The Limits of Empathy

ruminations of an old man

I believe that we are born loving. Wanting to understand and be understood. Craving love and craving to give love.

Some few are not born so. Many of us lose our loving nature as we grow and learn from others. But beneath all is the wisdom we are graced with: to feel the emotions of others, to care for others, to sacrifice for others.

Some call this "empathy". Others speak of the Golden Rule. Others talk of altruism and look to evolution and neuroscience for why we are this way.

I want to understand what is the impulse and how or whether it can lead us to a good life. And I want to understand how or whether limits to feeling with others and being loving are needed for a good life.

What is empathy?

What do we mean by "empathy"? What do we understand by saying someone is an empathetic person?

There is no general agreement, and dictionaries are not much help.

It seems to me that there are three levels of empathy.

Recognizing emotions

The first level, without which there can be nothing we call "empathy", is recognizing the emotions of others.

The inability to "read" the emotions of others is characteristic of autistic people. The autistic child cannot recognize the emotions of others. Seeing someone laugh or cry is no more meaningful to him or her than seeing a tree shedding its leaves in the fall or a car driving down the street. They do not respond to rage with rage; they do not respond with kindness to kindness; they do not respond to joy with joy; they do not respond to a smile with a smile. They have no idea what the other person is feeling. A blank.

If a child is not too severely autistic, we can teach her to recognize certain physical expressions of body and face, certain words or phrases, and respond to them. Someone says "Thank you" and the child learns to say "You're welcome." The child can be taught to understand that when someone exhibits signs we would construe as indicating anger, it is time to be quiet and walk away. The child does not learn to feel or participate in the emotions of others, just to recognize the signs. Like seeing a red light at an intersection.

Responding to emotions

Recognizing the other person's emotions and responding emotionally—not with thought, but immediately, physically more than mentally—is the next level of empathy.

In a parking lot I back into someone's car. I hear a scrunch, metal bending. The person in the other car gets out and starts screaming at me, berating me, getting closer to me with a raised fist. I react to his rage with rage. Or I back off, afraid. Rage is contagious, more than kindness. Fight or flight.

A woman says to her friend's child, "Would you like a cookie". The little boy nods yes, and she gives him the cookie. This is responding to the offer, but not the emotion. The little boy eats the cookie, then cuddles up to the woman. This is responding to the emotion the little boy saw in the woman: affection for kindness and affection.

CIA instructors, including psychologists, taught and perhaps are still teaching interrogators how to torture. They taught them to be responsive to the emotional experiences of the prisoners. If the torturers got pleasure from doing it—as we are led to believe they did since they continued torturing when they knew there was no further information they could get—then they were responding emotionally to the feelings of the prisoner. That is not empathy. Recognizing and responding to emotions can be no more than a skill used to manipulate others to your own ends.

Recognizing emotions and responding to them in a caring manner

I'm driving to town and see a guy pulling a suitcase. It's hot, over 100º (37º centigrade), too hot to be walking a mile and a half to the nearest place on the road he can get to. I don't know him, but I imagine how he feels—I know it's hot and he is hot. So I stop and offer him a ride.

I see a little boy outside the grocery store, sitting, crying—no mother, no father in sight. I feel for the boy, he is scared, unhappy. I speak to him softly, kindly, try to help. Calming him to get information about how to find his mother or father or older sister. *I recognize the emotion, I respond emotionally, and I act in a caring manner*. This is what I think most of us mean by empathy.

Being polite

Our natural ability to read emotions of others and respond in a caring way is not consistent and is distorted or suppressed by how we learn to live in our social world as we grow up. Often we just don't notice, going on with blinders.

A man walking along the sidewalk sees a woman and child sitting huddled against a building in the cold wind. The man recognizes the unhappiness and walks by: "I don't want to get involved. I'll be late for my meeting." Yes, recognition of the emotion, then discomfort.

As adults we often do not respond with even minimal empathy, being in a hurry, not wanting to engage another. Fear, impatience (which is a child of fear), indifference, these feelings often dominate us. Our social worlds get more limited, more angry, as each person feels that his or her feelings are being ignored.

This is why we have our codes of politeness. They make our social world run more smoothly. Even if we don't feel grateful, even if we don't appreciate what the other person did, we say "Thank you." We hold a door open for someone. We give up a seat on the bus to a little old man. We might not do it out of kindness. We need not identify with the feelings of others. But the person who receives the thanks, who receives the gesture, will accept it as a kindness, and the little part of the world there has become less filled with friction, more filled with caring.

Basic courtesy is what we rely on when we cannot imagine what the other is feeling or when we become distracted.

Aunt: "Here's a cookie for you."
(child takes it and begins to eat while walking away)
Mother: "What do you say?"
Child: "Thank you."

This is like teaching an autistic person to recognize what to do when he sees someone we would say is struggling or is sad.

Recognizing emotions as a social skill

Recognizing emotions of others is essential for us as social animals. To live together we must be able to "interact" with others. That's necessary for all social animals, from sheep to chimpanzees. But what's different is that they live in small groups, where now we constantly meet strangers. Yet with strangers we do not become immediately aggressive or fearful. We have ways to interact to lead us to know how to respond "appropriately". We do this some with language but even more with "body language", reading the other person's feelings. (At least we do with someone from our culture—we fail to read a Japanese person's smiling as embarrassment, and if you're from the ghetto you might read a middle-class person's friendly nod as a challenge.)

But being social animals is not enough for creatures to have empathy. Sheep are social animals, they recognize each other, they flock together. When one is afraid and runs, they all run. Beyond that—nothing. If a sheep is hurt it tries not to show it, for any sign of weakness would lead to being eaten by the mountain lion stalking nearby.

Other animals, particularly mammals, have some ability to read the emotions of other animals of the same kind. This is an adaptive trait. Fewer kinds of animals are able to respond emotionally more than at a survival level. As my friend Matt who is an animal biologist notes, humans are distinguished as having a developed sense of empathy far beyond any other kind of animal.

Courtesy

Courtesy is just one step from lying. The child is not "really" grateful. But courtesy keeps us together, trusting each other even in the knowledge that often the response of the other person is a lie. We gossip, we remember and compare, trying to find out what is sincere. We need to in order not to be hurt, not to be deceived, to gain friends we can trust. We abhor hypocrisy, which is courtesy that is most dishonest.

The child learns to say "Thank you" and finds that by doing so she gets more cookies. Courtesy, and reading others' emotions, is a way for us to get what we want. Arf, arf, whimper, whimper.

Discourtesy

We call a person discourteous when he pushes past you, bumping you in a crowd, or when someone plays music very loud in a bus. That's lack of courtesy, thoughtlessness. Real discourtesy is when you offer to shake hands with a man and he refuses, he sees your extended hand and obviously ignores it. He recognizes the emotion and responds to it—the first two steps towards empathy —but he does not respond in a caring manner.

Dogs have empathy?

Dogs are social animals. They take us to be part of the pack. They have been bred or simply evolved to attach strongly to a human, more even than to another dog. They recognize our emotions. We are sure that they also have empathy for us, that they love us.

They do not have empathy for each other. My dog Arfito comes to me and sits looking up at me with those big brown eyes, hoping for food. Or he comes and sits next to me hoping for petting, or rolling over on his back inviting me to rub his belly. Often he is successful: a treat or dinner or petting When I feed Arfito in the evening and give my very big dog Bidú his larger bowl of food, Arfito quickly finishes his food and goes and sits next to Bidú and looks at him while Bidú is eating, just as he looks at me when he wants some food. It would work with me: I'd share my meal. But Bidú looks over and takes no further notice. No sense of loving, of sharing. Bark and the whole world barks with you; whine and you whine alone.

Dogs rely on eliciting our emotions because it works: they get food and attention.

Do dogs "really" love us? Do they have empathy? Would a dog, seeing you hungry and begging, give you her food?

I had a dog, Juney, who was dumb, perhaps the stupidest border collie ever. She couldn't figure out how to get around a fence that was open at one end. When I came out of the house, she would leave her food to jump up and go for a walk with me. She would sit outside my dinner window, looking up at me. She needed me. If I was happy, she was happy, jumping up, ready to walk or play. If I was sad, she was happy, jumping up, ready to walk or play. Oh boy, oh boy, fun, play, walk, petting. That is not responding to my emotions with similar emotion. Appreciated, yes. Loved? Is there a difference?

With Arfito, petting is good, but food is better. With Bidú, food is good, but petting is better. When offered a treat, Bidú nuzzles up to me and wants to be petted before taking the treat. Does Bidú love me more? Does Arfito love me more? Is love even part of it? Or is it need and habit, comfort and pleasure?

Empathy for birds?

I saw a movie, *Spirit of the Eagle*, where an eagle plays the role that a dog usually does in heart-warming rescue movies. A father and son are in the wilds and are threatened by thieves. The father goes out by himself and is hurt. The eagle leads the boy to his father, and all is well in the end. The boy and father are with the eagle.

I can't say that the eagle looks happy. I don't know what a happy eagle looks like compared to a sad one, as (I think) I do with dogs. Can someone really be a friend of an eagle? Can someone have empathy for an eagle?

My friend Matt is also a falconer. He and I went out with his hawks near sunset while he lets them hunt for rabbits. He let them out, the younger one went to his arm. Then she took off and landed on my head—fortunately I had on a stocking cap. I did not panic, though I was anxious. But if the bird thinks this is a good place to sit, who am I to argue? Turns out that the first time Matt had this bird in public, the bird flew to someone's head and perched there. Matt reckons it's because it's the highest vantage point. That first time Matt immediately coaxed her back to his arm

with a piece of meat. Thereby, he realized, he had trained the bird that perching on someone's head gets a treat.

Matt says that he recognizes how his hawks feel: fear, excitement, hunger. But he doesn't feel how they feel. Recognition of emotion ≠ empathy. We saw that earlier with autistic people who can learn to recognize but not feel. Key to empathy is sharing the feeling of the other. Good or bad. Anger as well as kindness. Fear as well as grief.

Empathy for other creatures

Dogs, donkeys, horses, . . . , hawks, falcons, fish. Mammals?

Sympathy

Is sympathy the missing part of empathy that I called responding in a caring manner? Is sympathy part of empathy as I have characterized it?

We can respond with sympathy but not empathy. I see a donkey being beaten. It stands there stoically. It begins to bray. I cannot imagine what it is feeling, for I would try to run away, I would kick, do more than scream. And that leads me to try to stop the woman beating the donkey. I project my emotion onto the donkey. I sympathize.

Sympathy is innate, too, it seems to me. And it can be encouraged, learned.

But to me the idea of sympathy is too close to feeling sorry for the other person or creature. So I don't think that "sympathy" is quite right for being part of empathy, though when we see someone acting with empathy we often think of it as sympathy. Rather, I'd say it's compassion. Compassion, sympathy, are they different?

Cultivating empathy

I was in San Francisco, it was early in the morning, and I was returning home to New Mexico. I had to get to the airport. I got a taxi to the subway entrance. So many people going to work, and it was raining. I was pulling behind me my carry-on bag with wheels. I had to go down a long set of stairs, the first part of which was exposed to the rain. I'm old, and my back hurt, and I was limping a bit. I walked down one stair, then pulled the bag from the stair above to the stair I'm on, thump. Then the next stair, first me, then the bag, thump. Then another stair, thump. A young woman asks me if she can help and carries my bag to the bottom of the stairs. I am so grateful. My heart is overflowing that a stranger would do this for me.

This is not courtesy; this is empathy, which fills the world with much more joy and kindness than courtesy.

But can't we say that she responded in a caring way because my emotion, my physical suffering, affected her but not in a threatening manner? Do we have to overcome our natural impulse to respond to rage with rage or fear for it to count as empathy?

Perhaps "overcome" is the wrong word. We learn to see the pain in others that makes them rage and our heart fills with compassion rather than rage. So though the need and ability to love and want to be loving may be natural, it is not so dominant as to supplant our immediate emotional reactions to the emotions of others. We cultivate empathy.

Body language

My friends, when I told them the story of my travel to the airport, wondered why I wasn't worried that the young woman would steal my bag. I knew she wouldn't steal it. I could tell from the way she walked, her gestures, her stance more than the words she used.

Body language more than words is our key to reading others' emotions. Yet much of what we call "body language" is not "natural" but learned, conventional, shared only in a small group or a larger culture. An American goes to Japan and gets confused, mistaking smiling for happiness or agreement rather than a way to cover embarrassment. [See my book *Conventional Gestures: Meaning and Methodology* and my book with Alex Raffi *American Gestures*.]

Teaching empathy

I was stimulated to write about empathy by reading Mary Gordon's book *The Roots of Empathy*. In that book she tells of her program to teach empathy to children from kindergarten to eighth grade (5 years old to 13 years old). A mother and four-month old baby go to a classroom, visiting once every month through the school year. The children sit in a circle and watch the baby and mother interacting with each other and sometimes with them. An instructor from the program guides the children to think about their responses.

Gordon describes many scenes of how the experiences of children in the program led them to appreciate and understand the baby's feelings and motives—not thoughts, for it was not clear that the babies were thinking in any way comparable to what we understand thinking to be. She emphasizes that the children have to respond to the baby emotionally because the baby cannot talk. Then the children turn to understanding their own emotions as well as emotions and feelings of the others. They begin to be more forgiving, more open, more generous.

In this way the children learn . . . what?

Gordon and her collaborators were guiding natural social and emotional responses of the children to lead them to being empathetic.

I agree, completely, that a goal in educating children and adults is to teach empathy. But we should be aware that in many societies, and indeed even in some tendencies in Western countries, this has not been a goal. Certainly the ancient Romans would have rejected that. They wanted people who were tough and could

kill to be part of their armies and ruling empire. In our society, training for the military is meant to expunge empathy. Our goals of becoming rich and powerful lead us to deride empathy: "Nice guys finish last."

So her goal in her book is—and should be—to convince us to adopt her moral vision. I do not know if she is successful because I was convinced of it before I started reading her work, and I have tried to promulgate that vision in my work in writing and teaching.

In an appendix to her book her collaborators invoke studies to show that the program Mary Gordon started is successful in its goal of teaching empathy. What counts as successful? I think the authors of the appendix make clear what they think that means, though only implicitly. They invoke numerical data to show the *effects* of the program. But they cannot measure whether children are empathetic because that is a subjective issue, and the numerical data is about behavior. They are not clear about this. So I guess their work is not a shift of focus but part of a method for evaluating whether we should adopt the program. They are, though not clearly, evaluating a prescriptive claim: we should teach empathy in this way. And that has to be evaluated relative to the goal of wanting children and adults to be empathetic. It is only relative to that goal that their research resolves any issue. [Compare evaluating treatment programs for addiction in my paper in my *Last Writings*].

No numerical evidence can establish a prescriptive claim much less a moral vision. The evidence is based on assuming that moral vision and the goal of the prescriptive claim. We then seem to be in an endless quest: we should adopt this moral vision, this goal; but that is itself a prescriptive claim, and hence should be evaluated. Eventually we have to come to some place where we stop. And that is the point of the text that Mary Gordon writes: convincing us, without argument but illustration, that her moral vision is a good goal for ourselves and our society. [See my essay "Reasoning with Prescriptive Claims" in *Prescriptive Reasoning*.]

Addicts and empathy

I taught inmates at the local jail. I was told they weren't bad people; they just made bad decisions.

I quickly discovered this was wrong. They didn't make any decisions —they just acted. So I taught them critical thinking from my little textbook. That helped them to stop and think enough to make decisions. Then I read to them from *The BARK of DOG* to lead them to make good decisions, acting with a loving heart, always peace and not violence, generosity and kindness. Almost every one of the inmates was by their own admission an addict. [I wrote a short essay "Teaching Addicts" about that in my *Last Writings*.]

I gave an early draft of that to an addiction counselor here. Her response to me set out a moral vision for the basis of addiction treatment programs that is incompatible with my approach. First, she mistakes my view as offering love to addicts. I say that offering love is not a way to help addicts, but rather that we should teach them how to *be loving*— "No se puede vivir sin *amar*" not "No se puede vivir sin *amor*". But that, too, I suspect she would reject because she thinks we must rub their noses in how bad they have been to get them to go beyond denial and make amends. It is a punitive "Old Testament" approach to dealing with

addiction. By most standards of what counts as successfully treating addicts, it does not accomplish much. By the standard of "making them pay", satisfying our moral indignation and vengeful attitudes, it does work.

We do not have evidence that my approach, teaching critical thinking and empathy, works. That approach has not been done before. And without evidence it won't be allowed to be done. It can be argued for only as part of a moral vision: If you think this is what a good society is, then do this. Then check whether people in the program go back to jail as often as those who do not, and other measures. But as I show in my essay "Evaluating Treatments for Addiction" in my *Last Writings*, we cannot measure well cause and effect here.

Compare: We can show that that this addiction counselor's treatment program does not accomplish the goals of making society safer. We just note that though it has been tried for nearly a century, it hasn't had any significant impact. Indeed, addiction is getting to be a bigger and bigger problem. Though here, too, I'm not sure we can get evidence for that.

