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Empathy as a Method of Rational Inquiry

– Raymond Barglow

“The heart has reasons that reason does not know,” wrote 17th-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal. In the case of empathy, which indeed is an affair of the heart, can we discern those reasons? And are they as reliable as the reasons that serve other methods for acquiring knowledge, science included? This essay will answer in the affirmative: empathy provides a valid and indispensable pathway to understanding human experience. It’s important to recognize as well, though, that what looks like empathy can also *misunderstand* and cast aside the truth-seeking aims of rational query.

In 1909 the English psychologist Edward Titchener introduced the word “empathy” into the English language as a translation for the German word “Einfühlung.” Since that year, “empathy” has been conceived in various ways. Kenneth Clark, a psychologist and community organizer during the American Civil Rights Movement, provided a definition that captures, I believe, what is commonly meant by the word today: “The essential aspect of empathy is the capacity of an individual to feel into the needs, the aspirations, the frustrations, the joys, the sorrows, the anxieties, the hurt, indeed, the hunger of others as if they were his own.”¹

The Contemporary Assault on Empathy

Empathy seems obviously to count as a human virtue. Yet it stands accused these days of being fundamentally flawed—a quality of human character that comfortably adapts to, or even contributes to, what is wrong with the world. In his book *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, psychologist Paul Bloom asserts that when we focus our feelings on people who are emotionally close to us – who belong to our own “tribe,” so to speak – we are apt to become less sensitive to the plights of others. He cites examples in which a empathic response becomes small-minded or even cruel, and recommends that in addressing a broad range of human needs, “We should strive to use our heads rather than our hearts.”²

The contrast proposed here, between empathy on the one hand and what Bloom calls “rational compassion” on the other, is problematic, however. In her book *Empathy: A History*, Susan Lanzoni tracks the trajectory of “empathy” since the coining of the word

early in the 20th century.³ Although the meanings attributed to “empathy” have evolved over time, it is ordinarily and intuitively understood that empathic response – contrary to Bloom’s dualist account – binds together reasoning and feeling as essential, integrated components; empathy belongs to what cultural critic Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling,” uniting “thought as felt and feeling as thought.”⁴ To be sure, there are situations when care-taking needs to be calculated and dispassionate: when a doctor is thinking soberly and at some emotional distance in treating a suffering patient, for example. However, these are typically situations in which a doctor cares *about* as well as *for* the patient—wishes that the patient fares well—and hence (contrary to Bloom’s view) these are instances of empathy. In Albert Camus’ novel *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux’s scientific analysis of disease is not compromised by his empathy for those who are afflicted.

Bloom’s narrow definition of empathy follows from his conception of empathy as a mirror-like sharing of experience: “the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does.”⁵ This definition excludes too much, since empathy need not involve sameness or even similarity of experience on the part of the responder. It requires only that one *infer* or *imagine* what it would be like to walk in the shoes of another. Since the examples of rational compassion that Bloom cites meet this requirement, they are illustrations of, not alternatives to, empathy.

This is not to say that critics are mistaken in questioning the conception of empathy as a universal antidote to human misunderstanding and conflict. Indeed, what passes for “empathy” between a more powerful and a less powerful party can mask and even reinforce the structural inequality and advantage that is built into their relationship, fixing into place, for example, gender and racial categories that separate altruistic subjects from the recipients of their largesse. Empathy can amount to a kind of “feeling sorry for” that falls far short of authentic solidarity. Yes, one “walks a mile” in the shoes of another, but then exchanges them for one’s own familiar footwear and returns home, reassured about one’s openness and benevolence, but without any durable commitment to ethical responsibility.

Empathy and the Logic of Science

In response to contemporary interrogation of “empathy,” can we clarify its nature and its value? Might empathy provide a pathway to evidence-based knowledge? Science provides a gold standard of rational inquiry with which empathy can be compared. Scientific method seeks to learn about the world by gathering evidence without invocation

of divine agency or other supernatural influence. It is defined further by a willingness—sometimes reluctant, to be sure—to revise its own findings and assumptions in the light of future investigation. Even basic principles can be called into question, according to Karl Popper, Otto Neurath, and other philosophers who have followed in their footsteps over the past century or so. On this understanding, human knowledge, including science, is a “web of belief” within which our methods of inquiry are themselves subject to critical scrutiny and revision.⁶

