

Rationally Speaking #142: Paul Bloom on, "The case against empathy"

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and with me today is our guest Paul Bloom.

Paul is a Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Science at Yale University. He writes widely for venues such as the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and he's published many books -- including one of my favorites, *How Pleasure Works*, which I've plugged on this show before.

His current book that he's working on, which will be coming out sometime next year, is about empathy. Which he says people react positively to, when he brings it up at parties -- until he tells them that he's against it.

Paul, that's what we're going to be talking about today: why and in what sense you are "against empathy". Welcome to the show!

Paul: Hey. Thank you so much for having me here.

Julia: Maybe you could kick things off for us by just giving the basic skeleton of your argument, and we can delve into the details later. In what way are you against empathy?

Paul: I've got to begin in the most boring possible way which is by defining my terms.

Julia: Absolutely. All the analytic philosophers in our audience will be cheering right now.

Paul: Ninety percent are now moving forward the little dot to get to the good part.

For the analytic philosophers: empathy gets used in all sorts of ways. Some people use it as a catch-all term for everything good. For being moral, kind, loving, compassionate. I'm not against that. I do think we should love each other, we should be kind to each other, we're making a better world.

Empathy also gets used in a more narrow sense: in terms of understanding the mental states of other people. If I'm thinking, "Oh my gosh, I think she's bored or she's hungry or she's wondering..." I'm engaged in what some people would call cognitive empathy.

Though it also comes in other terms theory of mind or mind reading, and in many cases I'm not against that either. I think that the ability to understand other people's mental life is absolutely critical to becoming a good person.

Though, I would add that this capacity is also used by terrible people. It's kind of an amoral capacity.

Here's what I do mean by empathy. I mean by empathy what philosophers such as Adam Smith and David Hume called sympathy. And this is feeling what other people feel. If you're bored and because of this I feel bored, that's empathy. If I see you banging your foot and I feel pain myself, that's empathy. If you suffer and I suffer as a result, that's empathy.

There's many smart people -- smart philosophers, psychologist, neuroscientists, as well as non-scholars like Barack Obama, for instance, and many politicians -- who think this ability to feel the feelings of other people is absolutely critical to being a good person.

What I want to argue in my book is that that's probably mistaken. That empathy is a very bad moral guide. It's narrow, it's parochial, it's biased. It leads you to help the wrong people. It leads you to focus on the wrong concerns. The argument I make is that we're far better off to use a more cold-blooded cost-benefit calculation and use more distant compassion. We should care about other people, but we shouldn't put ourselves in their shoes.

Julia: What are one or two examples of cases in which you think empathy is biased, or gives us the wrong conclusion?

Paul: Empathy zooms us in on the suffering of particular people. This is the source of its power. The champions of empathy aren't wrong to point out that it could motivate you to care about somebody you wouldn't otherwise care about.

But the problem is empathy is like a spotlight. It just zooms in on one person or two people, and it's highly biased. We're far more likely to feel empathic for somebody who is adorable, who is our child, or our parent, or our friend, our lover, than we are towards a stranger. And certainly more empathic towards those we love than those who hate us, those we're opposed to.

It leads us to all sorts of problems. It's because of empathy that societies and governments care so much more about that little girl stuck in a well than they do about the crisis of climate change. It's because of empathy that often we will enact grotesque laws or engage in unnecessary wars because we feel tremendous empathy for the suffering of some individual we care about. It's because of empathy that the lives of one or two people often matter so much more than the lives of thousands or millions. It distorts your judgments and this leads to all sorts of mistakes.

Julia: What's the alternative? Is it some kind of utilitarian calculus?

Paul: It's a good question. I want to, in some way, be a little bit agnostic. On most days I am a utilitarian but --

Julia: ... But on alternate Fridays you just relax.

Paul: That's right. That's right.

I just read a very interesting discussion which explored the question, what if you think that being utilitarian is like 80% right, but being a Kantian is like 20% right?

Anyway, you don't need to be a utilitarian to buy this. What I would suggest, though, is that the alternative is to explore moral issues in a more impartial and distant way. Don't ask yourself, when deciding who to give money to, "How adorable is the person? How much does this make my heart sing?"

Ask yourself, "How much of a difference will this money make in actual people's lives?" When deciding whether or not to cheer on going to war, ask yourself, "Will the war make things better or worse?"

This need not ... I actually think that to some extent, David Hume is certainly right. Pure cold-blooded reason isn't enough. You need to care. But the caring need not be empathy. The caring could be a more distant compassion.