So we pick our moral vision. That has nothing to do with offering different programs because different people find one approach more helpful than another. That's because "more helpful" is not clear without a moral vision. Yet still we want to and can invoke some general measures or at least objective goals for evaluations that almost all of us can agree on.

Original Sin vs. Original Love

Two views:

- Humans are naturally given to destroy, to hurt, to crave power over others. The role of society is to control those impulses by laws or whatever means possible.

  Religious: Catholicism (original sin).
  Some Muslims: cover women to prevent men from being tempted.
  Secular: Hobbes.

- Humans are naturally good, loving, and it is only through badly organized society or parental training or example that we lose our loving kindness.

  Religious: Quakers.
  Secular: *Roots of Empathy*, secular pacifists.
  The BARK of DOG

The first leads to authoritarian society, led by the "good people" who take power to protect the rest of us.

The second leads to societies in which we all take care of one another.

Original Sin vs. Original Love

I set before you this day life and death. Choose life that you may live.

Sympathy again

Sympathy. I can feel sympathy: sorry for a horse that is being beaten. But I cannot share its pain. More so with donkeys, which will stand there stoically while beaten and not move on. No idea, no imagination let's me into its world. With mammals we seem to be able to respond, but many people don't. Dairy farms, sheep pens, cattle slaughter houses. We don't trust people who slaughter, butchers—who have often been considered pariahs in a community—because they have killed not only animals but also their empathy. They have "become hard", and that's enough to make us worry about how they will respond to us. And that's why we worry about violent films with children. They deaden the child's empathy.

You can't feel my pain. But you can have sympathy.

But what about the pig?

If we had no limits on empathy, we'd all be vegetarians. No one would kill a sheep or cow. But we do not kill horses or dogs for meat—at least not us in "civilized" societies. We think of people who do eat dogs as uncivilized, corrupt in their emotions. We extend to dogs and horses our empathy.

Vegetarians? My friend says that plants are living, too, so why stop at animals? I respond that eating a grape does not hurt the grape vine; picking a cherry does not hurt the cherry tree. She then says that pulling a carrot from the earth kills it. I tell her that's OK because the carrot was ready to die, so it was euthanasia.

Silly? Consider all the rationalizations we give for eating pigs, which are just as smart and can be as loving as dogs.

I saw two photos from the Socorro County Fair in the local newspaper. In each a young child is leading a pig in an arena for judging.

In one, the pig looks up at the kid, a real pet, doing its best to follow the kid's lead. Another story in that issue is about a kid who lived on a farm and loved animals, he always looked after the babies of animals—if a calf or a lamb was born and the mama couldn't or wouldn't take care of it, he would be there. He died this year (age 16) before the fair, but his pig won the championship.

Great kids. But what about the pig?

Where have all the piggies gone,
Long time passing.
Where have all the piggies gone,
Long time ago.
Where have all the piggies gone,
Gone to slaughterhouses every one.
When will they ever learn?
When will they ever learn?

It's not something unusual. Each day we adjust our empathy. Or rather, we adjust the limits of our empathy, though not reflectively, just doing it. The pig in, then out. The homeless person asking for a handout, out one day, in the next.

This is not like adjusting our reading of others, which we do constantly when we are with other people.

The Golden Rule

The Golden Rule:

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

This is considered by many people to be an excellent guide to living a good life.

I disagree. Consider Lexi. She just wants to be left alone. She hardly goes out much. She talks to only a few people. She hears that her neighbor has been in a car accident and is now confined to home. He lives alone. It does not occur to her to

help him, to ask if she can get groceries for him, to call and relieve his isolation. No, for that is not what she would want.

I have a friend who when he gets depressed just wants to be left alone. He will not answer his phone. He will not respond to emails. There is no way to reach him, as he lives far away. So if I'm depressed, I cannot talk with him. He doesn't realize that his silence seems to be:

> I get depressed, leave me alone.
> So if you get depressed I should leave you alone.

That's the Golden Rule.

The Golden Rule is a severe limitation on what we consider moral or a good life. It limits us to thinking of ourselves first, then projecting that onto other people. It does not even suggest that we project that onto other creatures.

What it lacks is invoking empathy. First try to understand what the other person is feeling.

And that is not enough. Higaberto can read the emotions and feelings of others very well, and he uses that to manipulate them to his own ends, with no thought of how that would make them feel or suffer. He is what we call a psychopath. All of us to some extent do that. We try to get people to do what we want.

What is still lacking is a direction to be kind, to be generous, to be loving. To think how I can help another person. And if I can recognize the emotions of a horse, or a donkey, or a dog, or even a cat, then to act in a kind and generous if not fully loving way to them.

Better than the Golden Rule is:

> Try to understand how the other person is feeling as well as his or her motivation: why they are acting like this, not only now, but over the day, the week, the year, their life. Imagine, if you can, how you would feel if you have had his or her experiences. Then act in what you consider would be good for that person.

Or in short:

> Practice empathy and kindness.

The Golden Rule is a good guide for someone who is kind, generous, loving, caring. But a woman who is like that doesn't need a guide to a good life, a man who is like that doesn't need a guide to a good life. What they need is a guide to the limits of being loving and caring and giving.

[See another version of the Golden Rule in Commentaries at the end here.]

The Golden Rule and empathy

In *Reason and Nature in the Eighteenth Century*, R.W. Harris describes a scene from Fielding's *Tom Jones* (pp. 263–264),

> Thus both of them 'made frequent use of the word mercy, yet it was plain that in reality Square held it to be inconsistent with the rule of right; and Thwackum was for doing justice and leaving mercy to heaven'. (III.x.) They differed so much over the meaning of virtue that 'Thwakum would probably have destroyed one half of mankind, and Square the other half'. When Blifil, in an act of

> meanness and spite, let Sophia's pet bird escape, Square approved because liberty was in accordance with the laws of nature, while Thwackum declared that 'the law of nature is a jargon of words which means nothing', and that the appropriate principle was to do as you would be done by (the sense of which depended on whether one identified oneself with the bird, or with Sophia).

Translation

Putting yourself in the other person's place. More than the Golden Rule. It's an imaginative leap.

Many who translate from one language to another take as the standard of a good translation: "That's what I would say in that situation." Or perhaps, that's what someone I know would say. That gets the right idea across, they reckon.

But it doesn't. It's a re-creation in the translator's terms of the other person's story. Some pale shadow of the story the other is telling, or a new, better story.

Dorothy Lee, Benjamin Lee Whorf, and other anthropologist-linguists knew that this standard was inadequate. Those who have lived among the Diné (Navajo) and come back to tell us . . . what? That they, in the end, cannot tell us of the world of the Diné, of how they can only imperfectly render it into some words in English. As much as those who translate from Chinese. With a language comes a whole world, a way to experience, and those who speak languages as different as Navajo, Chinese, and English have worlds apart, worlds that only with great effort one can enter from the other. The effort of imagination. It is not the same rock for someone who speaks Navajo, Chinese, and English: for the English speaker it is a thing that persists in time; for the Chinese it is part of all "rockness"; for the Navajo it is part of the flow of all, not static. How are these the same? How does "He held a rock in his hand" describe what the Chinese or Navajo says?

It is imagination that is lacking in The Golden Rule. It is imagination that is lacking in the standard of translation. It is imagination that can help lead us to be loving.

Being loving is not enough; insight is not enough. The true loving heart is fulfilled only in action, not tears.

What's good?

Martha really craves a cigarette; she has been trying to stop smoking and hasn't smoked for a week. So is it good to give her a cigarette? She sure wants one. Or is it good to soothe her and not give her a cigarette? For me, doing good amounts to being kind and generous and loving. But what is kind and generous for Martha? What are the limits of being kind and generous and loving?

The Beatles

"All you need is love." So sang the Beatles. And by doing so, they reinforced our Western preoccupation of wanting to be loved.

What we need is a loving heart.

But what is a loving heart?

Love?

I love to play tennis.

I love when it snows.

I love her so much it hurts. I want to be with her all the time.
I love pizza with anchovies.
I love to hear Beethoven's Symphony Number 3 when it's played by the Philadelphia Orchestra directed by Ormandy.
I love dogs.
I love to train horses for the rodeo.
I love to read philosophy.

We use the word "love" so loosely that it's almost lost meaning for us.

The ancient Greeks distinguished three kinds of love.

Eros is physical love, more than (just) lust. A deep attraction, uniting two as one. Or at least hoping to be united in not so much the ecstasy but the fulfilment of uniting with the other. The slope of her chin, the way she tosses her hair from her face, the step of her foot on the path; the slight shadow of his beard, the odor of his sweat, the twisted smile. Somehow they create more than desire. But do not mistake: there is desire. Eros is erotica. Often more, but too often only the desire of sex. This is not a love that leads to a loving heart.

Philos is the great attraction of caring for something or someone. The great friendships. The love of wisdom (*philo*sophy). The love of accomplishment. The attraction of someone to Jews (*philo*semitic), the caring for Blacks, the deep appreciation for an opera or for a rock song. The attraction of a great painting, a sculpture, a beautifully presented dinner. This is a deep and important part of our lives. It leads us to be thoughtful, appreciative. But it is at best a minor step to having a loving heart.

Agape is "the love that devours", as Paulo Coelho says in *The Pilgrimage*:

> "Agape is total love, the love that devours those that experience it. Whoever knows and experiences Agape sees that nothing else in this world is of any importance, only loving. This was the love that Jesus felt for humanity, and it was so great that it shook the stars and changed the course of man's history."
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> "During the millennia of the history of civilization, many people have been smitten by this Love that Devours. They had so much to give—and the world demanded so little—that they were obliged to seek out the deserts and isolated places because love was so great that it transfigured them. They became the hermit saints that we know today."
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> "For me and you who have experienced another form of Agape, this life here may seem hard and terrible. Yet the Love that Devours makes everything lose its importance: these men live only to be consumed by their love." He took a pause.
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> "Agape is the Love that Devours," he repeated once more, as if this was the phrase that best defined that strange type of love. "Luther King once said that when Christ spoke of loving our enemies he was referring to Agape. Because according to him, it was impossible to like our enemies, those who do us harm and try to make our daily suffering all the worse."
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> "But Agape is a lot more than liking. It is a sentiment that invades everything, fills all the cracks and makes any attempt at aggression turn to dust."
>
> "There are two forms of Agape. One is isolation, life dedicated only to contemplation. The other is precisely the opposite: contact with other human beings, and enthusiasm, the sacred sense of work. Enthusiasm means trance,

> ecstasy, connecting with God. Enthusiasm is Agape directed at some idea, something."
>
> "When we love and believe in something from the bottom of our soul, we feel stronger than the world and we are imbued with a serenity that comes from the certainty that nothing can conquer our faith. This strange force makes us always make the right decisions at the right time, and we are surprised at our own capacity when we fulfill our objective."
>
> "Enthusiasm usually manifests itself in all its power in the early years of our life. We still have a strong tie with the divinity and we give ourselves with such zeal to our toys that dolls take on a life of their own and little tin soldiers manage to march. When Jesus said that the kingdom of Heaven belonged to the children, he was referring to Agape in the form of Enthusiasm. The children reached him without paying any attention to his miracles, his wisdom, the Pharisees and the apostles. They came happily, driven by Enthusiasm."

I have discovered that if I close my eyes and press with my index finger just above the bridge of my nose, between my eyebrows, then I become completely open. The feeling I often strived for with meditation, clearing the mind. But much deeper. I can tell you to do it, but beware: if you press too long, all boundaries will dissolve, you will be open and not be able to come back.

Agape?

Agape seems to me to be an unattainable goal. And that leads to a sense of inadequacy.

Am I a fraud?

I try to act like a good person. I want to do good.

Only secondarily do I want to have people think of me as good. And if they do, I get very nervous. I know I have done bad in my life. Lots? Enough.

Inmates I worked with got out and didn't continue contact with me. I'm told some thought of me as a holy spirit. If so, then I failed in helping them, for a holy spirit is beyond others, not part of the world they live in. Imagine going out for a beer with Mother Theresa. Imagine sitting down with Jesus for a chat about the flock and the weather. Imagine joking with the Buddha. (But that is the greatness of Zen, joking, not taking ourselves too seriously. Compare the humor in *The BARK of DOG* and my bad jokes.)

If you have the Love that Devours, you feel compelled to share it and the vision of the good life that it entails. And that makes you pretty much unbearable.

I watch a movie, a silly romantic comedy, *Groundhog Day*. Just to relax in the evening before going to bed. Nothing serious. But it is serious, about how to live a good life. Everything I see, everyone I talk with, arouses in me this feeling of love, of wanting to help, of wanting to share my vision of a good life. It is "the love that devours".

Looking out the window on a hot summer's day at my old, old dog Chocolate, so crippled with arthritis and bad tendons, sleeping in the shade, I wish I could do something to make his life better. But that's what I cannot do. No more than take him for short walks so he can swim in the irrigation canal, feed him, give him pain pills, and pet him. But nothing will make him young and happy again. At best not too much pain and more or less content. Yet I yearn, that's right, yearn to do more for him.

It's like when I meet a foster child and so feel for him and want to help, to offer love. But this is not possible. I cannot do that for all whom I meet. All that I can do is be an example of a loving heart, guide, and write to lead others to help.

I cannot feel your pain. But in some ways I can. Those sympathy (mirror) neurons.

My friend Arnold says that children naturally are loving. If a child has an apple, he says, and the other kid has none, the one with the apple will naturally cut his in half and give half to the other. (Putting aside whether this is accurate . . .) *Agape*—the love that devours—is when you give the other kid the whole apple.

Perfectionist fallacy. Good enough is not good enough for the love that devours.

All the saints, holy men and women, and Jesus, were filled with doubts. Look at the stories of the lives of the saints, as written by them, not the "cleansed" ones.

Sex and agape

To be truly a "saint" one cannot be troubled by sexual desire. Sexual desire, eros, distorts our caring, distorts our ability to imagine, makes us selfish.

Yet sex is a dominant part of the lives of almost all of us. The greatest sexual perversion is abstinence.

So were the saints perverse? Or simply lacking in hormones?

Being at peace is not the goal

My friend is a trauma surgeon in Brazil. During the covid pandemic, with her colleagues dying, she worked so hard. In order to keep working during the pandemic she would not take her rheumatism medicine because that would lower her immune system response, though she could have been excused from work for medical reasons. Without her medication she suffered much pain. Besides doing surgery, she worked in the ambulance dispatch office making decisions as to who would be rescued and who would have to wait, perhaps to die, and as a physician advising medics in ambulances over the phone what to do. She became exhausted, unhappy, nervous. But consumed. She had to do, and to do more. I told her that she couldn't save the world. But she felt she should. I said that it is egotism to think that you are so important that if you do less then all will be compromised, worse and worse. But how do you advise someone who is consumed by *agape*, by love and caring for others? How do you help them find the limits of empathy? And should we help them?

Her husband, a great friend of mine, says that I was right because if she had died, think of all those people she couldn't have helped. Pragmatism? Competence? Do they matter to someone who has *agape*? Should they matter?

Self, others, and the world?

Dorothy Lee in "The Religious Dimension of Human Experience" describes how a division of self and world does not arise for speakers of the (now extinct) Native American language Wintu.

> Here we find people [the Wintu] who do not so much seek communion with environing nature as *find themselves* in communion with it. In many of these societies, not even mysticism is to be found, in our sense of the word. For us, mysticism presupposes a prior separation of man from nature; and communion is

> achieved through loss of self and subsequent merging with that which is beyond; but for many other cultures, there is no distinct separation between self and other, which must be overcome. Here, man is *in* nature already, and we cannot speak of man *and* nature. p. 164

See also her "Responsibility among the Dakota". In "Linguistic Reflection of Wintu Thought" she writes:

> A man too old to fend for himself prays:
>
> . . .
>
> I cannot go up to the mountains in the west to you, deer;
> I cannot kill you and bring you home . . .
> You, water, I can never dip you up and fetch you home again . . .
> You who are wood, you wood, I cannot carry you home
> on my shoulder.
>
> This is not the speech of one who has plucked the fruits of nature by brute force; it is the speech of a friend.

[These essays are reprinted in my *Language and the World: Essays New and Old*.]

In *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, Chad Hansen says:

> The Mohists, remember, did make an implicit distinction between human society and the rest of nature by arguing for utility. We could, in principle, have a utilitarianism that embraced all mammal life, or all vertebrate life, or all animal life, or all life, or all matter. What reason do we have for stopping at one of these levels? Hui Shi appears to argue that we have none. He draws the Daoist-like conclusion that we ought to love all of nature rather than giving human society a special significance. p. 263

> . . . Love should be universal, they still insist. *Lin*$^{\text{human relations discourse}}$, however, differentiates between people to whom we have *thick* or *thin* responsibilities. The social system has the general goal of universal benefit. We have an abstract commitment to that goal—hence, universal love. The social system makes it *my* role, in pursuit of that universal love, to spread benefit *thicker* on my kin. They even argue that universal love requires self-love. They thus modify the total self-abnegation that frequently brought criticism to Mozi.
>
> They inherit Mozi's view that human nature is socially malleable. Conventional training can instill many different types of moral character. Therefore, no natural *gu*$^{\text{in itself}}$ settles issues of guidance. Guiding depends on the scope of our concern—that range for which we *wei*$^{\text{do:deem}}$. *Wei*$^{\text{do:deem}}$ contrasts with *qing*$^{\text{feeling-reality}}$. This recalls our result [earlier] that the distinction between convention and nature, constant and inconstant, does much of the work normally done by our description-prescription distinction. p. 248

But how much is too much? Some believe there is no limit.