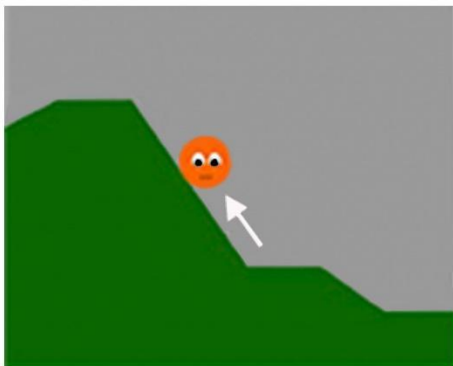
One of these methods of inquiry is empathy. In the social sciences as well as in everyday human affairs, empathy serves—paradoxically and sometimes problematically—both as a foundation for, and a result of, seeking to understand human experience. Considering this capacity as a cognitive instrument modifies a common view of empathy as downstream from knowledge: *first* we learn about the predicaments and experiences of others and only *consequently* empathize. The suggestion here is that empathy provides an *antecedent* framework for inquiry—as when one person is willing to listen openly and empathically to another—but also results from use of that framework: empathy changes as one learns more about someone else’s experience. This is somewhat similar to how natural science works: scientific explanation rests on basic assumptions about the world, but these assumptions are themselves subject to modification, depending on what further inquiry discloses. Pioneers of this understanding of empathy as a method of cognition include, in the United States, the psychologist Carl Rogers and the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut.⁷

In Kohut’s words, “Empathy is the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person.”⁸ That “inner life” becomes known through a kind of mirroring or modeling that discloses another person’s experience as akin in relevant respects to one’s own. A difference, of course, between empathic inquiry and other kinds of knowledge-seeking, including scientific ones, is the pivotal role of emotion. In empirical inquiry broadly, feeling and thinking objectively are often at loggerheads. Emotional investment in the outcome of a clinical trial, for instance, may motivate an investigator to invent or otherwise fake observational evidence. In the case of empathy, by way of contrast, affect plays an essential role as a kind of lens whereby the predicament of another comes into sharper focus; one’s own sense of what it would feel like to walk a mile in their shoes informs an empathic response. Although another’s experience may be quite different from our own, there can be a strong emotional as well as a cognitive connection when we learn, for example, about George Floyd’s encounter with the police in Minnesota,

captured by an on-looker's smart-phone recording; or about the immiseration of Palestinians and Israelis in the Middle East, graphically conveyed to us via traditional and digital media. In such situations, it's possible for awakened emotion to inform a thoughtful, rational response, and even impassion a movement like "Black Lives Matter."

Empathy in Children

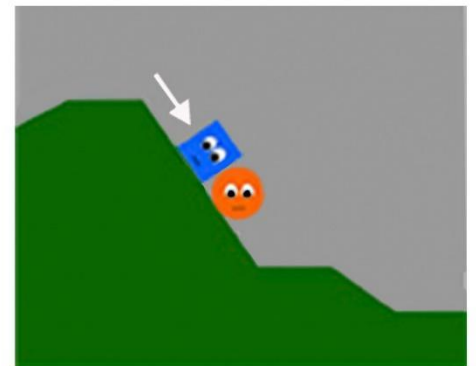
"The empathic understanding of the experience of other human beings," writes Kohut, "is as basic an endowment of man as his vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell."⁹ One imagines what it would be like to be someone else – a make-believe that comes so easily to children and might to us also, were it not for the accompanying vulnerability. ("I will not ignore your pain or your situation. I am here for you."¹⁰) Yet empathy appears to be an inborn human response, the earliest forms of which are observable in the helping behaviors of the very young. For instance, infants 6 to 10 months old were shown a scenario in which a wooden circle "tries" unsuccessfully to climb a hill. The circle was then pushed up the hill from below by another wooden figure, or pushed down the hill from above by a hindering wooden figure.



Red circle makes two unsuccessful attempts to climb the hill.



Triangle pushes circle up the hill.



Square pushes circle down the hill.