One of the things I discussed in my book is some wonderful work done by the neuroscientist Tania Singer and the Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, which nicely pulls apart empathy and compassion. They find, for instance, that when you get people to feel empathy for other people, to put themselves in their shoes, this causes suffering on the part of the empathizer. It causes withdrawal, bad feelings, and burnout.

On the other hand, if you get people to engage in contemplative practices that involve caring about other people, so-called "loving kindness", without absorbing their pain -- you see the person in pain, you don't feel their pain, you care for them but you don't feel their pain -- this actually leads to increased helping, increased happiness, no burnout.

There's a growing consensus, including people like Richard Davidson as well, and including some people involved in psychiatry, and different versions of psychology and neuroscience, that compassion is a powerful and very useful feeling. Empathy is just too biased and short-sighted to do good moral work for us.

Julia: I can certainly see how replacing empathy with compassion to some degree would address some of the problems in the realm of burnout, or being paralyzed by feeling others' pain and being unable to act effectively.

But it's not obvious to me that compassion doesn't suffer from the same biases, or parochialness, as empathy. Do you think it's less biased than empathy?

Paul: I think it's *less* biased. Any cognitive system we have -- emotional, rational, and so on -- is going to be vulnerable to some degree of bias. Yeah, it's a lot easier for me to feel compassionate, for me to care about those close to me than those far away. Compassion does suffer from bias.

Which is why in the end, I think compassion plays some role but not the whole role. I think we also need some notions of impartiality and moral principles. I think the bias of empathy, and this is what the research shows, is less strong ... Sorry, the bias of compassion is less strong than the bias of empathy.

Julia: Maybe I'm just not sure how to separate them in my personal experience. I understand how it's different to care about a person's well-being in general versus feeling empathy for them in particular situations. But if I were to say that I feel compassion for someone's situation, I don't know how to do that without feeling empathy for them.

Paul: I think you do.

Julia: How do I do that?

Paul: I'll give you a classic example. Not mine, it comes from Peter Singer. But the Chinese philosopher Mencius, I think, used it first.

You're walking down the road and you see a child drowning. The child's drowning in shallow water, so you easily wade in and pick up the child and rescue her. Everybody agrees you should do that. That's the right thing to do.

Why are you doing it? You might do it because you're utilitarian and you're figuring out that will maximize the happiness of the world. Or you're a Kantian and this will be a great general principle, rescue children whenever you can. I don't doubt that emotions -- you could just care about the child. It's a child, it'd be horrible if this kid died.

But, you probably don't feel empathy. In other words, you probably don't imagine what it's like to be drowning or you don't imagine what it's like to be the child's parents, to get phone call saying your child has drowned. You could do

that. In this case as in so many others, you can care about the kid and react, without engaging in any of this empathic dance.

Julia: I see. I bought that actually.

Although it still seems like I can see the same kind of biases present, where I care more, I feel more compassion, when the child is in front of me -- instead of a statistical abstraction or on the other side of the world. My caring doesn't scale proportionately with the number of lives at stake, for example.

Maybe it would be helpful for you to give an example or summary of research about why compassion would work better than empathy.

Paul: I think you're right. I'm not going to make a case that compassion or any sort of fellow feeling and positive affect is unbiased. Plainly it is biased. I just think the evidence for the bias of empathy is overwhelming, and compassion has somewhat more flexibility.

For instance, empathy is bizarrely innumerate. In that, empathy works by putting yourself in somebody's shoes. If you feel empathy for my suffering, you'll feel my suffering. We have this connection. You could do that with me. Maybe you could do that with another person at the same time, but you can't feel empathy for 10 people or a hundred people or a thousand people.

Compassion seems less constrained than that. You could hear about the victims of a tsunami and be sufficiently motivated to want to help them and send them money, because you care about them. Not because you say, "God this is horrible. That must be horrible."

You want their lives to improve, and you care about them. There it's compassion doing the trick. You don't have to replay in your head what it must feel like that water pouring all over you and drowning.

All of my examples today seem to be water --

Julia: Are you thirsty, or...?

Paul: I must be thirsty.

This is actually what the neuroscience... finds, which is that empathy is a very intimate emotion. It plugs you into another person and it becomes very personal. I think this is one reason why it leads to so much burnout and suffering.

Julia: Right.

Paul: So much of what I've been talking about has been sort of on a public policy level, but I'll give you another example on a more intimate level.

Just to pursue what you're talking about, pulling apart empathy and compassion: Imagine dealing with a therapist and you're miserable. You're miserable and you're anxious. What do you want? You want the therapist to care about you, to want you to get better, either because they get paid that way or because they care about you honestly. And to be good at it.