[From www.bbc.co.uk > religion > religions > glance]

> Jainism is a religion of self-help. There are no gods or spiritual beings that will help human beings. The three guiding principles of Jainism, the "three jewels", are *right belief, right knowledge and right conduct*. The supreme principle of Jain living is non violence (ahisma).
>
> Any food that affects or has a potential to affect our mind is absolutely

> prohibited in Jainism. Alcohol severely deteriorates our decision-making capability, degrades our judgement to decide right from wrong, loosens inhibitions and leads people to speak and act in ways that are harmful to self and others.
>
> For instance, Jain monks cover their nose and mouth with a cloth—known as Muhapatti—to prevent microorganisms in the air from entering and getting killed. In some temples, devotees cover their mouths with hands while receiving blessings. Many wash their hands and feet before entering religious establishments.

And a reminder . . .
From the TV series *Call the Midwife*

> We are not defined by the things that make us separate and distinct but by the moments that we share and the memories we make.

Fairness
We have an inborn sense of empathy, sympathetic empathy.

We have an inborn sense of fairness. It is innate and shared with chimpanzees, monkeys, dogs.

Give two monkeys a treat for accomplishing some task, say opening a window on a cue. Give one of them a grape, the other one next to it a dry food treat. Continue. Eventually the one given the dry food treat will throw it down and refuse to continue to play the game. It's not fair. She deserves a grape, too. (If you don't believe me, try it yourself.)

Our sense of empathy and our sense of fairness can be in competition.

> Fairness: We should deny a place in an overcrowded hospital to someone who has covid and who has chosen not to be vaccinated.
>
> Empathy: We can't turn away someone who is suffering.

It's the balance, the tug between empathy and fairness. Our sense of fairness is just as strong as our empathy. Fairness tempers our empathy, it sets limits. Someone hurts a friend, beats her up. I have empathy for her, and sympathy. But the guy? If I think about how he feels, the fear, the anxiety, the dread that moves him because of how he was raised, how he has learned, then I approach him, too, with loving kindness. And that's wrong. It "lets him off the hook". He can feel powerful to do it to her again, or to someone else. It's enabling. Our sense of fairness, or fair play that we elevate with the fancy word "justice" makes us condemn the man who batters the woman. Only then, with him neutralized (we hope) by being in jail, can we let our empathy and loving kindness extend to him. But an eye for an eye is not justice; it is vengeance. And vengeance kills our loving kindness as much as hurting another, destroying the avenger as much as his or her victim. Bad-mouthing someone reflects worse on you than on the person you malign.

> Vengeance is the sense of fairness perverted.
> Justice without mercy is vengeance.
>
> Empathy sets the limits of fairness.
> Fairness sets the limits of empathy.

Fairness without the limits of empathy ends up being vengeance.
Empathy without the limits of fairness ends up being enabling.

Tough love. Empathy. Overfeeding a dog.

Fairness?

If the sense of fairness, or being fair, is innate, so deeply felt that we all act on it, why is it that in Spanish and Portuguese there is no word for it? They have only "justicia" and "egalidade" which are good translations of "justice" and "equality".

But fairness is not justice. Justice may be based originally on some sense of fairness, though as often it is based on rules of a religion or culture that say what is "right".

Nor is fairness equality or treating everyone the same. I help a handicapped child more and in a way I wouldn't help a kid who has just hurt his toe playing football.

(Now I've learned that in Spanish and Portuguese they have the adjective "justo" that could serve for "fairness". As we say in English, "That's a just result", with no suggestion of justice beyond fairness.)

Fairness without empathy is cold, life as a business transaction.

Schadenfreude

Schadenfreude: taking pleasure in the pain of another.

He got what he deserved. "Who's sorry now?" as the song says. What goes round comes round. Thinking so seems like fairness, but it is a denial of empathy. Talk of karma, the universe (God) taking retribution, makes us feel that it isn't schadenfreude. Ha!

Navajo justice

The Navajo do not elevate the idea of fairness to justice in the way we do. In their flow-of-all language culture they involve the community to make life good for all, not retribution, less empathy than something we know only as "solidarity". How much of our discussion depends on our speaking English or a related thing-language? [See Robert Yazzie, "Life Comes from It: Navajo Justice Concepts".]

Rooting for the underdog

Why do we root for the underdog (except when we have a stake in winning)? Our sense of fairness + empathy (it would feel bad to lose). Equity.

I can't play chess. Oh, I'm smart enough. I studied it when I was a graduate student in math at Berkeley, where in the math lounge there was always a game being played. The world junior champion was there, and the U.S. open champion. I got pretty good. But I couldn't get really good because I didn't have the killer instinct. If I got ahead at the opening, that was enough. I didn't want to make the other guy feel bad. (Also I gave it up because I could study chess or write my Ph.D. thesis—not both—as they used the same focus of mental energy.)

But playing darts with a fellow grad student in his office, avoiding working on our theses, we would keep score through the week, and the loser would buy beer for everyone on Friday afternoon. There I was known as a good loser but a lousy winner: I would crow about winning. Go figure.

But what is right?

I remember, vividly, I must have been about 10, going into grade school in the morning, up the steps. A younger boy with braces on his legs was on the steps ahead of me (it was after the time of the polio epidemic). He dropped a book, and I went over to pick it up and help him, and he got mad. He could do it himself.

What counts as right in helping someone? My empathy was too general, not based on what that boy wanted or needed, not really feeling with him.

A test

As I was typing now, I got a call back from the insurance company that I am enrolling in to pay my drug costs. I had called the company and the representative couldn't get her system to access the member numbers. She had a difficult accent, and was clearly reading from a script most of the time. I was frustrated. But I thought about how she had to deal with lots of angry or frustrated customers, so I was calm and patient. About 15 minutes later she called back. It took 17 minutes to correct my address and set up payment with my credit card. I was getting impatient and fed up with the difficult-to-understand accent and constant reading and re-reading of the script the rep had, and with how she had trouble even reading back my address correctly. But I did not show my irritation.

I recognized that she was doing the best she could, yet was still incompetent. And I realized that my getting mad would not improve the situation, except perhaps to help me let off steam. It would just prolong the problem. And I thought of the rep trying to make a living and how a bad report from me might harm her.

This is not empathy. It is, perhaps, politeness. It is also evaluating what works and doesn't work to get what I want so I don't have to call again. I did not recognize the representative's emotions. I imagined what it might be like to be in her situation, and I responded with thoughtfulness and, if not kindness, at least tolerance instead of anger.

But a month later . . .

I called T-Mobile to cancel my internet service. The representative was pleasant and helpful. But an hour later I discovered my cell phone service was canceled. I couldn't call from my cell phone to correct that because I had no service. So I had to drive to town. I was agitated—would I get my phone service and phone number back?—a phone number I'd had for 24 years and which was crucial not only to my daily life but to my publishing and research work.

I went to an office where I know some people and borrowed the receptionist's phone, a very pleasant woman whom I knew slightly. I called T-Mobile, and I got fed up with the representative who was trying to help me but kept on "being nice", repeating. Though he said he wasn't on a script it sounded like it. I got very irritated and told him so. He explained that the first representative had disconnected the wrong number, so I still had the internet service but no phone service. The new rep after far too much talking finally got my phone re-connected and internet service disconnected, as I wanted. I was at best impolite.

Then I handed her phone back to the receptionist. And I was so ashamed. I had raged, couldn't get the phone service back easily, just a mess. Impatience, fear, temper. And now I know the consequences: I'm ashamed to meet the receptionist.

Empathy. I lose it when fear, anxiety, impatience are in me. Don't we all? We have to practice empathy, responding in a caring manner, until it becomes a habit. Our emotions are so strong. How to pass through them to being good?

It's easy to be kind and generous when we're in a good mood, satisfied, have enough money—easy indeed to be helpful. Practicing responding in a caring manner when we are stressed is hard. Giving a handout when we feel like the world is against us is the most important time to do it. And as we practice empathy, we grow beyond the fear, we become better by doing better.

Empathy is more than resonance with the other's feelings. Or rather in this case, responding to lack of emotion with emotion.

Doing what's right

I went to Walmart and got two packages of copy paper for my printer along with the rest of my shopping, which I checked out at the self-service scanner. When I got home and looked at the receipt to put the cost of the paper in my business accounts, I saw that I had scanned only one package. So when I later went back to Walmart for shopping, I got another package of copy paper and scanned it twice so I could pay for the package that I hadn't scanned.

I was not motivated by empathy. I cannot imagine the owner or owners of Walmart, much less have any idea how they would feel if they knew that I had not paid for one of the packages. I was not motivated by the Golden Rule because, again, I cannot imagine who the owners are. Nor was I motivated by Kant's injunction that I should imagine what would happen if everyone did that. Big deal, most would be caught, or if not caught eventually just cause higher prices at the store.

No, I was motivated by what was right to do. It is not right to lie, which was what I would have done if I had taken two and paid for only one. I would have "gotten away with something", and knowing that, I'd be tempted to do it again. Like when I finally won $50 at a slot machine in a casino in Las Vegas where I stayed when I was commuting to teach at the university there. Lest I get excited and want to start gambling more and more, I gave most of it to the hotel clerks.

I did not let it pass, I paid twice *for my own sake*.

Certainty?

The animal rights activist lets the rabbits out of their cage in the zoo to go live in the wild, free as in nature. But rather to die in the wild, for the caged rabbits have no ability to fend for themselves. Empathy and action unhinged from competence, tied instead to certainty.

Or the animal rights activist who blows up a lab where they test drugs on rabbits and monkeys, possibly hurting a person who works there. She has narrowed her empathy to animals—that's so much easier because they can't talk back. She is certain she is right.

The abortion protester who blows up a clinic and hurts a doctor. That's OK because the doctor was doing bad. Judge, jury, executioner. The protester is certain that he is right.

Self-righteousness in place of empathy.

Empathy, the deep feeling in tune with the other person, eliminates certainty. We see too much, acknowledge too many sides, causes and mitigation, that we cannot have a certainty that hurts others.

Certainty is the wall we build to protect us from having to make decisions, to judge and evaluate, that makes us want to follow rules rather than to feel. The religious who are certain that the path to heaven is to follow the rules of the church. Certainty is the child of fear.

Certainty eliminates empathy.

And yet . . .

I am certain that it is wrong to torture a puppy. I have no rules, no God-given guidance that I invoke to know that. I just know it, as deeply as I know anything. But . . . although I would try to stop someone who is torturing a puppy, I would not hurt that person. Two hurts do not equal one kindness. Stop him and then educate. *Kill the bastard! No, wait, take a deep breath, focus.*

Empathy is the basis of my certainty. Yet if the person can't feel that, can't understand, then I cannot see how to bring him or her back to the fold of humanity. If a society does it—how to end that society? Just wait, stand up, and educate, says the pacifist, despite the revulsion and certainty that it should be ended.

Yet how is this different from the woman who lets the rabbits out of their cages?

Temptation

From *The Razor's Edge* by W. Somerset Maugham.

> "D'you remember how Jesus was led into the wilderness and fasted forty days? Then, when he was a-hungered, the devil came to him and said: If thou be the son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But Jesus resisted the temptation. Then the devil set him on a pinnacle of the temple and said to him: If thou be the son of God, cast thyself down. For angels had charge of him and would bear him up. But again Jesus resisted. Then the devil took him into a high mountain and showed him the kingdoms of the world and said that he would give them to him if he would fall down and worship him. But Jesus said: Get thee hence, Satan. That's the end of the story according to the good simple Matthew. But it wasn't. The devil was sly and he came to Jesus once more and said: If thou wilt accept shame and disgrace, scourging, a crown of thorns and death on the cross thou shalt save the human race, for greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Jesus fell. The devil laughed till his sides ached, for he knew the evil men would commit in the name of their redeemer." pp. 167–168

An impediment to empathy

Fatigue.

The mother with three children, exhausted, little money, no friends to help, to even baby sit, she loses her temper. Often.

The couple with a severely autistic child. "I can't take it anymore!" They want to put the child in a care home, someone, anyone help with this burden.

The man who is asked again, and again, and again for help from a woman friend, she really does need the help and she is grateful. But always lurching from one crisis to another. "I didn't sign up for this."

I reckon that you can come up with more examples.

And emotional burnout watching ads on TV and appeals on the internet: starving children in Palestine, people who have no home or food in the cities, again, and again, and again. Too much. We close off—too much like guilt. We blame the victim.

A hidden impediment to empathy

Private property.

Mine, not yours.

What? I would question the very basis of our society? Didn't the other Richard Epstein (Richard A. Epstein), a well-known legal and economics scholar, say that the basis of a good society is laws that protect private property? Just look at dictatorships.

Property is a conception that is based on our speaking a language that directs us to see he world as made up of things. It is a relation between a person (or persons) and some thing, whether that be a piece of land, a car, a home, a slave, or even a view from a porch.

In some perhaps most flow-of-all language cultures there is no idea of property, for there is the flow and not things to be possessed. Anthropologists who went to live among "natives" found that the natives would take whatever appealed to them from the anthropologist's "belongings" in the hut. Europeans said they'd bought the land from Maoris in New Zealand and from Native Americans in the U.S., but the Maoris and Native Americans thought they were giving permission to the Europeans to use the area they'd been living in as long as they could remember (usufrucht).

What's mine is mine, what's yours is yours. Why should I feel empathy because I have so much and you so little? I earned it.

But no one makes it alone. Parents who raised, schools supported by the community, a public university, roads provided by the government with our taxes, so much. Too many of us have lost the idea of the common good.

We call helping others "charity", and therein lies distortion of doing good.

Another limit to empathy

There you are at a small party, and you're introduced to a middle-aged man. Very pleasant. You find that he was raised in a difficult place but has made good now. As the conversation goes on he begins to declaim, rather loudly, how Blacks are no good, how Hispanics are all lazy or drug dealers.

You have choices. You can walk away, disgusted by what he says, not willing to listen more. Or you can empathize with him: he was raised badly, perhaps you can lead him to see how he has opinions that are false—and hurtful. Quietly you try the latter. But you find that he is impervious to your cajoling. And he argues more loudly still about how since he made it, Blacks and Hispanics could make it, too, if they just weren't so lazy.

Then you have another choice. You can just leave him, perhaps leave the party. Or you can call him out, not quietly cajoling him, but telling him that he is plain wrong and hurtful, indeed dangerous in his hateful ways. Speaking as much to others at the party as to him.

To walk away is just an expression of fear and selfishness. I don't want to hear this. I know better, but it would be awkward, impolite, to call him out here, and I don't want to be thought of as disruptive. Impolite? Tolerating hateful speech is a lot worse than impolite. Politeness smooths our social lives, but there is no smoothing when the social life is being wrecked by hate.

We stand up for what we believe is right, not only for ourselves but to show others. We may be wrong, so we should be open to being corrected, not frozen in our beliefs but willing to discuss.

This is the old conundrum: freedom of speech, even when that speech yells for the ending of all speech that disagrees with it. (See the wonderful book *Free Speech for Me—But Not for Thee* by Nat Hentoff.) The solution: disagree, stand up for what you know is right. Courage. In the face of fear of being thought disruptive, of not being invited back to another party, perhaps even shunned. Courage helps us go beyond empathy when we must.

I'd rather be thought a crusty old man than one who is polite in tolerating hate, no matter how much I can empathize with the person who hates.

"If not me, who? If not now, when?" — Hillel

The martyr complex

(Commenting on a column by Carolyn Hax published in *The Washington Post* online January 22, 2020. The url is so long it would take up as much as the discussion.)

The letter writer is concerned about his girlfriend.

> . . . She goes above and beyond at work, then volunteers for extra duties, and she routinely gives up whole evenings and entire weekends to help relatives and friends with their own problems.
>
> All of this would be fine, except it's stressing her out. Most of our conversations lately have been about things/people in her life, how tired she is and how there isn't enough time. Often, she breaks down crying. I've suggested she slow down and take care of herself first, but she never does.
>
> She is extremely vulnerable to guilt-tripping from friends/family. She worries they'll get mad if she doesn't do enough for them. . . .

Here is what Carolyn Hax answered.

> . . . Her low self-esteem jumps out of your question. She is frenzied with efforts to compensate for what she sees as her shortcomings, as if she can only justify taking up the earth-space she occupies by generating good works. Or what she thinks others would see as good works. Or what garners praise from others. . . .
>
> Therapy is the only option that makes sense to me here.

Whoa! Therapy. The answer to all of the "emotional" problems we encounter in our lives. How about reading *The BARK of DOG*? Or the Koran? Talking with someone who doesn't spout psycho-babble? Yes, there are good therapists, not many in the years I've known, and some of them help. But for a full emotional re-set, as Carolyn Hax suggests is necessary, you don't want a therapist. You want a priest, a pastor, a guru, a shaman who is wise, someone who can offer not especially insight but a better way—which therapists are averse to suggesting.

