

Empathy's Role in Understanding the World

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Empathy is an emotion that anyone can feel, just like any other emotion. It is defined as being the identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another. Basically, it is feeling the same way another person is feeling with the same if not a more extreme strength of a negative emotion. Although it is difficult for some people to admit that they are empathizing towards someone, they know that deep down they are feeling just as strongly as the other. They may, however, not be able to express that they are feeling this way, whatever the reason may be. In fact, while everyone is capable of feeling empathetic, only some people are able to act on it, and these people are those who have a better outlook on life than those who cannot. They are better able to comprehend that people are not just people; that human beings need to understand other before they are able to understand themselves. Literature, such as 1984 by George Orwell, Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse, Dante's Inferno, and other secondary sources, is able to back up and support the claim that those who can act on their empathy are those who can better understand other human beings, thus are also better able to understand the world.

Empathy within itself is its own emotion, but there are different emotions that are very similar to empathy and can even be virtually along the same line. One of these is compassion, which could be defined as being a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, combined with a strong desire to alleviate the suffering. In the essay "On Compassion" by Barbara Lazar Ascher she writes about how she once witnessed a vagabond walk into a restaurant and one of the workers gave him food, and states, "If expulsion were her motivation she would not reward his arrival with gifts of food. Most proprietors do not. They chase the homeless from their midst with expletives and threats" (87). It is evident that the worker felt compassion for this man, since she did not ask him to leave or force him out of the restaurant; rather she saw what condition he was in and gave him food. The fact that that worker did what she did goes along with another quote from Ascher, which reads, "It (Compassion) must be learned, and it is learned by having adversity at our windows, coming through the gates of our yards, the walls of our towns, adversity that becomes so familiar that we begin to identify and empathize with it" (88). This in general is defining compassion as it was previously defined; that it is when someone feels extreme sorrow for those who are less fortunate than them. This is also what empathy is, just concerning everyone and everything given a particular, sorrowful situation.

As said in the last sentence, empathy is feeling extreme emotions for another. Suzanne Keen in her essay "A Theory of Narrative Empathy" states, "Empathy that leads to sympathy is by definition other directed..." (208), which means that feeling extremely for others is the primary definition of what empathy really is. Another part of empathy, however, is then stated by Keen when she says, "In empathy, sometimes described as an emotion in its own right, we

feel what we believe to be the emotions of others” (208), where she defines empathy as feeling the same emotions as someone else is feeling; perhaps something catastrophic happened to that person and they are filled with sorrow and someone then is able to legitimately feel their pain, just as an example. Without both of these parts coexisting, it cannot be empathy.

Defining empathy is not simple, but it is not impossible. What also is not simple is recognizing that everyone in the world is able to feel empathy, but as said by David Brooks in his article “The Limits of Empathy,” he writes, “Empathy orients you toward moral action, but it doesn’t seem to help much when that action comes at a personal cost” (1). Although the feeling of remorse and sorrow is strong for someone, the people who are able to act on it are those who better understand, while those who do not act are those who do not, yet everyone has potential to do so.

The people who cannot yet act on their empathy for whatever reason it may be cannot yet understand the deep emotions that people are feeling as much as those who can act on it can. This is due to their inability to comprehend the complex emotions that they are feeling. This is evident in many pieces of literature, such as Dante’s Inferno, when Dante and Virgil arrived to the area in which the virtuous pagans were placed. He looked over at Virgil - who was also one of these pagans - and thinks that he looks angry, and asks him why that they be. Virgil then replies, ““The anguish of the people Who are below here in my face depicts That pity which for terror thou hast taken”” (70). In a loose interpretation of this line, it can be taken as being a sign of Virgil’s empathy; he was capable of recognizing the anger on the people’s faces and explicating those looks of vexation as a sign of empathy among those who have not gotten empathy in return. Dante is not able to understand the empathy that Virgil has for his own kind. Whether or not it was because he is not in the same group as him, he still could not recognize that Virgil was merely feeling the same pain that they were feeling.