You also want the therapist to understand you. In that sense of empathy, you really want --

Julia: You want the cognitive empathy, that you were describing earlier?

Paul: You want the cognitive empathy. Here's what you don't want. I don't want, if I'm talking to my therapist, I'm all crying and I say, "Oh, my life is horrible." I don't want my therapist to break into tears and say, "That's horrible. That's terrible," and we're both weeping together.

In fact, so much of the training of professionals -- including therapists, but more broadly -- is a sort of distance. This distance is essential, for one thing, so that the therapist doesn't burn out after two weeks of this. But also because if you want to help somebody, it's actually best *not* to absorb their pain. It's best not to feel what they're feeling.

If I think I've been humiliated at work, and it turns out that this is an unrealistic belief caused by my low self-esteem and all those cognitive habits, my therapist shouldn't feel herself humiliated. Rather she should say, "Look, I know how you're looking at it and that's wrong." There, contrary to what we sometimes think, a sort of distance, a separateness, makes for more caring and more efficient treatment of other people.

Julia: Right. It seems to me that -- to separate things out, again -- there's what I want from someone who's actually in my life. Which at least for me is more than just cognitive empathy. I want the emotional empathy that's a part of the bond, part of reinforcing our bond, and feeling not alone.

Then there's the question of, what do I want from the society or human civilization, for me or for people like me. There, basically I just want them to act. I want them to help those who need it.

There, I guess it just comes down to a disagreement about -- not necessarily between me and you, but over this issue in general between people -- a disagreement about what is more motivating. Or what will more effectively produce helpful action. With you and your example of the therapist being a sort of intuition pump that remaining calm and collected will produce more effective help.

The alternate view, I suppose, being something like: Feeling someone's pain is much more motivating to get someone to act. I mean, I think that's a plausible story. But it may just be that when you look at the empirical evidence, those who feel the strongest empathy don't in fact act more often, or more effectively, than those who rely on empathy less. Is that in fact what the evidence shows?

Paul: You're raising two issues. One is sort of an empirical issue. Which is, to what extent in the real world does empathy make us a better person? The answer is complicated, but there's actually no good evidence that people with high empathy are in any sense nicer than people with low empathy. Despite everything you might hear about psychopaths and all of that.

There's been some huge meta-analyses being done. One published in the Journal of Psychological Bulletin, which looked at the relationship between very low empathy and aggression, sexual aggression, physical aggression, verbal aggression, and found there's virtually no connection.

Julia: That's surprising.

Paul: It is surprising. But if you think about it, what it shows is that it's true, for instance, that when you're being aggressive, it often involves a lowered empathy towards the person -- but it's just not the case that being high empathy makes you more helpful. In fact, it might make you not want to engage with people who are suffering because it's too painful for you.

Nor is it the case that being low empathy makes you cold-blooded and mean. Some of the people who scored lowest on empathy are people with Asperger's syndrome or on the autistic spectrum, and they don't tend to be bad people. They often are caring people, rule-abiding people and so on. They just don't put themselves in the shoes of other people. That's the empirical question... I've expressed my view, it could be wrong. More studies could come out.

I want to zoom in on something else you said, though, because there's sort of a more interesting issue. It's kind of about you and me and our different perspectives on this. I want to push back on you a little bit.

Imagine that something awful has happened to you. Somebody you love has died or something awful has happened within your career, and you reach out to the person who you care about the most in the world for reassurance. What do you want?

Well, I think what you want is for the person to care about you, and want to help you, and want to make your life better. I think what you want is the person to understand you. But is it clear that you want the person to feel what you're feeling? Put aside burnout, put aside what makes people successful therapists. The question is, what do you want in our relationship? If you've just felt humiliated and you're explaining to somebody you care about that you felt humiliated, do you want that person to feel empathy for you in a sense that they themselves now feel humiliated?

Julia: That's interesting. Now that you're digging into this, it seems to me that it depends on what emotion it is.

Paul: Yes.

Julia: If it's sadness, I think I do want someone I'm close to to feel -- maybe not the same level of sadness I feel, but at least a little bit of genuine sadness like mine, so that I feel like we're "in it together", in some sense.

If it's humiliation, no.

If it's anger, yes. I want people to be angry with me, and on my behalf. I guess it just depends on the emotion, which is interesting.

Paul: I'll make a personal confession, which is this is really is where people do differ. My wife sometimes gets angry, and I don't always say, "I appreciate that, boy that was really awful." And I think she gets frustrated because I don't share her anger.