Perhaps Hax is correct when she ascribes the woman's behavior as generated by low self-esteem. But then would she say that St. Francis of Assisi did good works because of his low-self esteem? Jesus? Maybe they, too, were overwhelmed at times and needed re-assurance or a shoulder to cry on.

The difference is doing good because of love, of empathy. Consumed by empathy, responding in a caring manner, is not wrong—unless you think that the measure of what is good is what is good for the person who is helping others. There is no insight in Hax's writing here or in her other columns (as far as I've noted) that *agape*, the love that devours, is not a character flaw. If the goal is to justify your existence by doing good for others, why is that bad? And as we ask that, we ask "Bad for ____ "? If we fill in the blank with the person who is trying to do good, we get Hax's response. If we fill in the blank with the person who the woman is trying to help, we get back to the discussion earlier that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. But if we refuse to fill in the blank, if we just say "bad" or "good", we are led to the question of what counts as a good life, the limits of empathy, of what is important in these lives we live as we wander or rush through our days.

The dogmas

The dogmas I hold to are those promulgated in *The BARK of DOG*: kindness, generosity, a loving heart are the good way to live. No violence.

Reward!

God helps those who help themselves.

No!

God helps those who help others.

No!

Don't do it for the reward. That's a business transaction. Do it from a loving heart.

Virtue is its own reward

Yes, when we act kindly, when we are generous, we feel better. Not smug—for that is a belittling of the other person. Just a warm feeling—hey, I'm a good person. No one else needs to know it, but I do, and I try to do good, so I feel good.

But the moment we anticipate feeling good for doing good—listening to a friend bewail her outcast fate, helping a little old man cross the street, leaving money on a doorstep—then we are doing good for the reward. Our motive is tainted. But then isn't every good we do tainted? It is not wrong to feel good by doing good. It is not wrong even to feel good for doing good. So long as the good we hope to feel is not the motive. Doing good becomes a habit, and then, perhaps, feeling good does, too.

What's in it for me?

I watched a documentary *Animal Odd Couples* from the American Public Broadcasting System. It shows animals from different species coming to be friends. But more than friends. They depend on each other: the cheetah yearns to be with the dog as the dog yearns to be with the cheetah, the duck cannot be parted from the tortoise.

In one documented story, a 16-year-old horse becomes blind. A goat takes to

leading him to the good pasture, every day, slowly leading him to the good grazing patch, the horse following (it would seem) by the sound of the goat's footfalls. After many years together the horse laid down in the pasture and died. The goat nudged the horse, then turned back to the barn without him. Then the goat faded away, dying soon after. The narrator says, "Jack the goat gets nothing out of this relationship". So wrong. The goat had the chance every day to be compassionate, to have a job in the world that matters. And without that, as so many people learn on retiring from work, no reason to go ahead, no reason to put one foot, one hoof in front of the other.

The dogma of DOG

From *The BARK of DOG*,

- Be kind.
- Be generous.
- Count not the giving and the taking, but give unconditionally.
- Harm no human.
- Harm no dog.
- Keep from thee hate, greed, vengeance, lust, fear, gluttony, pride, impatience, indifference, sloth, schadenfreude, guilt, and allergy, for these are the way of CAT.
- Put from thee all thought of power save the power of a loving heart.

But someone says dogs are bad and cats are good. If the way of cat leads them to live well, in loving-kindness—well each of us goes our own way in peace.

There is no injunction in the way of DOG to hurt or eliminate cats, only to be wary of them and of people who follow their way of selfishness.

Menstrual leave

Spain has just adopted a law allowing women who are suffering period pain to take paid time off.

So? What's that got to do with me?

(And shouldn't it be called "womenstrual leave"?)

Posterity

Posterity? Posterity? Screw posterity. What has posterity ever done for me?

What's in it for me?

The most terrible words a woman or man can say.

Terrible not for others, but for her, for him.

Human, all too human

If you think that Jesus never had any qualms, then he really wasn't human.

The grasshopper and the ant

A grasshopper and an ant live in a field near a forest. It's summer, warm, sunny, a little rain. The grasshopper is happy, chirping, singing. The ant is busy, industrious, carrying grain little by little to its home. The ant says, "Mr. Grasshopper, you should

work. Save grain. Winter is coming." The grasshopper just chirps, "It's a beautiful day." Day after day the grasshopper sings and the ant works, and the ant warns the grasshopper "Winter is coming. Save now." Until finally the cold comes, and snow. The grasshopper is shivering, no food for him. "What will I do?" He goes and knocks on Mr. Ant's door. "Please Mr. Ant, I am cold, I am hungry. Can I come in?" Mr. Ant replies, "I told you to prepare for the winter, and you just sang away your time." "Yes, yes, Mr. Ant, you are right. But please, please help me. I have learned. And if you do not let me in, I will freeze and starve." Mr. Ant replies, "O.K., just this once, you can come in and be warm and eat here with me."

The moral of this story:

If you play it right, you can always find a willing ant.

So which would you prefer to be: the grasshopper or the ant?

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is the ethical view that we should do what will yield the greatest good for the greatest number.

It sounds so good. But consider this exercise on analogies from my book *Critical Thinking*.

28. a. Suppose that good, highly reliable research is announced showing that oil derived from eyes removed without anesthetic from healthy cats when applied to human skin reduces wrinkles significantly. Would it be justifiable to do further research and manufacture this oil?
    b. Same as (a) except that the oil is drunk with orange juice and significantly reduces the chance of lung cancer for smokers.
    c. Same as (a) except the oil is mixed with potatoes and eaten and significantly reduces the chance of heart disease and lengthens the lives of women.
    d. Same as (a) except that when drunk, the oil kills off all viruses harmful to humans.

Students answer, some saying that (c) and (d) are O.K., but not (a) and (b). I challenge them to say what the difference is and why it matters. Can they find a general principle? Others say that none of these would be acceptable. Others say that all would be. Then I set them the next exercise.

29. Do Exercise 28 reading "dogs" for "cats."

Screw dogs and cats? They, and the lab mice, and the chimpanzees used in medical research are expendable. The researchers do not extend their empathy to them. Did they never have empathy? Never played with a puppy? Never played with a kitten? Or did they kill their empathy so that they could kill the puppy?

"The greatest good for the greatest number" sounds like a good guide, but it's always meant to apply to the number of people only. I suppose you could say that killing puppies upsets lots of people, and then we're back to the exercises.

More important, though, is that there is no empathetic basis for utilitarianism. It is a calculus of "happiness". How can we balance one pleasure or happiness against another? There is no coherent way to measure—the economists' way of measuring with dollars won't work if someone will not put a monetary value on a particular pleasure/happiness, which happens often enough. That's because we

ascribe to some basic goods and evils that cannot be violated without destroying our entire moral standards. And worse, often those basic goods are in conflict, not by different people or different groups, but for each one of us. Is it more important not to run over this puppy in my car or to save this person who I might hit if I swerve?

The only answer I can see is to be guided by empathy, make empathy a habit, until there is no calculus to invoke, only the guide of empathy that has been honed and refined by thought and by the necessary limits of empathy.

But Eddie and Pancho say that the issue isn't empathy, it's that we can't agree on what counts as good.

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Happiness

I recall a big billboard on the bridge connecting San Francisco, California to the East Bay, around 1972, with a picture of a beatific guru Meher Baba and the injunction "Don't worry. Be happy." Sounds pretty good if you're high. Morally despicable.

Teenage boy trying to get into the pants of his girlfriend, "If it feels good, do it."

Better?

> "A living dog is better than a dead lion." Ecclesiastes
>
> "Better than a live one, too." Arf

Of course. It hits us hard when we hear this: "Better for . . . ?".

Good. Better. These are relative to some purpose or use or person. Better for me. Better for you.

The utilitarian fantasy is that there is one notion of good, of better, of happiness —which we should and do strive for. But there isn't. What's good for me, like potato chips and beer, might be poison to you. What's good for you, like playing football, would wreck me. Potato chips and beer make me happy. Playing football makes you happy. There is no universal standard. Philosophers, or at least ones that I respect, worry and discuss and strive to find an answer to "What is a good life?"

So many answers. Only a loving heart filled with empathy can find a path.

Effective altruism

I just looked up "effective altruism" on the Web, hearing that some of those high-tech people who were convicted of crimes were advocates of it. Wikipedia says that it advocates "using evidence and reason to figure out how to benefit others as much as possible, and taking action on that basis". I'll figure out what's best and do it for all of you. Like a philosopher-king. All that it is missing is a moral basis to determine what counts as benefit. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. I looked up the effective altruism website and it sounds like it was written by a high-school student who suddenly wanted to start doing "some good". Just like those high-tech gurus who stole lots under that banner. Too much power and too little maturity.

A tough example for a utilitarian

(drawn from "Dreaming of Kimchee" by Yoshimoto Banana)

> A man has been married to a woman for ten years. Nothing exciting, no children, but still a good marriage.
>
> Then the man meets a somewhat younger woman who is single, and they instantly are in tune, attracted, fall in love. So the man and younger woman begin to meet secretly for sex and intimacy. Eventually, the man divorces his wife. The wife is devastated, feeling old and ugly and rejected: "No one would want me at this age." After some time, the man and the younger woman marry. But they carry anxiety, even guilt about what they have done to the ex-wife, so their marriage is only O.K., not joyous.

Then after two years the ex-wife calls to tell the man that she has married a younger man and that she and her new husband are very happy. The man and his younger wife are relieved and now live happily.

How will the utilitarian judge the morality of what the husband and younger woman did? They did not increase happiness (or utility?), but rather led to great unhappiness for the wife and for them. So the utilitarian judgment, until they hear from the ex-wife, is that they were morally wrong. Except that after two years, happiness has increased for them all. But they and the utilitarian could not have foreseen that. So does the utilitarian have to wait until "all" consequences are seen in order to make a judgment? That's impossible. And did the happiness that ensued after two years count for more than the unhappiness of the time since the man left his wife?

I, and possibly many of you, would judge that what the man and the younger woman did was morally wrong. Though perhaps mitigated if we judge leniently taking account of the inherent emotional weakness of all of us.

"All's well that ends well" is not a way to make moral judgments.

Consequences

The old woman living alone down the street needs groceries, so I pick them up for her at the store. But this is enabling, for she could go herself. I am contributing to her feeling of helplessness or allowing her to use others.

We are right to look at consequences of how our emotions lead us to act. We reason. This is another limit to empathy.

The lifeboat

There are five in a lifeboat, in the Pacific Ocean, far from land, sun burning hot, little water, little food, not enough for them to survive for long. Utilitarianism says to throw one of them overboard to save the rest. The greatest good for the greatest number.

Agape tells me to throw myself overboard.

Saving a good man

Only enough tetanus vaccine for one more person in this town. Save it for the man who has done so much good here, trying to help all of humanity with his great scientific skill.

If the man is so good, he will refuse the vaccine.

Every life matters. To judge by the utility of the life is to deny empathy and make us all so little.

Vaccinations

Sometimes we can calculate, determine with numbers what is the greatest good for the greatest number.

Vaccinating for measles is effective in ensuring that you will not get the disease. If at least 95% of the population get vaccinated, then if someone gets measles it will not lead to an epidemic. A few who are vaccinated may get a serious reaction to the vaccine, but that's very rare. So we require that all children be vaccinated for measles (along with mumps and rubella).

Or at least we did. Except now we allow people to opt out of vaccinating their children or themselves. Religious reasons: God will take care of us. Or "philosophical reasons": fear of the unknown, or listening to the fear mongers. And so a serious epidemic of measles began in the state of Texas in the U.S.A. Utilitarians should say that we ought to vaccinate everyone. But the greatest good for the greatest number cannot be a moral direction if people have no notion of the common good.

Yet if we demand that every person be vaccinated, some, maybe only one, will die. Where is the calculus if every life matters? Yes, every life matters, and the more the better?

Flies

"As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport."

William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

And speaking of flies

Did you laugh in grade school when you saw one of the boys in your class who forgot to zip up his fly? Ha ha ha.

Pain

"I can take any amount of pain as long as it's not mine."

Distinguishing

- Empathy.
- Sympathy.
- A loving heart. Loving kindness.
- Agape.
- Impotence (can't do it all).
- Imagination.
- Enabling.
- Compassion.
- Pity.
- Guilt.
- Fear.

Let us think about all of these ways to be in the world, how they are different, how each is or is not part of the other.

The punch line

A rabbi, a walrus, and a duck walk into a bar. The bartender looks at the rabbi quizzically, and the rabbi says . . .

Imagination is essential for empathy. Practice!

—You're too sensitive. You think it's all about you.
—Duh. Of course. Who else?
—What about me?
—Oh, so it's all about you.

Be wary of anyone who doesn't have a sense of humor.

Taking empathy too far

On a bad day, everything wrong, I bump my elbow on the door and curse the door. Then I have to remind myself:

Inanimate objects do not intend to harm me.

When young, learning how to read feelings of people, of dogs, even cats, we extend that nascent empathy to so much in our world. It's part of looking for meaning, for intentions. We learn as we grow up that the door, the tree, the last Cheerio in the milk in the cereal bowl do not have feelings. But if we are not careful, we learn to deny empathy to people with different skin color, with different accent, or just different.

Mindfulness is a means not an end

(I sent this to the magazine *Mindfulness*, June 29, 2014. No reply.)

We are told that meditation and mindfulness can lead us beyond suffering, can help us to be open and peaceful. We can become one with the all. Then, as a fillip at the end, we are told that we should return from our perfect clarity and peace to be compassionate.

But we are not told how to be compassionate. We are not told stories of compassion as the end, but of meditation only.

The goal of passing beyond suffering, the goal of being centered, the goal of being at peace, the goal of being open to the world—these are selfish. *Me* is still what all revolves around. Some who practice meditation more deeply hope to go beyond the *me* to a union with all, the dissolution of the self. Nirvana. And then, don't forget, return to teach us.

There is only one worthy goal: to have a loving heart. Meditation leading to some peace, some putting from us the horrors of hate, greed, vengeance, lust, fear, gluttony, pride, impatience, indifference, sloth, schadenfreude, guilt, can make it easier for us to live with an open heart that loves.

Many acting exercises are similar to meditation, but the actor knows they are only a tool, a way to be open to portray a character. Meditation, too, is a tool, to lead to a loving heart. *No se puede vivir sin amar*.

The end of suffering is no worthy goal. Learning how to live with suffering, to see suffering as essential in the steps to having a loving heart, this is a worthy goal. Not to suffer is not to live. Erasing passion is not to be able to love fully.

It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

We learn to have a loving heart by being loving, each day, learning and telling stories of loving as guides. We learn to have a loving heart by remembering never to pass up an opportunity to be generous.

A comparison of the way of a loving heart to the selfish version of mindfulness is made in *The BARK of DOG*, which I have translated from the classic Sumerian. There you will find stories that give worth to the practice of meditation.

Empathy and art

Wagner was a great composer. Operas that move us. *Tristan und Isolde* has the yearning of lovers so well-wrought with the *liebestod* (love-death) song. Yet

Wagner was a megalomaniac and a raging anti-semite. How can he have created such pieces that move us so? Are we right to respond, knowing his life? Here is what I found in the story "In the Village of Sadhu-Shwa" in *The Bark of Dog*.

> Then a young man, handsome and dark, strong, says, "Gaia, you are wise." And Gaia smiles, "Not wise. Only a good memory for the Bark of DOG." And he continues, "Tell us, how can it be? In the next village, you know, there is a woman who sings, she sings so beautifully, Vishna she is called, so beautifully. . . . She sings so beautifully, though all know she steals the songs from others, she is filled with hate for her rivals, she pets her cats and smiles as they torture mice or little birds. How can it be that she sings so beautifully when there is no love in her heart?"
>
> And Gaia replies, "Oh, there is love in her heart, but only love for herself. . . . Men want her, I hear, they want her, and she lets them make love to her. But hers is an ersatz love, taking and taking and taking but never giving. . . .
>
> And the young man asks again, "But how can she sing so beautifully? We all cry when we hear her, we are moved, yet she has no real love in her heart. . . ."
>
> Then Gaia reflects. "There is a bark, an ancient bark from Akita, the Third DOGGY LAMA:
>
> > All who are sentient have the capacity to love.
> > All who are sentient are here with the chance to love.
>
> So this seed of love is in her, and it comes out in her singing. She is moved to love though she cannot recognize it in herself. She preens herself as a cat, but inside her is the capacity to love that shines forth in her songs, unknown to her. We cannot abandon her, we cannot hate her."
>
> "No," says another young cripple, with his dog so close to him, a young man bringing him a bowl with the broth. "No, it is not her love that is in the singing, for she has no love of anyone nor any thing but herself. No, she sings beautifully to be admired, and we, who can love, we who do have the spark of love within us, growing, always growing, . . . it is our love that responds to the beauty in her song. She just plucks the string; it is we who reverberate. You are right, we must not hate her, ... Nor, surely, should we admire her, nor be envious of her wealth and power. . . ."

Art and empathy

I had thought that empathy was essential for creating art, the creator imagining a person who would respond to the art.

