**The case against empathy, by** [**Paul Bloom**](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/paul_bloom/search?contributorName=paul%20bloom)

The word “empathy”—a rendering of the German *Einfühlung*, “feeling into”—is only a century old, but people have been interested for a long time in the moral implications of feeling our way into the lives of others. In “The Theory of Moral Sentiments” (1759), Adam Smith observed that sensory experience alone could not spur us toward sympathetic engagement with others: “Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers.” For Smith, what made us moral beings was the imaginative capacity to “place ourselves in his situation . . . and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.”

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

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

Two recent books, “The Empathic Civilization” (Penguin), by Jeremy Rifkin, and “Humanity on a Tightrope” (Rowman & Littlefield), by Paul R. Ehrlich and Robert E. Ornstein, make the powerful argument that empathy has been the main driver of human progress, and that we need more of it if our species is to survive. Ehrlich and Ornstein want us “to emotionally join a global family” as the last best hope for saving the world from environmental destruction. This enthusiasm may be misplaced, however. Empathy has some unfortunate features—it is parochial, narrow-minded, and has little knowledge of mathematics. We’re often at our best when we’re smart enough not to rely on it.

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

Why do people respond to these misfortunes and not to others? The key to engaging empathy is what has been called “the identifiable victim effect.” You can see the effect in the lab. The psychologists Tehila Kogut and Ilana Ritov asked some subjects how much money they would give to help develop a drug that would save the life of one child, and asked others how much they would give to save eight children. The answers were about the same. But when Kogut and Ritov told a third group a child’s name and age, and showed her picture, the donations shot up—now there were far more to the one than to the eight.

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

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

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

This dynamic regularly plays out in the realm of criminal justice. In 1987, Willie Horton, a convicted murderer who had been released on furlough[[1]](#footnote-1) from the Northeastern Correctional Center, in Massachusetts, raped a woman after beating and tying up her fiancé. The furlough program came to be seen as a humiliating mistake on the part of Governor Michael Dukakis, and was used against him by his opponents during his run for President, the following year. Yet the program may have *reduced* the likelihood of such incidents. In fact, a 1987 report found that the recidivism rate[[2]](#footnote-2) in Massachusetts dropped in the eleven years after the program was introduced, and that convicts who were furloughed before being released were less likely to go on to commit a crime than those who were not. The trouble is that you can’t point to individuals who *weren’t* raped, assaulted, or killed as a result of the program, just as you can’t point to a specific person whose life was spared because of vaccination.

There’s a larger pattern here. Sensible policies often have benefits that are merely statistical but victims have names and stories. Consider global warming. As it happens, the limits of empathy are especially stark here. Opponents of restrictions on CO2 emissions are flush with identifiable victims—all those who will be harmed by increased costs, by business closures. The millions of people who at some unspecified future date will suffer the consequences of our current inaction are, by contrast, pale statistical abstractions.

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

Moral judgment entails more than putting oneself in another’s shoes. As the philosopher Jesse Prinz points out, some acts that we easily recognize as wrong, such as shoplifting or tax evasion, have no identifiable victim. And plenty of good deeds—disciplining a child for dangerous behavior, enforcing a fair and impartial procedure for determining who should get an organ transplant, despite the suffering of those low on the list—require us to put our empathy to one side. Eight deaths are worse than one, even if you know the name of the one; humanitarian aid can, if poorly targeted, be counterproductive; the threat posed by climate change warrants the sacrifices entailed by efforts to ameliorate it. “The decline of violence may owe something to an expansion of empathy,” the psychologist Steven Pinker has written, “but it also owes much to harder-boiled faculties like prudence, reason, fairness, self-control, norms and taboos, and conceptions of human rights.” A reasoned, even counter-empathetic analysis of moral obligation and likely consequences is a better guide to planning for the future than the gut wrench[[3]](#footnote-3) of empathy.

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

1. A special release program for some convicts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The rate at which criminals re-offend. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pain in our insides. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)