Julia: My boyfriend's the same way! I'll get angry about something, and his response will be something like, "I can see how that would be angering to someone."

He's gotten a little bit better at tweaking the phrasing over time, but, yeah. It's not maximally satisfying.

Paul: Sometimes I try to fake it like, "Oh, I'm so annoyed. That's horrible."

Julia: You two should hang out and exchange tips.

Paul: Yeah.

My argument is more a moral one, involving policy and how to live our lives. I'll concede that the case for intimate relationships is more complicated.

I'll give you an example which goes against my claim. It's by the philosopher Michael Slote. He imagines a father with a daughter who loves stamp collecting, and says, "What attitude could a father take towards his daughter?" He says, "Well, he could encourage his daughter. He could let his daughter know how much he respects her stamp collecting. But wouldn't it be great if he could share her enthusiasm?"

I do see that. I also see that this sort of resonance to the feelings of others has all sorts of arguments in favor of it outside this moral domain, and that it's a great source of pleasure. It's a law which goes on in certain sports. It's a law which goes on in sex. I think it's a law that goes on in the pleasure of fiction, where I put myself in the shoes of Macbeth or Walter White or Donnie Darko or whatever. You put yourself in the shoes of a character, and you feel what they feel. That's exhilarating.

Julia: Yeah. You know, I had this thought when ... I don't know how many years ago it was now. I was pretty into the Harry Potter books. And when we were waiting for the final book to come out, I felt a sense of camaraderie with so many other people in society. Because I knew that there were just tens of thousands of other people -- maybe hundreds of thousands of other people -- who were feeling the same thing I was feeling right now, this excited anticipation.

It occurred to me this must be what people get out of sporting events -- which I've never been able to actually share. But I could sort of get it, in that moment when I was waiting for Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

I think the pleasure in the empathy there is something like an enjoyment of the experience of being part of humanity, or part of a group or something like that, in which my pleasure is maximized or amplified by that feeling of it being shared by other people.

Paul: I think that's right.

I have to, almost contractually, quote Adam Smith. Smith talks about this. He says that one of the great things about sympathy and empathy in modern terms is that it adds so much pleasure to our lives. He talks about the pleasure one gets from having read a book and then handing it to a friend, and hoping the friend will read it and enjoy it too. Nobody reads books anymore, but there's the internet.

Julia: How about "You have to see this YouTube video"?

Paul: Yes, a YouTube video. So many times, people drag me over to their laptop or their phone -- and they stare at me as I watch it. This is a real source of pleasure.

Also having kids. Having kids lets you experience pleasures you've already had for the first time all over again. A Hitchcock movie, a sundae, a roller coaster ride. You're happy with your kid, they get the pleasure. You're happy they get the pleasure, but also you vicariously absorb their pleasure.

Julia: Right.

Paul: I'm not arguing for a world without empathy. There's so much pleasure we get from it. I'm just arguing it's not a guide to how to live.

Julia: Right. I'm personally, I think, a little more interested in the question of empathy and public policy. Or empathy and moral behavior not just on a personal intimate scale.

Partly, I'm interested in this because I'm involved with the effective altruism movement, which is concerned very much with these questions, about how to help the world most effectively. And also gets accused of not being empathetic enough. There's an open debate about whether and how empathy should play a role in these decisions.

I've read some of the critiques of your argument, and it seems to me that some of the disagreement, at least -- although not all of it -- comes from people talking past each other about the precise claim being made. I want to see if we can just precisify it to some degree.

Paul: Good. That's right.

Julia: For example, I can imagine different versions of the claim that empathy isn't ideal for making moral judgments or guiding moral behavior. The question, "Is empathy necessary to optimally helping others?" is different from the question, "Is empathy sufficient? Is it all we need to optimally help others?"

And those both are different from the question, "On the margin, would we see greater benefit to the world if we increased empathy from its current level? Is it the bottleneck? Is it a limiting factor?"

I just want to invite you to either pick one of those phrasings or pick a different phrasing, but sort of at that level of precision of claim.

Paul: Those are great questions. Often, my friends and my students try to rescue me from the sort of, what they see as the extreme form of the idea. And they try to

say I'm not really against empathy but I'm against the *misapplication* of empathy. Or, empathy isn't enough. Or empathy needs to be guided by reason.

