

GENERAL PAPER

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Paper 2

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READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

Paul Bloom writes about empathy.

- 1 The word 'empathy' 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. Two recent books, 'The Empathic Civilization' and 'Humanity on a Tightrope', 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. The authors want us to emotionally join a global family and make the leap to global empathic consciousness. They see this as the last best hope for saving the world from environmental destruction. These books champion an increase in empathy as a cure for the ills of humanity, as befits the spirit of the times. However, this enthusiasm may be misplaced. Empathy has some unfortunate features – it is parochial, narrow-minded and enumerate. We are often at our best when we are smart enough not to rely on it. 5 10
- 2 The immense power of empathy has been demonstrated again and again. It is why in the wake of widely reported tragedies and disasters, people gave time, money and even blood. It is why when twenty children were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, there was a widespread sense of grief, and an intense desire to help. Why do people respond to these misfortunes and not to others? The psychologist Paul Slovic points out that when a high-school American girl disappeared, the story of her plight took up far more television time than the concurrent genocide in Darfur. Each day, more than ten times the number of people who died in Hurricane Katrina die because of preventable diseases, and more than thirteen times as many perish from malnutrition. 15 20
- 3 There is, of course, the attention-getting power of new events. Just as we can come to ignore the hum of traffic, we become oblivious of problems that seem unrelenting, like the starvation of children in Africa or homicide in the United States. In the past three decades, there were some sixty mass shootings, causing about five hundred deaths, that is, about one-tenth of one per cent of the homicides in America. However, mass murders get splashed onto television screens, newspaper headlines and the Internet. The biggest ones settle into our collective memory. The 99.9 per cent of other homicides are, unless the victim is someone you have heard of, mere background noise. 25
- 4 The key to engaging empathy is what has been called 'the identifiable victim effect'. As an economist mordantly observed, 'Let a six-year-old girl with brown hair need thousands of dollars for an operation that will prolong her life until Christmas, and the post office will be swamped with nickels and dimes to save her. But let it be reported that without a sales tax, the hospital facilities of Massachusetts will deteriorate and cause a barely perceptible increase in preventable deaths – not many will drop a tear or reach for their chequebooks.' 30 35
- 5 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 recognise the numbers as significant, it is because of reason, not empathy. 40
- 6 In the broader context of humanitarianism, as critics 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. 45

- 7 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. However, the appetite for retribution is typically indifferent to long-term consequences. In one study, 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 did not care. They wanted the company fined heavily, whatever the consequence. 50
- 8 There is a larger pattern here. Sensible policies often have benefits that are merely statistical but victims have names and stories. The government's failure to enact prudent long-term policies is often attributed to the powerful influence of money, and to the incentive system of democratic politics, which favours short-term fixes. However, 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. 60
- 9 Moral judgment entails more than putting oneself in another's shoes. Some acts that we easily recognise as wrong, such as shoplifting or tax evasion, have no identifiable victim. Many good deeds, such as disciplining a child for dangerous behaviour and 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 counter-productive. However, the decline of violence may owe something to an expansion of empathy. Nonetheless a reasoned, even counter-empathetic analysis of moral obligation and likely consequences is a better guide to planning for the future than the gut wrench of empathy. 65
- 10 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 empathise with seven billion strangers, or to feel toward someone you have 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, which is impossible. It lies, instead, in an appreciation of the fact that even if we do not empathise with distant strangers, their lives have the same value as the lives of those we love. Where empathy really does matter is in our personal relationships. Empathy is what makes us human. It is what makes us both subjects and objects of moral concern. Empathy betrays us only when we take it as a moral guide. 75
- 11 Such are the paradoxes of empathy. The power of this faculty has to do with its ability to bring our moral concern into a laser pointer of focussed attention. However, if a planet of billions is to survive, we will need to take into consideration the welfare of people not yet harmed – and, even more, of people not yet born. They have no names, faces or stories to grip our conscience or stir our fellow-feeling. Their prospects call, rather, for deliberation and calculation. Our hearts will always go out to the baby in the well. Empathy is a measure of our humanity. However, it will have to yield to reason if humanity is to have a future. 80