I still think that it would not be possible for a severely autistic person to create written art (novels, poems, plays) because that would require a command of language.

However, it seems to me now that it's not necessary to have empathy to create visual art, including sculpture. Though we often invoke the creator's intention in judging such work, there need be no intention to communicate, nor any intention involving anyone other than the creator.

This can be seen in the book *Jonathan Lerman: Drawings by an Artist with Autism*. Jonathan Lerman creates drawings, almost all of faces. These have the power to move us emotionally: we are affected by the portrayed inner life of the person depicted. But there need not be, and apparently is not any intention by

Jonathan Lerman to affect us, to communicate any vision of his. Nor can we assume that he was responding to the emotions of the persons he depicted. We can see these as only records of what he saw, his fascination with the human face. [See the text of the book written by Lyle Rexer and Lerman's parents.] That is, the drawings serve as portrayals of his his vision without any sense that he wishes to make that available to us. Or perhaps the drawings are his only way to communicate.

In *Last Lectures* by Roger Fry, a noted critic of visual art says:

> The artist is then a man who has experiences of one kind or another which excite him in such a way that first of all for his own satisfaction he wishes to hold them in the focus of attention until he has exactly appreciated their quality, and this holding in focus results in the work of art, poem, picture or what not. p. 12
>
> If we regard works of art not as isolated static phenomena but as potentialities for evoking in ourselves certain states of mind, we shall concentrate our attention rather on what we can get from them than on what we conceive them to be in themselves. p. 16

We need empathy to appreciate visual art, but the artist need not have empathy to create it. A work of art is like a Rorschach test: our reaction to it tells us more about ourselves than about the artist.

The starving tiger

From Demo Rinpoche's *Jataka Tales*,

> Born in a past life Buddha was born a brahmin in a wealthy family. As a Bodhisattva, the Buddha chose to renounce a life of privilege. He became a beloved teacher, living a simple life in a forest retreat. One day, he was walking with a disciple up a mountain path to find a suitable place to practice. As they passed a ravine, they heard the anguished roar of a tiger.
>
> Far below, they saw a weak and starving mother tiger who had just given birth. Crazed with hunger, she was eyeing her tiny cubs as food. Her desperate hunger was about to overcome her natural love and care for her offspring.
>
> Quickly, the Bodhisattva sent his student off in search of something to feed the tiger. The Wise One knew, however, that food was scarce and that feeding the flesh of one helpless animal to another would only prolong the cycle of suffering. Instead, he acknowledged the benefit of using his own body to prevent the tiger from devouring her young ones. With that thought, he cast himself off the cliff into the ravine below.
>
> "*Two things alone cause people to ignore the suffering of others: attachment to pleasure and the inability to give aid. But if I cannot feel pleasure while another being suffers, and if I have the power to help, how can I ignore them?*"
>
> This teaching is about generosity. . . .
>
> When we talk of generosity and being generous with your wealth and virtue we also talk finally about something particularly that you own: your own body, right, a very high level practice of generosity.

What is the reasoning behind such thinking? A tiger lives off herbivorous or smaller predatory animals. An adult male tiger eats about 150 kilograms of meat every month. So why sacrifice your body to a predatory animal so that this animal may live on and continue killing other animals? What's the point? This sympathy

is directly linked to the killing of other animals that would have lived had the tigress starved to death. If he wanted to save an animal from starvation, then why not let himself be devoured by ants? The number of individual souls "saved" by this sacrifice would doubtlessly have been greater. If Buddha's motive would have been to further the natural circle of dog eat dog, predators eating herbivores, I could logically understand, even though in my faith, predators, parasites, leeches are not the ideal way of managing populations and achieving world peace; the predatory mindset is the cause of crimes and wars.

Sometimes, perhaps often, we act immediately on our sympathetic empathy to stop a hurt, to save a dog from drowning. But when we can let's stop to consider the consequences of our acting. This is a limit of empathy.

Why didn't they save the zebra?

We've seen the animal documentaries where a lion stalks a zebra, pounces on it, kills it, and eats it.

Where is the person with the camera filming what we see? Why doesn't he or she intervene, stop the slaughter? The poor zebra!

That wouldn't change the nature of the world. Lions eat zebras. Should we teach the lions to be vegetarians in order to assuage our sensibilities?

But how is this different from the man who walks past a poor woman begging? He says that there will always be poor people. It's the nature of the world.

What are the limits of empathy?

Killing empathy

This is from a weekly column "They're Not Like You and Me" I wrote for the local paper, *El Defensor Chieftain*, in Socorro, New Mexico, August 12, 2006.

> *The Torturers, Murderers, and Rapists in Our Military*
>
> They joined the military. They thought it would give them a head start in life. Or they wanted direction in their lives. Or they felt it was a way to do their duty, to serve their country.
>
> They never thought that they'd go to a big city in ruins, a country without running water and electricity, where every single person they pass on the street might want to see them dead.
>
> They didn't plan to kill. They never thought they'd see ruined bodies, dismembered friends, dead Iraqis in pieces on the streets. They never thought they'd have nightmares that go on and on and on.
>
> They never thought that they'd be away from family and friends for two years, three years, just a little time with them and then back to fighting. They never thought they'd be asked to win the hearts and minds of people by killing them. They were nice kids. Your friend's niece. Your cousin's son. They were good kids, just out of high school a year or a few years. No evil in them.
>
> But some of them. They were bad. They got mad when their buddies in the unit were killed. They stormed into a house and shot everyone there: women, children, men in wheelchairs.
>
> They couldn't stand being young and male and not a woman around for months

> and months. And told that all the people they see are the enemy. They raped. They shot the woman and her family. They had no remorse.
>
> They were told the captives were evil, bad. They didn't need any evidence—their superiors told them so, and officers don't lie. They should mistreat them. They had absolute power over prisoners, absolute. No restrictions. Together they indulged their fantasies of humiliation.
>
> And others. They saw the evil these ones were doing, but didn't stop it. They didn't have the courage to say "No, No, a thousand times No." They knew that saying so would bring hatred and danger from their buddies and from their officers. They would be ostracized, in real danger for their lives. In the military you don't arrest your officer for misconduct.
>
> They had been trained: obey orders; don't think. They'd been abused and confused in boot camp. They were taught to kill, not to care. They didn't know the military was like that. They only wanted a job and a chance to serve their country.
>
> They're not like you and me. They were bad. Or they became bad. No one told them what it would be like, and they didn't have the courage to say "No." We wouldn't have murdered or raped. We would have resisted the temptation and the constant assaults, the fear and license to indulge our fears and hatreds. We would have had the courage to say "No."
>
> Or would we? Maybe they aren't so different from you and me. What did we think when we sent them to kill in a country far away? That they would remain good kids and not be affected by the death, the injuries, the fear, the hatred?
>
> They once were like you and me. Now they're not like you and me.
>
> We did that to them when we asked them to go to kill for us.

Rousing marches

John Phillips Sousa, the great composer of marches, said that pacifists are cowards. So Jesus was a coward. Sousa's lack of empathy, inability to imagine how the other person feels, how a pacifist is motivated. This is what we see from so many people who have fixed on how they will act without concern for others, unable to change it seems. They know what is right and wrong and will not consider emotions other than those that are consonant with pushing them in the way they have chosen. Beware anyone who is certain what is right and wrong, for that blinds them to empathy. Think of those "Christians" now who have been born again. They want to convert me, to save me, but not to understand and walk with me.

Pacifists, I and others I have known, are not afraid to die. We are afraid to kill. No, "afraid" is not right. We are unwilling to kill. Self-defense? To react with hate and injury is to lose the chance to lead someone to empathy and love.

Survival

Many of my friends are old. I hear of attempts by them and others to prolong the lives of ones they hold dear. The stories are awful. Terrible therapies that destroy more than save. Life at any cost. Barely coherent old people hanging on, their children telling the doctors to save them, save them. I remember how my mother and brother did all they could to save my father when he was old and very ill and

was in hospital. When I visited him I asked the doctor how long it would be before he could go home. He looked at me quizzically and told me that he wouldn't ever be going home. My father wanted to die, but who was he to say? There is some passage towards the end of *Social Darwinism in American Thought* in which someone notes that survival as the goal is a pretty worthless goal. Survival just to survive. I've got a living will. If I get a hangnail, don't try to save me.

Advice

Keep a smile on your face, a song in your heart, and don't bend over.

Charity begins at home

Perhaps you know someone like the surgeon. He's always at the hospital, on-call when he's home. Day after day, year after year, he is absent from his family. His son, his daughter never see him at their school, at the baseball games, at their birthdays. But how can they resent that? He's doing so much good.

Perhaps, but it is not empathy, nor even primarily wanting to do good. It's his job, the life he has chosen, and he gets to feel good about what he does. Indeed, he can't have empathy for his patients if he is going to start cutting on them. And he certainly has no empathy for his children. The older son takes care of the younger daughter, since his wife left long ago, for she saw him for what he is: doing good to justify his life, so he can feel good about himself, but thoughtless of others.

And my father. My mother and father returned from a vacation on a cruise ship. The wife of a man on the cruise died on board, and my father spent much time consoling him, listening to him. My mother tells me how wonderful my father was. I think that he has time to listen to that man, to be big-hearted, but only criticizes me, never listens to me, never cares how I am feeling. I resent that, being too young, perhaps only too immature, or perhaps too selfish to think of my father's problems, to see his big-heartedness as an emotional knee-jerk in place of a deeply felt empathy.

Empathy for our parents?

I got older and learned more about my father's life and my mother's life. I began to understand why they acted the way they did, so hurtful to me—though not, they would say, and I believe, intentionally. And that was the hardest part: no one to rebel against, they meant well. I was supposed to love them.

I never had any empathy for them, not when I was a child, nor when I got older. They had the power. Like a prisoner can have no empathy for his guards. Though I was not a prisoner except emotionally. Can any child have empathy for his or her parents? Sympathy yes, as I did later in life. But empathy? Can you? Did you?

God has no empathy

You mentioned the Abraham-Isaac myth. It was meant to instill fear and faith in those who heard it. But my reaction is: Why should I follow a God who says I must sacrifice my beloved son? What kind of God would require such a test? Abraham could have said "No" to God and taken the consequences. Even if that meant the son dying anyway. But then Abraham would not have done the killing. The pacifist alternative. "Just testing" is a terrible ending to the story. God like a mafia boss.

From Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*,

> I used to listen to the monks repeating the Lord's Prayer; I wondered how they could continue to pray without misgiving to their heavenly father to give them their daily bread. Do children beseech their earthly father to give them sustenance? They expect him to do it, they neither feel gratitude to him for doing so nor need to, and we have only blame for a man who brings children into the world that he can't or won't provide for. It seemed to me that if an omnipotent creator was not prepared to provide his creatures with the necessities, material and spiritual, of existence, he'd have done better not to create them.

Altruism

From *Seeing Calvin Coolidge in a Dream* by John Derbyshire, p. 220:

> Now that we are on the subject of altruism, I must say a word as to its essential immorality. The term surprises you, but is not a whit too strong. If it is possible to put self and its welfare completely out of sight in order to labor solely for others, it will be equally possible to put out of sight self and its responsibilities and obligations. Unless self is the center of one's horizon and is degraded by wrong doing and ennobled by right doing, there is nothing to tie to, nothing to bind the person to the path of duty.

This seems wrong to me. Think of those people who speak a flow-of-all language in which one does not conceive of oneself as a separate *thing*, not separate but with all in the flow of all (see the quotes by Dorothy Demetracopoulou Lee on p. 15 above). It is our prejudice, instilled in part by our language, that directs us to think we must be self-centered before we can be good to others.

Were the religious saints, hermits thinking first of themselves?

Empathy by itself is not a virtue

My niece gets pain in her abdomen when she sees a person or an animal hurt. But she does not act on it. It's private. Whether empathetic or indifferent, the effect on the one who is suffering is the same.

What is the difference between a friend who never calls, doesn't keep in contact, and someone who doesn't care about you at all, distant? Functionally, nothing.

—"But I was thinking of you."
—"Think louder.

Non Sequitur by Wiley, October 12, 2009

Pain

Can we say that someone who suffers terribly and later cannot remember the pain has suffered?

I had sciatica very bad. In the summer. I learned that it came from being dehydrated—an old man's problem, forgetting to eat or drink. I slowly recovered by drinking lots of water regularly. I can remember now that I hurt, from my spine across to my left hip and down my leg. I want to avoid that. But I can't remember the hurt. And thank DOG for that.

If I could remember pain I have had, more than a slight twinge or pale reminiscence, I would be hurting a lot of the time. And yet . . . when I hear a dentist's drill I have more than a faint memory of pain—I wince with the sound.

Pain redux

I cannot recall my own pain, try as I might to imagine. So how much less can I feel the pain you are suffering. Yet I react when I see you twist your ankle on a walk. Or when you cut your finger slicing onions. I feel no pain, I only react, and the why and how are a mystery to me.

A child runs to his mother crying, waving his hand. "I'll take care of it, here honey" the mother says. She sees that it is a big splinter, pushed in deep. She gets a needle and starts to dig it out while the child is screaming. "This hurts me more than it does you," she says. Really? How can she do it? She has to stop feeling with the child, just as the surgeon must stop her empathy to slice open the abdomen. But at least then the patient is under anesthetic.

I have to hurt you to help you.

The dentist gave me laughing gas

There I was, not moving while he drilled on my tooth. I could feel the pain, but I didn't care. Pain without suffering.

A mother

A mother at the bedside of her very sick child, who is moaning and screaming in pain, soon perhaps to have surgery. Oh, she says, could I just take your pain, leave you well. I would gladly suffer rather than see you suffer so.

But that's what she cannot do; what we cannot do: take another's pain, not physical, not emotional. We can only give the child—or adult—a guide, more than words, touching, leading to live through what comes. Like a bicycle repair kit.

Emotional pain

Many years ago I returned from a trip, home, rushing out of my car I called my dog, ready to meet her, to pet her, away too long. "Juney, Juney". My neighbor came out of her house and told me that Juney had chased a squirrel into the road and had been hit by a car. Dead. And disposed of. I bellowed, I yelled, more than crying, grief overwhelming, raging, here, there outside the house, overwhelmed. Tears, gasping, unable to breathe. No calm, and again now, as I remember, I have the great sorrow, the regret that I had not been there so she wouldn't have run into the street. Not a faint glimmer but the full feeling of that time, I am again overwhelmed. I cry.

We call this "pain". Emotional pain. Suffering. As if it were the same or akin

to physical pain. But physical pain I cannot relive. Emotional pain I cannot not relive. The trauma that recurs.

Emotional pain is so different from physical pain that it seems wrong to use the same word for both. We can see when someone has physical pain, grimacing as she walks. We can respond with empathy, sympathetic empathy. We try to help. But we cannot see how someone who is a walking wounded of emotional pain is suffering. So we cannot respond.

That is why we cultivate empathy, inquiring at small signs of emotional suffering, offering to help when we are unsure of the need. Often rebuffed but often met with great gratitude.

Reliving emotional pain makes us regret. Regret? We cannot change what happened, but our memories can teach us how to live better now.

Fairness to yourself

The great movie *Dogville*. Judging others less harshly than you would judge yourself. Not holding them accountable, as you would hold yourself accountable. = You're better than them. Pride. That's enabling.

But how is that different from the Catholic saints?

I'm a bad person

Depressed. Obsessed with oneself. So can't reach out to a friend who is suffering. Empathy is gone.

"I'm a bad person", "I am worthless", "The world would be a better place without me" become self-fulfilling prophecies. The answer is to reach out, try to help others, to not let empathy die, and in doing so save yourself—though never that as the goal.

Regret

You comment on shame and anguish for those we hurt whom we love most. Or, for me, those who I care for even some. Even for the hurt and anguish I caused thoughtlessly.

But if I had acted differently, I would not now be the person I am who is regretting. And along what other path I'd chosen, I'd be regretting something else. And my dog Arfito would not have been born. As it says in *The BARK of DOG*, "Regret is the paralysis of hope". We learn so as not to repeat our mistakes, but we cannot go back, and dwelling on them is destructive. I tell myself, as I dwell on them.

The Gift of the Magi

So a friend tells me of a couple she knows. They get a loaf of French bread, a baguette. She likes the hard end of the baguette. But she loves her man so much that when she cuts the bread she gives him that piece. He dislikes the hard end of the baguette, but he takes it because he knows it will make her feel good.

Another limit to empathy? Check up on what you assume.

Reasoning to empathy?

Here is an example from my paper "Analogies" in *The Fundamentals of Argument Analysis*.

Example
You should treat dogs humanely. How would you feel if you were caged up all day and experimented on? Or if you were chained to a stake all day? Or someone beat you every time you did something wrong?

Analysis We can take each of the questions as rhetorical and get an argument by analogy. The unstated claim is that dogs are like humans.

It would be morally unacceptable to cage up and experiment on a human.
It would be morally unacceptable to chain a human to a stake all day.
It would be morally unacceptable to beat a human every time he/she did something wrong.
Dogs are like humans.
Therefore, it is morally unacceptable to do any of these things to a dog.
That is, you should treat dogs humanely.