But actually, I'm against empathy as a moral guide. I certainly think it's not sufficient, and I can't imagine anybody who thinks it's sufficient. I also easily think it's not necessary. You save the girl from the pond. You give money to Oxfam. You do kind and good things, and you could do so without any empathy. We could strip empathy from your brain, so long as you still cared about people. You would normally continue to do good things. You'd do good things in a far less biased way. I mean I also argued with a development psychologist that empathy is entirely separate from compassion in a developing baby's brain. You see all sorts of acts of kindness and caring in babies that have no empathic resonance.

I like your mention of the effective altruism movement. Because in some way, my critique of empathy guides me towards that movement, or at least towards the ideas of that movement. I'll give you an example.

I was on the radio and making my argument. I gave an example, based on an article I read on Slate about giving to child beggars in Africa and Asia. The article pointed out that when you give to child beggars, you make the world worse. Because although you're helping these kids in the here and now, basically you're encouraging a huge criminal organization that enslaves and often maims children. If you want to help kids, give to Oxfam. There's a lot of better ways to do it.

I was on the radio with another person who was a minister. She responded by saying, "But I like giving to kids. It makes me closer to them. There's an intimacy. It is so impersonal to give to Oxfam." I'm awful at thinking on my feet, as you may be able to tell, so it took me like three days to figure out what my answer should have been.

Julia: That's so frustrating. By the way, the French have a phrase for that. It's called "l'esprit d'escalier," and it translates to "the wit of the staircase" -- like the perfect retort you come up with once you've already left the party and you're walking down the stairs.

Paul: That's good!

Julia: What's your wit of the staircase?

Paul: My answer should have been, "It depends what you want. If you want intimate close relationships and the feeling of making a difference, by all means give to the kid. On the other hand, if you want to save children's lives, don't."

I think effective altruism, the whole movement, forces people to make a choice. I think part of the anger that's directed towards effective altruism is because it's an unpleasant demand to make upon people. Most people want... what Peter Singer calls warm-glow altruism. They like the buzz.

Julia: Correct.

Paul: The effective altruists are basically saying, "Put down your ice cream and eat your vegetables... You're not doing others any good."

Effective altruism movement connects to another issue which is that empathy in my view makes us less good, that it directs us away from being the optimally good people we can be. It causes all sorts of horrible things.

I'll give you one small example, from a book by Linda Paulman. Where she once asked warlords in Africa, I forget exactly where, why they chopped off children's limbs. It was such a grotesque horrible thing to do, and like, why would they do it? The answer, and she got this answer from multiple people, was, "We do it for you. NGOs and American and European organizations don't come to our country unless we give you atrocities. The atrocities energize people."

Julia: Wait. The warlords want the charities to come in and help the country?

Paul: Yes, because the NGOs pay taxes to the warlords.

... Often, the NGOs, and there's a complicated moral issue here, help everybody, all the parties involved. They don't take sides. They're a net plus for the warlords, even taking away that they give the warlords money.

Julia: Wow.

Paul: Now, this is one example of some ugly incentives. But there's no shortage of real world cases -- where unscrupulous people, those who cut off the limbs of children to make them better beggars, those who set up fake orphanages, or simply drag children away from their parents into orphanages. They exploit the well-meaning, loving empathy of people, particularly wealthy American people, in order to profit themselves. And in the way they do it, they make the world worse.

Julia: Right. Yeah, I guess what people really want is not just ... Like, it doesn't really work to tell people, "Look, purchase your warm-glow separately from your altruism." Because the warm-glow is dependent on the feeling that you're being altruistic. It sort of disappears if you say to yourself, "This charitable donation is a

consumption good. I'm purchasing it so that I can feel a warm glow." It's just sort of -- the bottom falls out from under you there.

Paul: Yes, that's right. There's these hard issues, which maybe you have to deal with more than I do, which is the effective altruism movement could be ultimately almost self-refuting. As you convince people that giving to charity is a fine utilitarian good, and it isn't to get a buzz out of it, you get less giving to charity.

I tend not to be that pessimistic.

Julia: Yeah, I'm not quite that pessimistic. I think the empirical evidence so far suggests that's not true, or at least it's not going to be true of a significant minority. I don't know if this would work on a scale as large as becoming the dominant way of giving to charity. We'll see.

Paul: That's right. I'm also willing to be a bit strategic. I think that ... I don't have huge moral objections to charities that have ultimate good ends using empathy as a way to get money for their work.

Julia: Right.

Paul: Showing the obligatory pictures of the adorable babies and so on.

Julia: Right. This actually brings me to my next question quite nicely. When I look at myself and also at other maybe more hardcore effective altruists that I know, they have empathy -- but in a particular way.

