindness, compassion, and general goodness. It's worth pointing out that there's different kinds of empathy, most relevantly affective empathy (feeling what people are feeling), and cognitive empathy (understanding how people are feeling).

Affective empathy has a lot of positives, from its role in intimacy to the way it makes fiction more enjoyable. But when it comes to morality, it doesn't tend to make that good a foundation for decision-making.

Some of the shortcomings of empathy are well illustrated by what we are going through in the European social and political landscape and discourse. If we tend to believe that xenophobic, racist rhetorics lack empathy, what is actually happening is the opposite; these movements are motivated by it. The question on empathy is not so much whether it's there or not - most humans are empathetic creatures - but for whom we feel it, and how that influences our behavior.

People who are against immigration most often do it out of empathy, care, and a wish to protect their loved ones and those they consider as their own, mobilized by narratives of crime, danger and joblessness.

When politicians are building these narratives, they are exerting cognitive empathy skills, understanding what motivates people, what and who they connect to, and directing that towards specific political agendas.

Cognitive empathy is not inherently evil. It's a neutral skill that can be used for ill, as do con people, or for good, as a good teacher or therapist would. It's often the baseline of persuasion, and a common skill for people to have in service industries. On a similar note, affective empathy is not universally good. There are many instances and professions where an absence of affective empathy will lead to better care and more positive outcomes, while protecting those providing the care from long term consequences of trauma exposure, as is the case of first responders and surgeons.

[As psychology professor Paul Bloom explains in his research](#), a common problem with affective empathy is that it acts as a spotlight, and the direction it points towards is inherently biased. We are more naturally drawn to those who are similar to us, those we deem safe, our allies, or in-group. As he explains, a morality based on empathy distorts our behavior in favor of the familiar. And if empathy is linked to feelings of pleasure and joy, it's also closely related to anger and violence. Acting on empathy alone doesn't take into consideration how our actions can be harmful to those our empathy is not focusing on either, and might lead to their dehumanization, and this is something we constantly see around us.

However hard we try to equalize our relationship to every human and their experiences, there's no certainty that's fully achievable. In more than a way, it makes sense that we feel more connection to our partners, children, family, friends and community than to strangers.

Another problem is that empathy is also shaped and influenced by those whose experiences are more broadly and predominantly represented in our culture in a positive manner. When we put things this way, another stark problem starts to show. Who is represented overwhelmingly favorably in the media? Who isn't? Who are decision-makers, directors, writers with large platforms, what are their lives and experiences like, and how does that shape the narratives that are built?

If it's urgent to work towards less segregated societies, better representation of minorities, and lower inequality, this doesn't change the fact that running on empathy alone will mean that the biases of the majority will systematically outweigh those of the minority.

If we make empathy the baseline for care and justice, we are conditioning fairness to both people's capacity to plead their case, and our willingness to disrupt our biases and affections. This is what is currently happening with trans and immigrant people, where people are being left to make the case for their own humanity in order to access rights and safety. This equals asking marginalized, exploited and oppressed people to relive their trauma, or expecting emotional labor in the form of (often unpaid) education in order to make others "understand" and empathize with their experiences, which is inherently violent and exploitative itself.

Like Bloom, I find it urgent that we take a more rational approach, beyond emotions, to motivate and shape our compassion and care for others, particularly when it comes to policy and structural justice. The more power we hold, the more it matters that we distance ourselves from our natural empathy, embracing rational compassion and moral responsibility instead.

Let me give you a concrete example many of us can relate to; as a teacher we will, inevitably, feel more closeness and connection to some people under our care. This is absolutely normal. Yet our role is to treat everyone equally, to evenly divide our attention and resources, and to give as much support, time and energy to every person in the room regardless of how we personally feel about them. To achieve this, we need to actively dissociate from how we personally feel about people, guiding ourselves by moral principles rather than emotions.

I believe that being in any other position of leadership and power is the same.

Affective empathy relates to how we feel, and human feelings are naturally messy. Being human is imperfect, biased, unfair, hot-headed, tribalistic. That's who we are, but it doesn't have to mean we can't overcome our impulses in our systems and decisions. That's, after all, the point of morality.

We can't always control how we feel, but we can control how we behave. We can ignite more sustainable, long-term changes than what our fluctuating, irrational, biased emotions alone would allow.

I believe that when it comes to how we run our companies, communities and institutions, how we approach conflict, and how we step into our social, professional and political roles, we should mindfully, rationally, intentionally shape our behavior. We should choose a sense of equity, fairness, justice, collective responsibility and ethical morality to dialogue with, and above all prevail, over our instinctive affections.

In a world increasingly shaped by inflammatory rhetoric and algorithms designed to manipulate our engagement through the stimulation of the most visceral, impulsive, primary affective empathy, this is more important than ever.

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