[Surian, Ueno, Itakura and Meristo, Creative Commons \(CC BY\)](#)

When these children were presented afterwards with the helping and hindering figures, most of them showed more of a liking for the former than for the latter, indicating to the researchers an inherent capacity to recognize a need for help and an attraction to the helping agent.¹¹

That empathy is a fundamental human capacity does of course not make it a foolproof path to knowledge. Empathy listens generously, but need not be naive: we acknowledge the unreliability of the stories people tell about themselves, recognizing the

age-old human disposition to deceive ourselves and others by obscuring or denying the real reasons for doing what we do. A listener may indeed be “taken in” by an engaging narrative. But no other method of inquiry works infallibly either.

Empathy deployed by both sides in the “vaccination wars” in California



Vaccination skeptic Robert Kennedy Jr. in the company of Otto Coleman, whose parents say he was paralyzed by a vaccine injection (Courtesy: Joshua Coleman)



Rhett Krawitt – immunocompromised child endangered by unvaccinated children at school – with his pro-vaccination oncologist Dr. Goldsby (Courtesy: the Krawitt family)

The History of Empathy

There are virtues advocated in ancient Buddhism that have much in common with what counts as empathy today. Karuna (caring) and metta (loving kindness) take an approach to life that opens the boundary between self and other: “As I am, so are others. As they are, so am I.” The Jewish Torah also praises compassion based on shared experience. “You shall not oppress a stranger,” teaches *Exodus*, “since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Empathy is familiar as well to Medieval Christianity, in the form of personal re-enactment of Biblical stories in the lives of believers.

Like religious parables, secular fiction relies on listeners' empathic identification with characters and their adventures.¹² From the 18th century novels of the French and English Enlightenment through those penned in the 19th century, literature becomes a laboratory, so to speak, for exploring empathy's labyrinthine pathways. The writings of Georges Eliot, Henry James, and other Victorian-era authors extol empathy while also subjecting it to critical scrutiny. Their work anticipates twentieth-century discoveries made in the fields of clinical psychology and psychoanalysis.

Pioneering this path was Sigmund Freud, who conceived empathy ("Einfühlung" in German) as an indispensable instrument for learning about the inner life of patients. He holds that it "plays the largest part in our understanding of what is inherently foreign to us in other people."¹³ Freud, however, misread the experience of some of his patients profoundly, especially those who were women, and that is a risk built into empathy: one may view the experiences of another through the distorting lens of one's own preconceptions. Empathy is indeed complicated, and Freud's followers would make use of the concept very differently than he did. The "relational turn" that psychoanalysis, influenced by feminism, has taken in recent decades has elaborated a richer understanding than Freud's of experiences between self and other.¹⁴ And central to that understanding is the multi-dimensional reality of empathic response, outside as well as inside the office of the therapist.

Social and Political Empathy

Empathy has always been fundamental to progressive social movements.¹⁵ In the 19th century, English and American abolitionists drew upon empathy's persuasive power to make the case against slavery. When Susan B. Anthony delivered her speech in 1859



Giotto, *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata*. A mirroring experience conveys Christ's suffering to the saint.
[Louvre, Wikimedia Commons](#)

asking Americans to “make the slave’s case our own” she was issuing a call that drew upon the force of empathy. That call, voiced in protest literature ranging from Frederick Douglass’ autobiography to anti-slavery newspapers, pamphlets, sermons, and fiction, deployed emotion to “awaken conscience” and amplify the advocacy for change.

Following the 19th-century abolition of slavery, empathy continued to play a role in the struggle for Black liberation in the United States, including resistance to apartheid following the era of Reconstruction. Susan Lanzoni points that in the 20th century, the Civil Rights Movement drew upon a concept of “empathy” that was evolving in the fields of medicine, psychology, psychoanalysis, and social welfare.¹⁶ African-American social psychologists Mamie Clark and husband Kenneth Clark were community organizers who believed that the Black freedom struggle could succeed only if guided by an ethics of empathy: “Whites and Negroes must join together in an experiment to determine whether systematic and empathic use of human intelligence and training can be a form of power which can be used constructively in the quest for solutions of long standing urban and racial problems.”¹⁷



Empirical studies carried out by Mamie and Kenneth Clark (photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons) showed that Black children valued and preferred to play with White dolls rather than Black ones, although most of these children identified themselves as looking more like the Black dolls. This research was cited in the 1954 Supreme Court decision that ruled against segregation.¹⁸

To Paul Bloom’s objection that empathy is short-sighted and tribal, Kenneth Clark offers an answer that Peter Singer¹⁹ and Steven Pinker²⁰ would later elaborate in their writings

on social ethics. Anticipating Singer's belief in an expanding "circle of altruism" is Clark's view that for some individuals