They don't necessarily feel empathy for every person, or even every group or cause that they're giving to. But they certainly have a core of empathy, and it occurs to me that maybe that's ... Maybe I want to push back on your claim that empathy isn't necessary, and argue for a limited version of the opposite claim, that you need at least some kernel of empathy to understand what other people's suffering is. And in order to know that you want abstractly to reduce suffering overall.

You don't necessarily have to feel empathy for the statistical lives, whose quality of life will be harmed by malaria or something. As long as you understand what it is like for someone to suffer from a painful illness, or for a parent to lose a child to malaria. So that is just the motivation for your abstract calculation that leads you to decide you want to find the charity that most effectively reduces malaria.

Paul: Two things. One thing is, I agree with everything you're saying, almost -- except for the word empathy. Which is, I agree other people have to matter to you and you have to understand what's bad for other people. You have to have some

appreciation that having your child die of malaria is horrible, and you have to care. You have to not want people to go through that experience. I just wouldn't call any of that empathy as opposed to just caring about other people.

Julia: I see.

Paul: In some ways, this is an empirical question. I don't want to push it too far. I don't doubt that there are people who do wonderful things in the world because they feel the suffering of others and that motivates them. I think in the end that way of acting causes more trouble than that's worth, but I don't doubt that some people do amazing things driven by empathy.

But I see the effective altruism in a different way. Peter Singer, in his newest book, has stories of these effective altruists he talks about. And they tend to be a fairly distant rational lot. There may be a selection bias there, but he tells a story of this guy, Zell Kravinsky, I think, who gave away one of his kidneys to a stranger.

Julia: Right.

Paul: When asked why he did it -- and this was actually not an interview by Singer but another interviewer -- when asked why he did it, Kravinsky didn't say, "Oh, I felt the pain of somebody missing a kidney and being stuck on dialysis." Rather he said, "Oh, it's basic math. I have two, other people don't have any."

It sounds very cold-blooded and utilitarian, but it did happen to lead to an act of extraordinary kindness.

Julia: Right. Maybe another part of the disagreement over this question is that it's not necessarily that people agree what good moral behavior should look like, and they disagree about whether empathy helps you get there, or hurts you from getting there. But that it, in fact, might boil down to a disagreement over what optimal moral behavior even is.

Paul: Yes.

Julia: One way in which it's clear that empathy is ... well, I was going to say biased, but that's kind of presupposing the question. One way in which it's clear that empathy gives a different answer than, say, a utilitarian calculus is in scope insensitivity.

As I was saying before, our empathy and our compassion too to some degree, don't scale proportionately with the number of lives at stake or the number of people suffering. Some people look at that and say, "Well look, that's a

demonstration of how empathy is flawed." Other people look at that and say, "Well, I just have a bounded utility function. I just don't care twice as much about 2,000 people suffering as I do about 1,000 people suffering, and I don't think that's an error."

I'm a little torn about this. I don't know how to tell that latter group of people that they're incorrect.

Paul: You're putting the issue very nicely. I wouldn't tell somebody that they're incorrect in not feeling like 2,000 deaths is twice as worse as 1,000. That's human nature. If I tell you 10,000 people died in this horrible event in China and then I come up to you later and said, "Oh my god, now it's 30,000" you don't feel three times as bad. When the numbers get high, it's like nothing.

I actually think paradoxically, when you hear a hundred people die, it's not as bad to you as when you hear one person die.

Julia: Right.

Paul: I don't blame people for being wired that way. Actually, that's what it is to be human, I think.

Julia: Right.

Paul: Here's what I blame people for. I blame people if they then take their feelings and then they say, "Yeah, and it really does matter more when one person dies than when a hundred people die."

... I understand, for instance, if a little girl dies from a vaccine, they might shut down the vaccine program. Even if the vaccine program statistically is proven to save the lives of a hundred children. I understand the psychology behind that, which is the suffering of a child is immensely powerful. While statistically, causing the death of a hundred people statistically leaves us cold. That's the way we work.

Julia: Right.

Paul: A rational good person should say, "That's how I feel, but that's stupid."

Let's shift from empathy a bit to discuss another emotion. I don't blame somebody who says, "It really grosses me out to see a black person and a white person kissing, or a man and a man kissing. It just really grosses me out. It's repulsive." Fair enough. That's how you feel.

I do blame them for saying, "Therefore, we should put them in prison."

Julia: Right. That example's hard to argue with.

All right, here's an alternate model of how we might react when our system one intuitive or emotional moral judgment is different from our system two analytical moral judgment: When I consider utilitarianism, just to take that as an example, it feels pretty logical and compelling to me. I don't want to go so far as to say I think it's the *correct* moral system, but it aligns with my moral intuitions.