Is the argument good? We have to replace the vague sentence "Dogs are like humans" with specific ways in which dogs and humans are similar, and then devise a general principle that applies to both dogs and humans.

The fundamental similarity of dogs to humans is that they are both mammals. We can use that similarity to flesh out the argument by adding as premises:

Dogs are mammals.
Humans are mammals.
You should treat mammals humanely.

This would do, though the general claim is too broad to be plausible to many of us, since it covers cats. The only other clue we have to the speaker's intent is that she says, "How would you feel . . ." She believes that we can imagine what it would be like to be a dog treated badly. We could flesh out the analogy, then, with premises:

You can imagine what it would be like to be another person treated badly.
You can imagine what it would be like to be a dog treated badly.
You should treat humanely any creature that you can imagine what it would feel like to be mistreated.

This might be better, for it would justify some people treating fish humanely, while others would reject that since they can't imagine what a fish feels.

Which is the better analysis of the original analogy? Both are reasonable interpretations. But both need to be improved considerably before they would be good arguments. As is often the case with an analogy, a comparison and a conclusion are just a starting place for a serious discussion of an issue, for attempts to find principles that we all find plausible.

Now I think that this is a worthless exercise in reasoning. You can't convince someone by reasoning not to beat a dog (*pace* Kant), but only by example, by leading the person to feel. And that is what the original example is meant to do.

Joy!

So much talk about feeling the pain of others, of responding in a caring manner to others' suffering. Yet empathy is for joy, too. I'm shopping in the local grocery store and a middle-aged woman comes along singing an old silly song I remember

from when I was a teenager, and I smile, laugh, and sing a bit, too. Joy is contagious. Let's not be soooo serious. Her teenage daughter, however, is embarrassed. What will people think? They'll think that we're being silly, and isn't that just great!

When empathy fails

In my local grocery store again. I see a man, unshaven, dressed as a woman, dressed to attract attention. I almost gag, I avoid him/her.

But why is that different from a woman who dresses attractively in the (perhaps not clearly thought-out) hope of attracting a man, or a man who wears a big belt buckle and cowboy hat to advertise his being heterosexual.

Why can't I feel empathy? Why does this seem so awful to me? Almost a gagging response, disgust. I cannot control my reaction. This, I think, is an effect of fear, as if he/she were inviting me to participate in sex that I don't want.

Yet if someone were to ridicule him/her, to push him/her around, I would step in to defend, I would not let it pass. Then I do have empathy, I can feel the pain.

But some cannot feel that pain. And for them we have laws to protect those for whom they can feel neither empathy nor sympathy, none at all, only fear, fear of the different, fear of being infected by that "disease".

Different strokes for different folks

I can't control my disgust reaction. It is there. Physical. As basic an emotion as hate and fear and awe.

Yet disgust is learned, too, taught to us growing up in a community, a culture. A religious Jew or Muslim would feel disgust if he or she had just found out that the meat they were eating was pork; most of us would enjoy the meal.

And lust, also a basic emotion, so shaped by our culture.

Bad person?

From *The Razor's Edge* by W. Somerset Maugham.

> "She's soused from morning till night. She goes to be with every tough who asks her."
>
> "That doesn't mean she's bad. Quite a number of highly respected citizens get drunk and have a liking for the rough trade. They're bad habits, like biting one's nails, but I don't know that they're worse than that. I call a person bad who lies and cheats and is unkind."

Excessive empathy?

Recall those inmates I taught at the jail, almost all of whom were addicts they said.

For them to become open again, I had to be open, too. I shared with them my ups and downs. I told them once that I was very depressed, terribly, so depressed that I was about ready to start taking drugs. After all, I said, the drugs must be really good if you give up everything—family, friends, children—to take them every day. One of the men joked that he could arrange for me to get the drugs. Another, though, warned me not to take them because I would end up in the jail like him. I told him I'd be careful to take the drugs only at home. But then talking with the women (I taught the men and women separately), one said, "Yeah, they'll make you feel better. But afterwards you'll feel worse." The other women agreed and told me

more. I told them that I couldn't face feeling worse. I was convinced by them not to take drugs.

It was hard not to be overwhelmed with feeling for the inmates. I want to help, I want to give, I identify. But that leads to enabling. And being taken advantage of. We need "tough love". But what is that? What is the limit and what is turning your back because you "know better"?

Better not have empathy?

And the jailers there, the guards, walking a tightrope. If empathetic, they cannot deal with the inmates. They must learn the limits of empathy beyond being fair. No empathy demeans the inmates, and demeans the guards. Too much empathy leads to emotional wipeout, enabling, being taken advantage of by inmates who see you as an easy mark.

The line for the guards to walk: fairness, justice, but not empathy. So they are told.

Is this empathy?

I have a friend. He is always good, kind, offering to help without being asked. But he is upset, perplexed, if the offer isn't accepted. Or if later the person doesn't keep in contact with him. So, it seems to me, this is not empathy but only the desire to do good. And be recognized for doing good.

To be loving

I take it as a goal to teach addicts, inmates, children to be loving, to look outwards. But then there is always the "risk" that they take it "too seriously". Risk? Or good?

Compassion

This is from a weekly column "They're Not Like You and Me" that I wrote for the local paper, *El Defensor Chieftain*, in Socorro, New Mexico, March 8, 2008.

> *I'll be better as soon as I'm over this flu*
>
> Two weeks now. Sick with this cold, this flu. Coughing, feeling as miserable as people say I look. I wouldn't mind getting sick except every time I do, I don't feel good.
>
> I feel so rotten it's hard to imagine how anyone else feels. It's hard to imagine someone else's troubles when you're ill. And this flu sure makes me feel down. Blue. Depressed.
>
> Still, there's always someone worse off. If not, what joy would we have in the world? There but for the grace of Dog go I. Thank goodness they're not like you and me.
>
> Yet a kind word from someone, a wish that I feel better, the slightest acknowledgement of my illness, and I feel better. Part of the world again. Others have concern for me. And as they do, I begin to have concern for others again.
>
> Compassion. Not feeling sorry for someone. But feeling their pain—and joy, and as I feel it, I become part of the world again.
>
> Part of the world, I know that others are like you and me. The mugger, the rapist, the drug addict, the rock star, the guy who cut me off in traffic, the thirty-

year-old Down's Syndrome child—they are all like you and me. They hope, they fear, they care for someone, they hate. Only they have lost their way. In that, we hope, they are not like you and me. Waiting for a gentle hand to touch them, they press their hope into deformed and ugly shapes, small creations of fear, and hate, and pride. Of all those, only the Down Syndrome child day after day presses her hope into love, and in that she can lead us.

Knowing that they are like you and me, we can reach out to them. Give them a gentle touch that may soften their fear and hate and pride. Knowing that they are like you and me is the first step to compassion.

Compassion is the beginning and end of all morality. Without compassion there can be no morality, only rules. With compassion there is no need for sermons.

They're not like you and me, those folks who think that morality is a set of rules to follow—and to impose on others: don't kill, don't lie, an eye for an eye, don't eat pork, ... Rules are only a guide until we can feel compassion, a crutch for the emotionally impaired to lean on until they can see the world as another person does. Such rules are forced, demanded of us, or we are cajoled to follow them. Fear to break the rules, fear of hell. Hope of reward to obey them, hope of heaven.

Compassion needs no hell nor heaven. Hell enough it is to feel the pain of another and not be able to help; heaven enough to be able to help.

Feeling with?

When a trout rising to a fly gets hooked on a line and finds himself unable to swim about freely, he begins with a fight which results in struggles and splashes and sometimes an escape. Often, of course, the situation is too tough for him.

In the same way the human being struggles with his environment and with the hooks that catch him. Sometimes he masters his difficulties; sometimes they are too much for him. His struggles are all that the world sees and it naturally misunderstands them. It is hard for a free fish to understand what is happening to a hooked one.

Karl A. Menninger

Addiction

(From a blog I wrote on the ARF website in 2020)

The sciatica has gone.

Now I can remember <u>that</u> I had pain. But I can't remember the pain, thank DOG.

I told a friend that the pain pills didn't work for me and I put them all in a medication disposal box at the local police station. He congratulated me. Congratulations that I didn't become an addict? I don't deserve congratulations for not being able to tolerate pain pills, which didn't ease the pain anyway. And the week of withdrawal after one month on them was awful. Congratulations for disposing of the pills with the police? I wasn't tempted to sell them, thinking of how bad the effects of them would be on others.

When we judge others who are addicts, think of how they respond physically to the opiates or meth. What we can't tolerate seems great to them. Or at least it keeps them from the horrors of withdrawal. Less judgment, more empathy tempered with knowing not to enable.

I had thought to title this post "Pain and Suffering—ended". But there is no certain end to pain and suffering, only interludes that we cherish for feeling well, and feeling well want to help others feel good, too. Even if the sciatica doesn't return, there will be suffering enough for me in the future, I am sure. As it says in "Master Ts'en" in *The BARK of DOG*"

> What you do with the suffering, that is what matters,
> that is what can lead to love, to follow with love.

The greatest impediment to empathy

Fear.

Fear of contamination: walking past a bum or a dirty slovenly woman, I shall not touch you, I shall not feel for you, for you are not clean. I must hold to my sense of myself as above this person.

Some build that into a religion or strict way of life. I follow the rules, I am clean, you are a slut, a cheat, a whoremonger, a bum, unwilling to follow THE rules (= our rules). I will not help you. Lest I go that way. For I, too, have been tempted.

They forget what Jesus taught. He touched and was touched by the leper. But didn't he say to Mary when he returned to the empty grave and she was there: *noli me tangere* = do not touch me ? That's how later Christians translated him as saying. The original in Greek: "Cease holding on to me" or "stop clinging to me". Yes, Jesus touched all and was touched by those who would touch him. Live in my way, not needing me to show you anymore. But the Christians, the christians, distort all to feel superior, for they are afraid. If I recognize that this woman, this man, this child has life, emotions, a way in the world, however hard and "unclean", then I, too, might go that way. My fantasies must be suppressed. They do not realize that with suppressing empathy they are suppressing love, and doom themselves.

[Read or listen to the story "She Who Loves the Lowest" in *The BARK of DOG*.]

A hidden impediment to empathy

Smart phones. Social media.

You see him walking down the street, looking at his phone, not talking. Texting. Not aware that there's a person walking by. We do not smile at him, for there's no point: he'd not notice, or if he did he'd not respond. A woman glued to her phone who notices you smiling might be unpleasantly startled. We're not real: we're not posting on the internet. Better to sit at home and watch videos of dogs playing and being rescued from animal shelters than to go outside and pet your dog.

If there is no recognition that there is another person, there cannot be empathy. It could as well be an artificial intelligence program texting back to you.

Ersatz contact that is not contact.

Doing good

You have a friend, a woman you love dearly—not sexually, but deeply, philos. She is obese. If she were to lose 100 lbs (45 kg) she would be only fat. You want to help her, for she will not live long if she continues eating, eating, eating. Should you suggest that she take one of the new wonder weight-loss drugs?

You meet someone casually, also obese, you have seen how the weight-loss

drugs can help. Should you go up to him and suggest that he investigate that kind of treatment?

What's the difference. What is empathy here?

We've all met them. They've found the way that has saved them. They feel compelled to help others to find the way, button-holing each one they can. They are unbearable. They have feeling for others, but not empathy.

The Eliza syndrome

We look for meaning—that's crucial for us as social animals. And that leads us to understanding how others feel, though not necessarily empathy. But that can be distorted.

Back in the 1960s there was a program Eliza that mimicked mental counseling. Roughly, it put on the screen "Tell me how you feel", and then in response to what was typed in, it would put on the screen, "Why do you feel that way?" or "What makes you believe that?" [See <web.njt.edu/~ronkowit/eliza.html>.] Some people who used it were helped. They attributed feelings and insight to the program, just as we attribute feelings and insight to a human therapist who is just repeating back to us as questions what we say.

And now some fall in love with the new artificial intelligence programs. Sexual fantasies. Then they are disappointed when the program resets and so "forgets" what went before.

My poor puppy!

I got my puppy, Pup, when he was 3 months old. Here at home with Arfito, who's been with me for almost 6 years. From the beginning Pup has been very lively, jumping, chewing, play-fighting with Arfito, going for long walks with us where he's learned from Arfito how to catch and eat gophers, running, running, so much energy. I did ask for the most rambunctious puppy of the litter.

He'll be seven months old in a couple weeks. My veterinarian tells me that it's time for him to be "fixed"—castrated. Castrated! Oh, my poor puppy. I love you so, you sit in my lap when I rest on our walks, you look to me, you play with me. And now to cut off your balls!? My friends tell me it's for the best, no unwanted puppies, no chasing after bitches—he's already trying to hump Arfito. He'll be calmer. And happier.

But I empathize with him. How he will suffer. No, just a little cut, and healed in a week. He won't know what he'll be missing. As I would. As I did when I got hormone suppression therapy for my prostate cancer and was slow and got fat until it was stopped. But is my dread for him really empathy? It seems more that I am identifying with him. What I would feel if I were him. But identifying with Pup, or with another person, is focusing on yourself first. It is not empathy. I am the measure of all things.

I've made the appointment. Forgive me, Pup.

And a few days later . . .

I thought: I'm old, Pup is young. He will outlive me, or at least I hope he will. When I die, it will be much easier for Pup to get adopted if he has been "fixed".

Reasoning tempers empathy.

Reasoning and feeling

Reasoning, talking with my friend about the appointment for Pup, he was shocked that I could consider not getting Pup castrated. I had to explain to him that I wasn't talking about what should be done, for I had become convinced by the same arguments he was making, but about how I feel about it.

We can become convinced, intellectually, see a clear path. But we still have to reconcile that with how we feel, respecting that and, sometimes, learning that how we feel will lead us astray.

Sometime we just act

Empathy, fear, rage, love—all mixed. You cannot say why you acted—then or after. But it is what you have trained for—though not waited for. Practicing kindness, joy, putting aside anger, and fear, and wanting, and self-pity, for the giving of love.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. But we cannot, do not cogitate to all or even most of our actions. We just do. And if we have trained our heart, we do well. Most of the time. Or at least some of the time. Don't we?

He means well need an example here

An excuse? A good excuse?

If time and again he acts out of kindness and concern, of empathy and fairness, —well, sometimes he'll get it wrong. We all do. And in that case to say that he meant well is not so much an excuse as a reminder that he does have a good heart and we should not lose trust in him.

But if he "just didn't think", he rushed in thoughtlessly without any consideration of consequences that would have been—should have been—clear, then to say that he meant well is enabling, a get-out-of-jail-free card.

Language

Without recognizing emotions we could not have language.

We talk to communicate or to get someone to do something. So we have to have some idea of another, a person, judging his or her reaction as we talk.

But empathy is not sufficient. Lots of animals have empathy but no language. Empathy is necessary for language but not sufficient.

And without recognizing others' emotions there would be no basis for lying.

Empathy and our language

Are all these ruminations tied to our speaking a thing-language? English, Spanish, German, European languages direct us to see the world as made up of things, individual things that persist in time through their changes: chairs, tables, dogs, people. Empathy then is how we try to, can, bridge the gap between you and me. Feeling with, though not identifying with, for that is to mislead. We are all one—at the emotional level. They talk of evolution giving us this.

In contrast, Chinese, Polynesian languages, Navajo and many, perhaps all American Indian languages direct their speakers to see the world as the flow of all. [See the quotes from Dorothy Lee on p. 15.] You and I are not separate though distinct in the flow of all. As it says in *The BARK of DOG*, "I am you as you are me and we are all together." So recognizing your emotion of anger is somehow

recognizing what is in me. Does talk of empathy make any sense in such a language? [see the comments by Chad Hansen at the end here]

Forgive

I was talking with a friend who's seeing a therapist, psychological counseling. The therapist, advises him to empathize with this person who has wronged him. Think of his side. And that, as I said before, just lets that person off the hook, no responsibility for his or her actions.

But you should let go, forgive him, it will make you feel better.

Wow! That's not generosity of spirit. That's not growing in maturity. It's forgiveness for your own sake, for the reward of feeling better. That's no virtue.

Responsibility

Carolyn Hax in her column May 14, 2025, says:

> Each of us is responsible for what we choose to do. That includes taking into account its possible effect on others.
>
> But that doesn't mean anything I do that hurts someone else is wrong. I don't have to make plans with someone I don't like, for example, just because saying no would hurt them. My time is my responsibility, not theirs.

Time is precious. Right. Until you're old and time is a burden. Time is money. We spend time, we waste time. We have forgotten how to live. We apportion our time, perhaps, to optimize what we do. And somehow that optimum use of our time neglects kindness.

Duty

A woman I know has no good feelings towards her aged mother. But she has her mother live with her so she can take care of her.

When my mother got very old, my older brother put her in a nursing home near where he lived, across the country from me. Every evening he would leave work and drive to sit with her while she told stories of the family, stories that were awful, he saying nothing. Trauma for him to hear evening after evening. But he persisted.

This is not empathy. This is not kindness. It is guilt, fear of guilt if he should not "do his duty". It drove him to drink heavily when he got home each evening, and eventually divorce.