"empathy extends slightly beyond the self to include some, if not all, members of the immediate family. For still others—probably a majority of human beings — empathy extends to other human beings who have qualities and characteristics similar to those of their family. These individuals are able to empathize with others who are similar to themselves in color, religion, nationality, sex, and status.... The highest and probably the least frequent form of empathy is that in which the individual is compelled to embrace all human beings.... If this is done, there will be a future for humanity."²¹

Empathy for Kenneth and Mamie Clark has no need for sentiments of pity or charity, nor for sameness or equivalence of experience. It can turn instead upon mutual respect and recognition that reach across lines of ethnicity and class. Combining intelligence and feeling, "empathic reason" is capable of mobilizing effective political intervention.

Social Empathy Today

Social conflict can tear down the bridges that empathy builds. Economic inequality combines these days with cultural and religious conflict to divide the world deeply, and the rifts—exacerbated by a global environmental crisis— look as irreconcilable as ever before. At the same time, though, we witness today humanity's capacity for cooperation, evident for example in the world's collective response to the COVID pandemic; although public health campaigns against the virus have by no means been flawless or uncontested, they have largely succeeded. Recognition of interdependence—of mutual interest that extends beyond one's own family, friends, and community—widens the circle of altruism. Empathy has an important role to play here, providing an emotional "push" in the direction of caring about others that may go missing if one relies only on the "pull" of abstract moral principle. Empathy is



President Obama consoles Hurricane Sandy storm victim Donna Varant. (White House Archives, Photo by Peter Souza)

an inherent human capacity that can help build bridges across wide differences. We'll need nothing less to save ourselves and the planet.

Notes

¹ Kenneth Clark, "Rough Draft," August 31. Box 165, folder 2, KBC Papers, 1979, p. 3.

² Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy*. New York, NY: Ecco, 2016.

³ Susan Lanzoni, *Empathy: A History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018.

⁴ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

⁵ Bloom, *op. cit.*

⁶ Willard Van Orman Quine. and Joe Ullian, *The Web of Belief*. (2nd edition). Blacklick, OH: McGraw-Hill, 1978.

⁷ Thanks my brother Peter Barglow for pointing out to me the work of Carl Rogers and Heinz Kohut on the subject of empathy. However, the understanding of empathy proposed in this essay—which views it as a kind of compassion—differs from Kohut's wider definition.

⁸ Heinz Kohut, *How does Analysis Cure?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

⁹ Heinz Kohut, *Restoration of the Self*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

¹⁰ "Empathy is a choice. And it's a vulnerable choice, because if I were to choose to connect with you through empathy, I would have to connect with something in myself that knows that feeling." Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead*. New York N.Y.: Random House, 2018.

¹¹ J. Kiley Hamlin, Karen Wynn, and Paul Bloom, "Social Evaluation by Preverbal Infants," *Nature*. 2007, v. 450, pp. 557–559. doi:10.1038/nature06288

¹² Victorian novelist George Eliot has it that "the greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies." George Eliot, *The*

Natural History of German Life. Westminster Review, 1856, vol. LXVI, pp. 51-79. Also significant in thinking through the nature and implications of human empathy were political economists like Adam Smith and other figures of the European Enlightenment.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. London: International Psychoanalytic Press, 1922, p. 66.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/35877/pg35877-images.html>

¹⁴ Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. New York: Pantheon Books. Mitchell, S. *Freud and Beyond*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

¹⁵ Although we will concentrate here on the role empathy has played in Black liberation movements, the history of the labor movement illustrates empathy's contributions equally well, as does the history of feminism. Sharon Freedberg, (2007). Re-examining Empathy: A Relational—Feminist Point of View. *Social Work* (New York), 2007-07, 52 (3), pp. 251-259.

¹⁶ Lanzoni, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Kenneth Clark, The Present Dilemma of the Negro. *Journal of Negro History*, 1968, 53, no. 1, p.15.

¹⁸ <https://www.naacpldf.org/brown-vs-board/significance-doll-test>.

¹⁹ Peter Singer, (2011). *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²⁰ Steven Pinker, (2011). *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. London: Penguin Publishing Group.

²¹ Kenneth Clark, (1980). Empathy: A Neglected Topic in Psychological Research. *American Psychologist*, p.190.