But then, in particular cases, often I find that my moral intuition in that particular case does not actually line up with utilitarianism. The scope insensitivity case is one example, but there's also cases where I just find that I don't care as much about increasing the happiness of someone who's a jerk as I do about increasing the happiness of someone who's not a jerk.

Even if you could set up the problems such that we aren't dealing with incentives causing more jerkiness in the future if we reward jerkiness. Take that out of the picture. I still don't really want the jerk to be rewarded. I'm not going to say I want them to be tortured, but there's definitely a non-utilitarianism in my reaction to those cases.

Paul: Right, so now, if there's a rapist, we put him in prison and we say, "Oh, there's good utilitarian reasons that discourages other people." But if somebody says, "Hey, good news. We don't have to put the rapist in prison. We can give him ice cream and get him to pray, and then that will lead to good results," we say, "Well, that doesn't seem right."

Julia: Right.

Paul: A good utilitarian should say suffering is bad and we're not good utilitarians. We want justice to be meted out.

Julia: Right. And I'm not sure how much I want to disown that response, or tell that response that it's stupid because it doesn't line up with utilitarianism.

The only reason I picked utilitarianism in the first place is that it felt intuitively correct to me, or intuitively compelling to me. I often opt for a process of what a philosopher whose name I'm forgetting now called "reflective equilibrium". I'm just trying to hold these contradictory impulses or intuitions against each other and trying to achieve some kind of convergence. But I haven't written the bottom line yet. I haven't decided that the convergence will happen in the direction of my system two, my original system two response.

It does seem to me that there are some cases in which my original logical reasoning gets shifted in the direction of my empathetic reasoning, and that's not necessarily bad. Maybe originally I reasoned it out and decided I just want to maximize the overall good in the world, and then I force myself to feel the pain of someone who gets the short end of the straw and ends up worse off even though the world overall is better off, and that causes me to decide, "Well actually, I want to modify my overall policy to prioritize equality a little bit more relative to overall size of the pot," and that shift happened because of empathy.

Paul: Look, we're on the same page regarding the uncertainties over utilitarianism. I haven't fully drunk the Kool-Aid myself.

Here's something which often bothers me: I have two sons, now teenagers. And I feel this tremendous obligation and love towards them, so much so that I would spend enormous amounts of money to make their lives slightly better.

Julia: Right.

Paul: A better school, books, healthcare and so on. And a utilitarian would say, "This is ridiculous. You could be saving a village with this money. You could be curing a dozen people from blindness with the money you spend to send your kids at a special tutoring or delightful vacation." To me, at this gut level, I feel I'm doing the right thing. And my feeling, I can't disavow that.

Julia: Right.

Paul: I actually think that a morality that tells me I shouldn't give my kids special care, or that I should only give my kids special care because that's a means to a better utilitarian end, is missing something important. I agree with you.

The reflective equilibrium stuff, I think it's either Rawls or Nozick, but I'm not ...

Julia: Rawls sounds right. Yes.

Paul: I agree with you. I guess what I would say is that my book, I'm not making a full throttle argument for utilitarianism. And maybe that there's some sort of broader principles that need to be applied, or technical problems that we both know about utilitarianism, like repugnant conclusions. This is not a full utilitarian argument.

It is an argument though that empathy really sucks as a moral guide. I can think of cases where we think about it and we say, "Gee, the utilitarian answer isn't the right one." I struggle with that. But I can't think of any good case where empathy drives us towards the right answer.

... Because empathy pushes me to care more about white people than black people, pretty people more than ugly people, Americans more than Mexicans.

Julia: Right.

Paul: It cause me to value the one over the ten. Everything that empathy does that distinguishes empathy from other sentiments, -- for every one of these, reflectively I say, "That's really wrong. That's racist. That's sexist. That innumerate. That's stupid."

Julia: Yeah, I've definitely noticed this bias come into play when I think about animal welfare. I noticed that I'm much more concerned about the suffering of, say, pigs or even chickens than I am about the suffering of, say, fish. Or octupi is probably a good example, because octupi are quite intelligent, right?

Paul: Yes.

Julia: But they don't have faces. They seem so alien, it's hard to empathize with them. I've tried.

But the question I actually care about -- which is, can the animal suffer psychologically or physically from the way it's treated? -- is not necessarily that connected to whether it has a face or not.

I think even though I'm not willing to disown my empathetic responses overall, I will definitely say: when it's clear to me what the source is of the divergence of my empathetic response from my more analytical response, which is for example, humans evolved to care about things that have faces, then I'm much more inclined to disown it.