> Guilt is the poison of love. — *The BARK of DOG*

Hardening one's heart

From Fielding's *Tom Jones*,

> I do not think a few or many examples of ingratitude can justify a man's hardening his heart against the distresses of his fellow-creatures; nor do I believe it can ever have such effect of a truly benevolent mind. Nothing less than a persuasion of universal depravity can lock up the charity of a good man; and this persuasion must lead him, I think, either into atheism, or enthusiasm; but surely it is unfair to argue such universal depravity from a few vicious individuals.

Enthusiasm

Agape, unless it leads to a hermit's life, is filled with enthusiasm. Yes, enthusiasm, the joy of sharing.

Enthusiasm as a necessary spark to our doing good, but not sufficient, no not sufficient. The Hitler Youth in the 1930s were filled with enthusiasm.

At one with God (and the world?)

The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn by the Ikhwán is a debate between animals and "the Adamites" (humans). Lenn Goodman translates the spokesman of the birds saying:

> You say that you have festivals, convocations, visits to the houses of worship, and we have no such thing. But that is because we have no need of them. For all places are our places of worship, and all directions are the *quiblahs* toward which we turn in prayer. For wherever we turn our face, there is the face of God. All days to us are days of festival and assembly, and all movements in us are acts of worship and praise. So we need none of the things you have cited and of which you boasted. (p. 158)

The animals are winning the debate time and again; the arguments by the humans are all refuted until the end when CRASH: it's all resolved in favor of the humans as being masters and animals being slaves because humans can look forward to the resurrection and animals can't. Ahh, religion is our consolation—when it isn't our torment.

The therapist knows best

Man: So I hit the guy.

Therapist: How did that make you feel?

Man: Great!

How should the therapist respond? Isn't the point of therapy is to make the patient feel good about himself or herself?

It's not like advising against taking heroin, since here there's no withdrawal. The man feels great three days after hitting the guy.

But it is like advising against heroin. The therapist can see farther, knows that if the man continues in this way he will, sooner or later, be in jail, or friendless, or hunkered down against the world. Just as the therapist knows that using heroin will lead to misery, though she's never taken it herself, she knows that hitting people when you don't like what they said will lead to misery.

Perhaps the therapist would say that she is trying to make the man feel better about himself so that he won't hit people. Or is this a smoothing the therapist makes to get the patient to better adapt to society?

Me, too

Years ago at the bank where I had an account in Berkeley, California, I was at the teller's when I heard a man at the next teller upset because she wouldn't cash his check. Though it was from that bank, it wasn't from that branch. He railed, got mad, and madder. The teller said, "I'm just following orders." Then he said, "Yes, like the Nazis at the concentration camps." I said to him, "That's awful. Denying cashing your check is not like killing Jews." The man looked at me (I look Jewish) and said, "You make me wish that Hitler had been successful." Then without thinking, with no reflection, I punched him. Hard, on his arm.

He let out a wail. He told the teller to call the police. I went and sat down in a chair in the small lobby. Two policemen came, he told them the story and said I had run away. Then the teller directed them to me. The white policeman talked to the man, and the black policeman came over to me. I told him I was ashamed of myself, that violence is never a good response, that I was a pacifist and couldn't excuse myself. The police conferred with the man and then the black policeman told me the man wouldn't press charges: they'd told him that you couldn't say something like that in a confined place in Berkeley and expect no consequences.

I was so ashamed as I went back to the teller to finish my business. She was Asian and thanked me. And the teller the man yelled at told me her relative was Jewish. I apologized to the bank manager, who was black. After that when I came to do business they were very pleasant to me, more than before.

But doesn't that encourage violence? Hitting the man didn't make me feel better. I was only at the second stage of empathy, responding to the emotion—not the third stage of responding in a caring manner, though I started with that by talking to the man. Resonance, not empathy.

Resonance

Some folks talk of empathy as emotional resonance. But to me resonance is when you pluck a string on a bass viol and the "same" string on another bass viol nearby vibrates. Emotional resonance wouldn't even qualify as necessary for empathy: recognizing anger and then having fear is as appropriate as feeling angry.

Reading emotions

It's obvious. I can tell just looking at him that he's angry. I can tell just looking at her that she's sad. I can tell just looking at her that she's happy.

It's not always obvious, not always evident to all. In Japan they smile when they're embarrassed or anxious. We'd read that wrong. In France they wave their hand wildly up and down when they're in sudden pain, where we would grimace and shout. In *Espressione e Mimica* Leone Augusto Rosa, an Italian artist, presented drawings of emotions to be used by other artists (the Advanced Reasoning Forum has reprinted it). As I note in my book *Conventional Gestures*, for more than a few illustrations I couldn't identify the emotion meant, and even translating the title of the illustration from Italian didn't help.

The expression and reading of emotional signals are stylized in a culture; we learn to make the expression; we learn to read the expression.

Empathy is not a free gift to us with our being human. We can and must learn empathy.

Share their thoughts

So I'm reading the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on empathy. The first sentence is:

> The concept of empathy is used to refer to a wide range of psychological capacities that are thought of as being central for constituting humans as social creatures allowing us to know what other people are thinking and feeling, to emotionally engage with them, to share their thoughts and feelings, and to care for their well-being.

Share their thoughts? Know what other people are thinking? That's way too much. We learn to guess what other people are thinking, to make our way in the world assuming that our guesses are more or less good most of the time. But share their thoughts? I can't get inside your head and you can't get inside mine. And we're often wrong, too often (sigh). That's why we talk, we gesture, we act to get one another to "understand". [See the paper "Subjective Claims" by Fred Kroon, William S. Robinson, and me in *The Fundamentals of Argument Analysis*.]

It's not knowing how the other is feeling

My dogs, Arfito and Pup, how they love to have their bellies scratched. I approach Pup and he turns on to his back, paws up, inviting me to rub his belly. Arfito, too. I can see and feel in the touch of my hand how they are content, pleased, "zoned-out". But I cannot imagine how they feel physically. Rub my belly? OK, I guess, but it doesn't do anything for me.

I can see and feel their emotion, and I respond in a loving manner. I cannot imagine their physical state, their bliss, no more than I can feel the pain of the donkey being beaten, or you can feel my indigestion. It is the emotion and caring, not identification, that is the basis of empathy.

Getting it wrong

So a psychologist walks into a bar . . .

I bought a book *Against Empathy* by Paul Bloom. He writes on p. 9:

> But how could empathy steer us wrong? Well, read on. But in brief: Empathy is a spotlight focusing on certain people in the here and now. This makes us care more about them, but it leaves us insensitive to the long-term consequences of our acts and blinds us to the suffering of those we do not or cannot empathize with. Empathy is biased, pushing us in the direction of parochialism and racism. It is shortsighted, motivating actions that might make things better in the short term but lead to tragic results in the future. It is innumerate, favoring the one over the many. It can spark violence; our empathy for those close to us is a powerful force for war and atrocity toward others. It is corrosive in personal relationships; it exhausts the spirit and can diminish the force of kindness and love.

I was led astray by this as it comes before he defines "empathy". I thought he was doing what I'm trying to do: looking for the limits of empathy. But it's only on p. 16 that he defines:

> Empathy is the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does.

Now you can define "empathy" any way you like—there are lots of choices. But this definition is bad because:

1. It suggests that empathy is to be construed as a conscious decision—it is an act. But perhaps that's reading to much into that word.
2. It does not take empathy to have anything to do with emotions.
3. It does not allow distinguishing empathy as an emotional response from identifying with the other person.

The definition closes off too many important issues.

Bloom doesn't challenge the reader to come to his or her own conclusions but "tells it like it is"—as an authority. No humility.

He is concerned with what is moral, and particularly with whether empathy leads us to act morally. But he never says what he means by "moral".

> As another example of how empathy can clash with other moral considerations, C. Daniel Batson and his colleagues did an experiment in which they told subjects about a ten-year-old girl named Sheri Summers who had a fatal disease and was waiting in line for treatment that would relieve her pain. Subjects were told that they could move her to the front of the line. When simply asked what to do, they acknowledged that she has to wait because other more needy children were ahead of her. But if they were first asked to imagine what she felt, they tended to choose to move her up, putting her ahead of children who were presumably more deserving. Here empathy was more powerful than fairness, leading to a decision that most of us would see as immoral. p. 25

How does he know that most of us would see that decision as immoral? Did he do a survey? It seems obvious that the "subjects" in the experiment did not view it as immoral. He has not examined the assumptions built into the experiment nor has he examined how he gets from the objective (verbal responses) to the subjective.

So I looked up that paper ("Immorality from empathy-induced altruism: When compassion and justice conflict"). The authors don't define "empathy", but we can infer from what they write that it's emotional resonance, not what Bloom takes it to be. The experiment is very artificial and they are not clear about how they get their subjective conclusions from their objective observations. Nor do they make clear on what they base their idea of morality.

The basis of morality

We don't reason to our moral judgments, or if we do it's on the basis of other moral judgments that we do not reason to (see my book *Prescriptive Reasoning*). Reason is important as we try to see the consequences of our actions or try for some consistency in our beliefs and actions. But without compassionate empathy that we are blessed to have (save for those autistic people), no moral judgment can be reasoned to, can have force to move us.

Who would you rather encounter in a dark alley: one who reasons to what is right or one who is guided by empathy? Who will jump into a lake to save a child? Consequences be damned: the child is drowning. Perhaps I, too, will drown, but if I am human I cannot but be moved to help. Unless I have learned from society that only me, me, me is important. Selfishness as a basis of our culture.

Reason tempers empathy.

Empathy tempers reason.

And on the airplane

The stewardess announces before take-off that if there is a sudden loss of pressure, oxygen masks will descend from the compartment above. Then first put the mask on yourself, then on a child.

Right. Though your impulse is to save the child first, you can be of no help if you are struggling for oxygen. Reason tempers empathy.

Sucking-on-the-teat love

Besides eros, philos, and *agape*, there is another kind of love, deep and powerful. A child loves its mother: she provides all. How not love her? She makes the child feel important, the center of the world, for its world is very much circumscribed by the mother.

Now I can see that my question "Do dogs really love us?" is stupid. I was assuming that there's just one kind of love, worrying whether my dogs loved me that way—colored by all those movies, romantic love. All tinged with eros. Happily ever after.

My dogs and I, you and your dog, have sucking-on-the-teat love, as real as any love. And Jack the goat and the horse. Reciprocal.

There are so many kinds of love, surely more than four. Shall we try to distinguish them all? Cataloguing? Whatever we call "love" is some deep emotion, some yearning, that we know when we feel it, unless we denigrate it because we think that only romantic love counts. We distinguish so that we do not get confused.

Is this really love? A stupid question.

Co-dependence

But what I've described, isn't that just co-dependence?

We've been led to believe that co-dependence is bad, like one heroin addict for another, feeding their addictions. But my dogs and I are co-dependent. That's what sucking-on-the-teat love is.

In our Western fixation on being independent we forget that the most human, the most doggy, the most loving is giving and sharing. Helping and being helped we become more, learning and practicing empathy.

For those who speak a flow-of-all language, there is no idea of co-dependence for we are all in the flow of all together. For them the question is how or whether to distinguish myself from others.

But can't the scientists help us distinguish?

Reducing love to hormone levels that can be studied by a scientist who doesn't know emotion but only "objective" facts is just as bad as asking "Is this really love?"

It is the writers of novels, the playwrights, the poets who tell us of different kinds of love, who help us learn of love.

> Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
> As, to behold desert a beggar born,
> And needy nothing trimm'd in jollity,
> And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
> And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,
> And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
> And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
> And strength by limping sway disabled,
> And art made tongue-tied by authority,
> And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,
> And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,
> And captive good attending captain ill.

> Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,
> Save that, to die, I leave my dog alone.
>
> Shakespeare, Sonnet 66

Love me, really me

We want people to love us for ourselves. Would you love me if I were old and ugly? I would love you for yourself and not for all that makes you yourself—that's incoherent. That's fear, of loneliness, wanting reassurance, wanting certainty. We resent when we don't get the affection we deserve, mad at the person, mad at the puppy who won't pay attention to you. Such ugly fear.

Reciprocal

Is this feeling, this deep emotion I have, reciprocal? Does he, she feel like I do? Well, not like I do, but loving, yearning, for no one feels just like I do, just like you do. Empathy will lead us to know whether our love is all just me, deluding myself, torturing myself. That is the bad side of eros.

We approach *agape* when we love without expecting return, when we give without asking.

Self and selflessness

> If any one should ask me what he gets from a charitable act, my answer in all sincerity would be: "This, that the lot of the poor man you relieve is just so much the lighter; otherwise absolutely nothing. If you are not satisfied, and feel that such is not a sufficient end, then your wish was not to give alms, but to make a purchase; and you have effected a bad bargain. But if the one thing you are concerned with is that he should feel the pressure of poverty less, then you have gained your object; you have diminished his suffering, and you see exactly how far your gift is requited.
>
> Schopenhauer,*The Basis of Morality*, pp. 202–203

It sounds so simple and easy. Don't think, just respond. Act on the resonance you feel with the emotion of the other. A handout for the man seated on the ground in front of the grocery store, he clearly needs help.

Respond with sympathetic empathy, no thought of self. Just as my dog responds to me, learning to read my emotions. Only my dog does stop to think: I want to chew on this rug but the last time I did I got swatted and he yelled "Bad dog!", so I won't. Even dogs consider consequences. As should we. I think that the man might be a drug addict or alcoholic. Money I give him may lead him to get high and not eat. So I ask him if I can get him something to eat in the store, and he says yes, so I get him a sandwich and soft drink. Sympathetic empathy with the limit of reasoning, looking for consequences.

Compassion as the basis of moral conduct

Schopenhauer in *The Basis of Morality* says:

> Boundless compassion for all living beings is the surest and most certain guarantee of pure moral conduct, and needs no casuistry. Whoever is filled with it will assuredly injure no one, do harm to no one, encroach on no man's rights; he will rather have regard for every one, forgive every one, help every

> one as far as he can, and all his actions will bear the stamp of justice and loving-kindness. On the other hand, if we try to say: "This man is virtuous, but he is a stranger to Compassion"; or: "he is an unjust and malicious man, yet very compassionate;" the contradiction at once leaps to light. pp. 213–214

> [How] are we to account for even the smallest offering of alms made with absolutely no other object than that of lessening the want which afflicts a fellow-creature? Such an act is only conceivable, only possible, in so far as the giver *knows* that it is his very self which stands before him, clad in the garments of suffering; in other words, so far as he recognises the essential part of his own being, under a form *not his own*. It now becomes apparent, why in the foregoing part I have called Compassion the great mystery of Ethics. p. 278

I agree with Schopenhauer that compassion, sympathetic empathy is the basis for all moral conduct. But he misses that compassion needs limits to be moral.

Duty

You don't need heaven and hell to motivate good deeds. Guilt is enough, inculcated at a young age. Often disguised as duty.

Doing good deeds motivated by guilt does not lead to loving kindness.

Setting limits

I've seen it with my dogs, and with friends' dogs they've left with me for a week or two. The dog will respond to the one who sets limits, who makes clear what is and is not OK. "NO! Don't chew that rug! NO! Don't chase that skunk! Good dog, good boy, good girl." Lots of loving that tempers the limits that the dog needs. For the dog, my dog, Pup, wants to please, wants to be loved. So it is with people. It is not tough love, it's love and limits to help find the way.

And then they lived happily ever after . . .

We tell children fairy tales with this ending. Then as we grow up we look for happy endings, not just today but for always. There is no guarantee, no matter how well we act, no matter how carefully with a loving heart we plan. Tragedy will come, or it will not. It is how we live with the suffering that makes our lives rich and full, leading us to a loving heart—if we do not succumb to despair.

"And then they lived happily every after" is the worst lie.

Good

Being good.

Trying to be good.

What is the difference? (You thought I'd have an answer?)

A scientific basis of empathy?

So I thought to look at what scientists say about empathy.

I started reading *The Neuroscience of Fair Play: Why we (usually) follow the Golden Rule* by Donald W. Pfaff. He is looking for a basis in our brains for why we follow the Golden Rule. He cites about ten different versions of the Golden Rule, from different religious traditions. But most are not equivalent to "Do unto others as you would have them do to you," so it's not clear what he is talking about. As he

goes on, it seems that he is concerned with the neural basis of altruistic behavior. But most of the examples he gives, of humans and animals, are transactional: I do this, and then she/he returns the favor. That's not altruism. Fair play perhaps.

Then I looked at the paper "The Neural Basis of Empathy" by Boris C. Bernhardt and Tania Singer. They say:

> Despite a long tradition of philosophy and behavioral psychology research [references], empathy has no universally accepted definition, and the different phenomena it subsumes remain debatable [references]. However, previous conceptual work on empathy has greatly facilitated the design and interpretation of empirical studies that assess empathic traits through self-report measures and empathic states through controlled observational experiments. Findings from these experiments, especially those involving the brain processes underlying the empathic experience, may deepen our understanding of this phenomenon at the interface of social interactions and internal feeling states and ultimately promise to disentangle the conceptual web surrounding empathy. pp. 2-3

So we don't know what we're talking about, but if we do enough experiments perhaps we'll find out what we're talking about. "Say, are you feeling empathetic now?"