In some cultures where the people follow certain religions, such as Buddhism, those with empathy but cannot act on it are the equivalents of those who are not enlightened yet. At one point in Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha, Siddhartha was not enlightened and was not able to feel towards every human being. Towards the beginning of his spiritual journey, Hesse writes, “Siddhartha’s sympathy and curiosity lay only with the people, whose work, troubles, pleasures, and follies were more unknown and remote from him than the moon. Although he found it so easy to speak to everyone, to live with everyone, to learn from everyone... there was something which separated him from them... he had been a Samana” (69). Apparently, he was not able to feel strongly towards everyone since he was in a certain social class. He was not in a certain part of his spiritual journey as to where he would be enlightened, and therefore his ability to act on his empathy was virtually nonexistent.

Empathy does not have to be felt by individual people; it can be felt by groups of people as a whole, and the group could potentially act on it. Yet, the Party in George Orwell’s 1984 was not one of those cases. It was evident from even the beginning of the book that the Party felt little towards their people, and this was evident until the very end. One example of the Party’s influence was when there was an explosion caused by a bomb and Winston, the protagonist, was taking a walk and he noticed a dismembered hand laying on the street, and with it, “He kicked

the thing into the gutter, and then, to avoid the crowd, turned down a side street to the right” (84). This suggests that, although Winston is still capable of empathizing towards others, - which is evident since he loved Julia - the Party’s influence on him made him unable to feel remorse towards whoever lost that hand. In fact, he kicked it out of his sight without feeling like he should have done something to show his sorrow for that person. This is clearly the work of the Party, however, and that can be seen when O’Brien was chatting with Winston, trying to brainwash Winston into vehemently believing in the Party. The Party’s belief, according to O’Brien, is that, “Obedience is not enough. Unless he is suffering, how can you be sure that he is obeying your will and not his own?” (266). This shows how the Party in its totality is not even capable of the feeling of empathy, let alone acting on it. Those of the Party minus Winston and a select few could not understand how others felt or that other people were individuals and could feel however they wanted. By not understanding they attempted and succeeded in taking every bit of humanity out of everyone who tried to be human. They were only able to act on their apathy, and these people in the Party could probably never get to the point where they could act on their empathy, if they were ever able to get it.

Eventually, when someone wants to have the ability to act on their empathy, they will embark on a long adventure on finding whatever makes them obtain this capability. Dante is one example of this when he was trekking through the Inferno with Virgil. They came upon those who had committed suicide, and one of the souls of a victim was before them. Virgil asked him to talk to him, with which Dante replied, “Do thou against inquire Concerning what thou thinks’t will satisfy me; For I cannot, such pity is in my heart” (78). Upon hearing about what happened to this man, Dante becomes so moved by pity that he is incapable of speaking. Although he was not able to express his empathy towards this person, the fact that he fell silent was evidence that he was still acting on his empathy. Dante’s grief was so deep that he was rendered speechless, unable to say anything. Dante found it within himself to express his empathy without him losing his ability to concurrently feel it.

Siddhartha’s spiritual journey could only keep progressing as he attempted to reach enlightenment. At one point he could not act on his empathy towards everyone, and towards the end of this spiritual journey of his, Hesse writes, “He now saw people differently than he had before, less cleverly, less proudly, but more warmly, with more curiosity and empathy” (129). The fact that Siddhartha got to the point in his spiritual journey in which he was able to see other people differently than he had before while still feeling his empathy shows that he not only got that much closer to becoming enlightened, but he also obtained the ability to express it. Everyone has their own feelings, and if someone feels a certain way and you are able to feel for them, that shows that you have become able to act on your empathy. Just the fact that you were able to state that you now see others how they are tells how empathy and your actions now coincide.

Better understanding others is a key aspect of empathy, especially when you actually want to act on it. In deriving from this, David Brooks states that, “People who actually perform pro-social action don’t only feel for those who are suffering, they feel compelled to act by a sense of duty” (2). Those who are able to act on their empathy do not do so just because they

want to, rather because they feel as if acting on it is what they must do. They understand that people go through horrible events and when they see this they feel as horrible as they do, and thus they then act on this intense feeling because they understand everything. These are the people who better understand the world around them.

Empathy is a universal emotion. It can be felt by anyone, since everyone has the capability of feeling any emotion. However, it is safe to say that not everyone is capable of acting on the empathy that they are feeling. Those who do not act on it are not able to comprehend other people's ability to feel complex emotions. Those who do act on it are those who can, and thus they understand the world much better than those who are not able to act on it. This does not mean though that those who cannot are never able to. It may be a long endeavor, but for them, and for the entire world, it is only for the better.

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