Paul: That's right.

Julia: There's this old parable from an essayist named G. K. Chesterton. He says, "Imagine that you come across a fence just sitting in the middle of the road and you want to tear it down because you can't see why it's there, you don't see the purpose of it." He says, "I will not let you tear down the fence until you can tell me why it's there. Because if you don't know what the purpose of it was, then you shouldn't be cavalier about getting rid of it."

I guess I feel a little bit that way about my intuitive responses. When I can tell, "Oh, this fence is built to keep in the cows which we are now no longer keeping, therefore I'm comfortable tearing down the fence." That is often the case with my empathetic judgments. If I can tell why they're there and I don't endorse the reason then I'm comfortable ignoring them.

Paul: That's a thoughtful response. I'm in favor of it. I'm not radical in a sense that ... I know people who like Jonathan Haidt who are more pluralists. They argue there's all sorts of moral foundations. Some more utilitarian, but some based on concerns about authority and purity. What he advises is sort of caution and humility in that, just because you have this moral intuition that doesn't jive well with a utilitarian calculus, you should be very cautious before discarding it.

Julia: Right.

Paul: That in part is because maybe we should be more pluralist, or in part maybe this weird moral principle you have hanging around serves utilitarian and you can't see it.

Julia: Right. Exactly. Yeah, your system two logic can be flawed. Our reasoning is not always perfect.

Paul: Right. In some way, I think you have to go forward on this on a case-by-case level. I would confidently reject disgust, in that there, going back to the fence, we know why disgust is there. Disgust is there for pathogens, and all sorts of things, and the fact that it extends to our sexual morality is just an ugly glitch in the system.

Julia: Right.

Paul: Empathy, I would more cautiously put aside, but when it comes to something like the particular sentiments we feel towards our family, there, I'm a lot less willing to throw them aside in favor of utilitarianism.

Julia: Right. I like the spectrum you've sketched out there.

Paul: It's a case by case thing.

Also, I've been thinking a bit about Cecil the lion. And I think Cecil the lion is this case where this dentist hunted and killed the beloved lion and now, he's being persecuted. Plainly, he did something wrong, he broke the laws, but the amount of the affection people have towards the lion, I find disturbing. I think that's an incredibly out-of-whack moral compass. I said this to somebody and I do not think that this is mistaken, that the dentist – that there are far more people who were enraged by the guy killing this African lion than there would have been if he killed an actual African.

Julia: Yeah, it's fascinating. It's also kind of an inverse, a mirror image, of the case of giving money to a child beggar and inadvertently thereby making the problem worse. By paying money for the right to kill Cecil the lion, the dentist was

actually causing a lot of good in terms of conservation. Which his critics were not. But he was doing a very intuitively horrible thing.

Paul: That's right. In those cases, I just think we need to step back and accept the fact that our intuitions may be mistaken. Social media is not a mechanism designed to enforce contemplation and caution.

Julia: Careful reflective equilibrium, right.

Paul: That's right.

Julia: We're actually over time, so that's probably a decent note in which to wrap up this section of the conversation. I will move us along now to the Rationally Speaking picks.

[musical interlude]

Julia: Welcome back. Every episode on Rationally Speaking, we invite our guest to introduce the Rationally Speaking pick of the episode. A book, website, movie or whatever else tickles his or her rational fancy. Paul, what's your pick for today's episode?

Paul: I have three quick picks.

One is a blog by Freddie deBoer, D-E-B-O-E-R, which is a fascinating blog, on intellectual affairs, political things. My sense is that all sorts of people read it. It has a huge influence but it deserves a bigger influence.

Second pick, a friend of mine, Matt Polly, is a guy who's a wonderful writer and he has a wonderful book called Tapped Out. Which is his experience as a normal journalist, somewhat out of shape guy, becoming a mixed martial artist. His next book is on Bruce Lee and he just writes like a dream.

Third pick, which relates to our discussion of empathy, is season three of the TV show Hannibal. Season two got so grotesque, I stopped watching it, but season three is just amazing. The whole show is filled with monsters and serial killers and psychiatrists...

Two episodes ago, one of the psychiatrists -- who was also a murderer played by the woman who played Scully in The X-Files -- turned to the main character and said very carefully, "Great acts of cruelty require an immense capacity for empathy."

Julia: No wonder you love the show. I couldn't have crafted a more perfect scene for you if I'd tried. That's a wonderfully diverse range of picks, much more so than the norm.

... Paul, thank you so much for joining us!

This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.