These scientists haven't made the crucial distinctions about what we mean by "empathy" that we made in the first few pages here. Moreover, as many other psychologists and brain scientists, they do not make clear on what basis they conclude claims about how people feel from observations about how they act. As I explain with examples in my "Evaluating Treatments for Addiction" (in my *Last Writings*):

> No observations about what a person does can lead to a claim about what that person thinks, believes or feels without some assumption about how behavior links to thoughts.

It is that assumption or those assumptions linking behavior to feeling or thought that we must examine in drawing any conclusions from experiments. (For a fuller discussion, see "Subjective Claims" by Fred Kroon, William S. Robinson, and me in *The Fundamentals of Argument Analysis*.)

Perhaps some day scientists will help us find insight about empathy—and sympathy, and compassion, and . . . . But any such explanation will have to show why sometimes (often) people do not act with compassionate empathy.

What we do know is that there seems to be some biological, evolutionary basis for acting with compassionate empathy, based on our observing other animals, particularly primates. That's what I've given examples of above. We are not alone.

Evolution?

But didn't Darwin teach us that it's competition that drives evolution? Survival of the fittest. Cat eat cat.

That was a 19th Century misreading of Darwin compatible with the culture of competition in capitalism.

Darwin taught that species compete, not necessarily individuals within a specie. He gave examples of co-operation. Peter Kropotkin in *Mutual Aid* made it very

clear that co-operation between not only individuals but between species is essential for survival of species.

But altruism? A woman who rushes into traffic to push a child to safety and is killed? How does that perpetuate her genes? Perhaps not hers, but her family, her people. People live fuller lives if they co-operate, but it is the species that goes on with co-operation.

Memories

I received a photo from a dear friend, a woman with whom I was so close but later distant because of her mental illness. The photo shows her with me in front of the house where I lived in Berkeley thirty-five years ago. She visited me there? I have no memory of that, none at all, though you would think that good or bad it should have left a trace, for she was both the love of my life and the dread of my life.

I bicycled across the North Island of New Zealand in 1974. Many weeks, cycling 30 to 60 miles each day to reach the next village where I could find a bed-and-breakfast to stay. Watching the TV in the lounge I saw a program that moved me. I had to be sure to get to the next bed-and-breakfast in time to watch the next episode, so strongly associated with that trip. Recently I bought a DVD of that show, "The Singing Detective", great, even deeper and better than I thought at the time. Only it was made in 1986. So I couldn't have seen it in New Zealand.

We are the stories we tell. Our memories. But memory is uncertain.

Only the clear path of empathy, of loving kindness, remains, bolstered by the stories we tell.

Left-handed

That dear friend of mine told me about growing up in Switzerland. Being left-handed she was forced to write with her right hand. No empathy. Left-handed people are different—they should be forced to be like us.

It was only when she was ten or so that she rebelled and wouldn't use her right hand to write, writing perfectly well with her left-hand. And that contributed, I am sure, to her problems with schizophrenia. Why? I can't imagine being left-handed, and the problems she had—until I try to write with my left-hand. I can't. Letters ill-formed, scrawls, no train of thought, just unnerving. Sometimes you do have to walk a mile in someone else's shoes.

Enabling-spoiling-infantalizing

We think of enabling as one person aiding another to continue his or her bad ways, whether that be using drugs or settling disagreements with fighting.

Sucking-on-the-teat love is not enabling. Enabling is not mutual. It goes in one direction, from the person who has the strength, the power, to the other who is treated as one not able to make decisions.

We see this with a mother enabling her son to depend on her: picking up his clothes, doing his laundry, cooking for him, making sure he gets up for his job, making an appointment with a doctor. "I do it out of love" the mother says. No, she does it to preserve her power over her son, to feel good about herself, convincing herself that making her son depend on her is helping him. It is co-dependence, but in the bad way, as the son becomes dependent on the mother. We say she is

spoiling her son, starting when he was young. That's a nice way of saying she is *infantalizing* her child. The father, too, who criticizes his son for not fixing his bike right and steps in and does it himself, not letting him learn by trial-and-error. And he continues this even when the boy is twenty years old: he can't be trusted to make decisions. So the boy never learns, becomes dependent, no self-confidence to try to do something new. Infantalizing, for the father to keep his power over the son. Not love.

And daughters, too. You can come up with better examples than I.

And then, when the child is older, he or she beginning to make decisions, growing beyond the parent, the parent resents it: the child is not grateful—in the way that I want, which is dependence, bending his or her will to mine. It's all about power, not love. And fear.

Does enabling-spoiling-infantalizing go on other than with a mother, father, aunt, grandmother, or whoever is raising a child and the child who grows up physically but not mentally? Yes, you can see it in couples.

Children are people, too

That's a new idea—at least in Western cultures. Until recently children were expected to contribute to the family as soon as they could, at five years old or eight years old, working in the fields, or a factory, or getting apprenticed to ensure the family could survive. In paintings and etchings from centuries ago children were often drawn as small adults.

Now we classify parents who expect their children to do hard work for money instead of going to school as neglectful. We have child welfare laws, limits on children working, protecting the child until . . . he or she can take care of himself or herself. Which also allows for spoiling and infantalizing. So we have adolescents who have not learned to care for others.

Compassion

Schopenhauer in *The Basis of Morality* says:

> Compassion is to anger as water is to fire. Therefore, whoever would fain have nothing to repent of, let him listen to my advice. When he is inflamed with rage, and meditates doing some one a grievous injury, he should bring the thing vividly before his mind, as a *fait accompli*; he should clearly picture to himself this other fellow-being tormented with mental or bodily pain, or struggling with need and misery; so that he is forced to exclaim: "This is my work!" Such thoughts as these, if anything, will avail to moderate his wrath. For Compassion is the true antidote of anger; and by practising on oneself this artifice of the imagination, one awakes beforehand, while there is yet time . p. 217

Would that it were so. A little reflection and we would refrain from hurting another.

But some people . . . they do not have the ability or habit of reflecting. Worse, some get pleasure imagining another person suffering. Schadenfreude. We try to coax them to empathy. But some we cannot: how they were raised, fetal alcohol syndrome, bad genes. They are just evil. I have met a child of 13 like that—no talking or caring helps. He is so terrible to others that the only solution is to institutionalize him. And for others, prison. Yet with talk of someone being evil, there goes empathy. Sometimes that is necessary. Another limit to empathy.

And honor
The more concerned you are for your honor, the less empathy you will have.

Everything happens for a reason
I've heard this from friends, from acquaintances, many times. As if no matter how terrible what we have lived through, there is some sense to it, though we cannot discern. I don't disagree, for it is too vague, just a hope that the world we live in is not senseless. But it is not fate, not the heavens, nor the wheel of fortune that guarantees a motive for what occurs.

We need to find in ourselves how to live better from living through disaster, lest we be overcome and despair.

despair = loss of hope

And when hope is gone, we can do no good for ourselves or others.

Perfection?

> Do we make a difference?
> Maybe.
> Sometimes.
> Not much.
> What I do know is that we should never stop trying..
> And we need to remember that every little counts.
>
> from "The White Lion" in the BBC television series, *Wallander*

Ecclesiastes
Whine, whine, whine.

> Vanity of vanities, says the preacher; vanity of vanities, all is vanity.
> What profit has man of all his labor wherein he labours under the sun?

I thought, I studied, I had great wisdom. I'll die, and some jerk will follow me and waste it all, if not in the first generation then in the second or third. Or eventually. We all die. What's the point?

I build: a magnificent palace, orchards, pursue pleasure, a harem, slaves, and sure as anything it will be wasted on someone who comes after me who has no appreciation, who squanders, or it simply falls into ruin.

And there is nothing new under the sun. What a waste.

The bad prosper, the good suffer.

What's the point?

> There is no rememberance forever.
>
> Wherefore I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him back to see what shall be after him.
>
> This is the end of the matter; all hath been heard: fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

Whine, whine, whine. It's all meaningless except in God's eyes. So follow his commandments.

Why should the goal be to be remembered? The sun shall burn out, all humankind gone. So what's the point?

We can help, be good to one another. Bring ease and less despair to those who suffer. Join with those who rejoice. Build not for the next generation, nor the generation after that, but because it is good to build, to help. God? Unfathomable, neither good nor bad, only some writings that say we should act this way or that: stone the adulterer; cut off the hand of the thief. No! It is empathy, acting in a caring manner, that gives a point to life, day-by-day, not grand, not forever, but the welling up in your heart that you have done, that you have helped.

> Look what they've done to my song, ma, look what they've done to my song.
> Well it's the only thing I could do half right and it's turning out all wrong, ma.
>
> Melanie

It was not yours. The giving was yours. What you gave is now theirs.

It is not so hard. Many of us do it every day. We donate blood, not knowing who will receive it. The giving is enough. Community.

The problem of evil and the meaning of life

How can there be a benevolent God when the wicked prosper and the just suffer? What is the meaning of life? Here are short summaries of how some have answered these questions.

Ecclesiastes

I'm going to die!
You're going to die!
We're all going to die!
Whine, whine, whine.
So I better fear God.

Bhagavad Gita

This guy is ready to battle his cousins and teachers to get a crown or die. He doesn't want to kill them—he realizes it would be wrong. The god Krishna says it's O.K. to kill them because it's part of his bigger plan, and don't worry, they'll all be reborn anyway. So the guy says O.K. and kills them.

The Rubaiyat

We're all going to die!
So let's get drunk.

Job

Job: It isn't fair, the wicked prosper and the just suffer.
God: Who are you to complain?
CRASH! Fear me.
Job: OMG! O.K.

Doctor Faustus

Power! Riches! Lust!

Enjoy it for a long time.
Then you'll go to hell.

Sermon on the Mount

Be kind.
Be generous.
Do no violence.
Love God.
And if you do, your suffering will be redeemed in heaven.
And if you don't, you'll go to hell.

An Analysis:

If you are wicked, then you will suffer.
You are suffering now. Therefore you are wicked.
Bad reasoning (affirming the consequent).
Need: Only the wicked suffer.
Only the good prosper.
(The mediocre just get by?)
This goes against our experience. So

1. The wicked really do suffer—they just don't realize it.
   or
2. You're looking at it too short term. The wicked will suffer in the afterlife, and the good will be happy in the afterlife.

So against our experience, either we should be satisfied because "suffering" doesn't really mean what you thought, it includes unconscious suffering, and/or we should believe in an afterlife that redeems justice.

The BARK of DOG

Be kind.
Be generous.
Count not the giving and taking but give unconditionally.
Harm no human.
Harm no dog.
Put from thee all thought of power save the power of a loving heart.

All sentient beings have the chance to learn to love.
But there is no deep love without suffering.

There is no heaven above the earth: heaven is here, giving and sharing.
There is no hell beneath the earth: hell is here, knowing you could have helped but didn't.

* * * * * * * *

There is no end but only a continual beginning . . .

July 20, 2026

I am deeply indebted to Juan Francisco (Pancho) Rizzo and Eduardo (Eddie) Ribeiro for reading earlier versions with me. They and other friends and colleagues questioned, offered examples, and gave other interpretations, which made this better. I hope.

MAY ALL BEINGS BE FILLED WITH KINDNESS AND COMPASSION FOR ~~ONE ANOTHER~~ ME!

Commentaries on "The Limits of Empathy"

Another version of the Golden Rule
(Contributed by Pancho)
A sort of golden rule of my own.

> Don't be cruel. Being cruel is wrong.
> You should try not to be the cause of unnecessary pain.

That's it.

Then, we can (and should) discuss what counts as necessary or unnecessary pain. Thinking it through, reasoning together, negotiating meaning, etc., can help with that. But I'm convinced we all have a feeling of what it is to inflict UNNECESSARY pain. Some people even enjoy it. I suspect all of us (except perhaps the Doggy Lama) are ultimately capable of enjoying it. But even if you feel bad when doing it, it doesn't make it any better. It's still wrong. It doesn't matter if you do it out of indifference or simply distraction.

Of course, there is not one person nor one set of rules that can help us decide what is unnecessary pain in every situation. This is just a very general principle, not a complete guide on how to live a good life.

Does trying to abide by this principle require empathy? I'm not sure, though it does seem to require at least a little bit of imagination, plus some idea of cause and effect.

For this to work, we don't even need a very strong idea of empathy—just being able to tell that someone is in pain and that our actions are (a significant part of) the cause. Which is something we should avoid whenever possible, to whichever extent we can.

And all of this comes from the fact that . . .

> Pain is bad. Pain (or suffering)* is never good in itself. No part of pain is good. We can be the cause of pain (both for others and for ourselves). Inflicting pain is never good in itself, because nobody deserves to suffer. Those are just basic claims, or even part of my definition of pain. Of course, there could be no "objective" definition of pain, if by that we mean one that does not appeal to how pain makes me feel (maybe that's what philosophers mean when they say that pain is "private," but that's a topic for another time . . .) .

Note that believing in something like original sin or the "fallen nature" of humanity implies believing that some or all of us deserve to suffer, even if you don't take it upon yourself to inflict that punishment directly. People who believe that can call themselves pacifists, they may be selfless and act "fairly" in their dealings with others. But they will do nothing to relieve or prevent someone else's pain. (Those people are one of the scariest things I can think of. I struggle every day not to become one of them.)

*In all of the above, "pain" should be understood as including both physical pain and what Arf classifies as suffering.

Chinese empathy

Background review:

It's almost a cliché today that where we are individualist, Chinese are socialist. Part of the doubt that Classical Chinese thought was philosophy was the absence of any hint of idealism or dualism whereas we date philosophy as starting from Parmenides contrast of reality and dream. Herbert Fingarette, an early visitor from Wittgensteinia, described it as having no psychology. I disputed that in my Grad-School review of his booklet on Confucius but ignored "explaining the appearance." He was exaggerating, but he did pick up on a phenomenon. They clearly had conceptions of dreams, imagination, inner dialogue, moods, memory, plans etc. but not of an inner world of *ideas/meanings* to fuel skeptical worries about what reality was or to serve as a bridge between words and the world in theory of language. Nor was there any concept of that special mental object of sentence picture-meaning—the proposition, belief, content of propositional knowledge. (Buddhism caveat.)

Richard Nisbett's "geography of thought" caught a related phenomenon, the focus on social cohesion and holism. He argued rice farming was the explanation. My own favorite explanation for both was a confluence factors (adding ideographic language syntax and focal metaphor (path vs. logos) fleshed out how sociology could play the pivotal role in Chinese philosophy that psychology did in Classical and early modern Western thought. In place of the inner-world of *de-dicto* beliefs corresponding to outer world facts/truths, the Classical Chinese grammar resembled de-re belief. The focus of skepticism was not dreams but the choice of socially permissible 名 míng/name(s) for a mereological part of 有 yǒu/exist(s). (Arf and Hansen on the concept 'thing'.)

The term most often translated as "idea" was an ideograph consisting of sound/tone and heart. It is tempting to link these features of Chinese to the conception of their written language as picto-ideographic while spoken Chinese is a family of hundreds of phonemic languages. Inner dialogue in one of those languages can be translated (by the literate) into the classical written language, with its social-historical-causal origins to provide the basis of coordinating our cooperation in finding and following a shared social *way.*

- Most of traditional Chinese ethics and philosophy of mind is consistent with Arf's analysis, but particularly close to your third level of analysis**: responding with care.** Chinese thinkers do not expand much on the "what it's like" to be in their recognized emotional states. The canonical four were 喜怒哀樂 xi-nu-ai-le (approximately happiness anger sadness and joy). They were internal辯 bìan/distinctions in the heart's responses to other sensations' distinction inputs. Together they were called

情 qing which, paradoxically to westerners, also Is used of objective situations, states of affairs (facts), reality.

Desire was a distinct concept 欲yu. It was frequently compounded with qing. The Dàoist Laozi broadly implied that desires resulted from naming and distinguishing. The eyes distinguished colors from each other; the ears sounds and the heart reacted with and distinguished 情qing.

The classic case for innate ***compassion*** was put by the "second sage" of Confucianism—Mencius. Mencius describes a situation like Arf's which inherently evokes a compassionate response from humans: a child climbing on the edge of a well prompts a stranger-passer-by to saving behavior. He described the source of the caring reaction as a heart that cannot bear the suffering of others. The heart, he argued, contains 惻隱 the "seed" of the Mohists' moral' virtue: 仁 *rén*/benevolence. Translators render this in English using our popular psychological account of the source of benevolent behavior: *compassion, sympathy, empathy, pity, commiseration, distress, sense of mercy* etc. Neither character is in most lists of *qing* though most thinkers agreed with Mohists that humans are naturally cooperative and *can* learn to be good utilitarians.

Many ethical controversies flow from this picture. Most classical "masters" agree with Arf that the compassionate reaction can be (and should be) taught and learned through modeling and practice. Mencius might conclude it doesn't need to be taught, but seems to shy away from direct assertion (since his *Sage*, Confucius was all about learning). He pictures it as a plant blossoming from a seed or sprout. His Confucian foil, Xunzi, argued it **must** be taught. Human natural *qing* & *yu* would lead to disorder in the absence of social mores like etiquette, again agreeing with Arf's analysis (so far).

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