

## Why Empathy is not the Best Basis for Humanitarianism

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Centre for  
**Global  
Cooperation  
Research**

**Fritz Breithaupt**

# **Why Empathy is not the Best Basis for Humanitarianism**

**With commentaries by Frank Adloff and  
Christine Unrau**

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*Fritz Breithaupt*

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## Abstract

The paper challenges the assumption that empathy is the key source of humanitarianism. It begins by asking what underlies the perception of empathy as one of the chief motors of humanitarian aid. This leads to an examination of the 'scene of empathy'—which in turn sheds light on some of the more problematic aspects of empathy. Three of these problematic aspects and their importance for humanitarian aid are discussed, namely (temporary) self-loss, a tendency to radicalize conflicts and the danger of sadism. In conclusion, the author asks in how far humanitarianism can be decoupled from empathy and proposes an alternative approach. This alternative approach revolves around the development of a common we-identity which does not depend on empathy.

## Keywords

*Humanitarianism, empathy, narrative, self-loss, conflict, sadism, we-identity*

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# Why Empathy is not the Best Basis for Humanitarianism<sup>1</sup>

Fritz Breithaupt

Most people today assume that empathy is a key source—perhaps *the* key source—of humanitarianism. The logic appears straightforward: we see the suffering of others and we feel for them; because we feel for them, we intervene. In what follows here, we<sup>2</sup> will challenge this oversimplified thinking and highlight the darker sides of empathy.

Historically speaking, there is indeed some justification for ascribing the rise of humanitarianism to empathy. The key condition for the latter's emergence was the extension of fellow-feeling beyond one's immediate circle—a development which, so Lynn Hunt argues, was fostered in part by the spread of the novel as a new literary form: 'Eighteenth-century readers, like people before them, empathized with those close to them and with those most obviously like them—their immediate families, their relatives, the people of the parish, in general their customary equals. But eighteenth-century people [also] had to learn to empathize across more broadly defined boundaries.'<sup>3</sup> Thomas Laqueur (2009: 38) makes a similar point, arguing that at some stage in the late eighteenth century 'the ethical subject was democratized. More and more people came to believe it was their obligation to ... prevent wrongdoing to others; more and more people were seen as eligible to be members of the "circles of the we".'<sup>4</sup> But does this historical evolution imply that empathy is the best basis—or even a desirable basis—for humanitarianism?

In tackling this question, we will begin by asking what underlies the perception of empathy as one of the chief motors of humanitarian aid. This will involve us in an examination of what one might term the 'scene of empathy' (I)—which, so it turns out, sheds light on some of the more problematic aspects of empathy. We will then

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<sup>1</sup> This paper owes much to the inspiring discussions that took place at the conference on 'Humanitarianism and Changing Cultures of Cooperation' organized jointly by the Centre for Global Cooperation Research and the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen in June 2014. In particular I would like to thank Frank Adloff, Dennis Dijkzeul, Volker Heins, and Christine Unrau for their stimulating comments and ideas. I am also indebted to Sarah Whaley and Eleanor Brower for their critical and thoughtful readings and to Margaret Clarke for a most thorough editing of the text.

<sup>2</sup> At the risk of irritating some readers—who may see it as somewhat manipulative and pretentious—I have opted for a 'we' narrative throughout the present text. This is more than just an attempt at conventional geniality: it is intended to highlight the fact that author and reader, though they may disagree at times, are treading the same intellectual path. Cf. below our discussion of the 'we' feeling.

<sup>3</sup> Lynn Hunt (2007: 38) argues that the rise of the novel, a literary form that relies heavily on empathy for its impact, accelerated the 'invention' of human rights during the eighteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> See also Nussbaum 2010.

turn to the darker sides of empathy and the major problems that arise when it is linked to humanitarian aid (II). Drawing all this together, we will conclude by asking whether humanitarian aid should be decoupled from empathy. Our answer will be yes and we shall follow this up with a proposal for an alternative approach (III).

Some readers may be wanting to call a halt here and question the notion that empathy is not a positive force in humanitarianism. After all, both the media and the general public seem to see it as the remedy to every social ill; and the list of benefits we expect of it—which includes a more peaceful world—is a lengthy one. Steven Pinker (2011) cites empathy as one of the four ‘better angels of our nature’; and, in line with the expectation that greater empathy will lead to greater justice, Barack Obama has called for a more empathetic approach from the judiciary and has in general repeatedly lamented the ‘empathy deficit’ of the present age. So what could the downsides of empathy be?

## I The ‘scene of empathy’

When we consider empathy in the context of humanitarian aid, there are two factors in particular which we should take into account. The first is temporal change. It seems that people are generally more willing to empathize when the object of their empathy undergoes change rather than ‘stagnating’. This appears to be the case with fiction and film, where a sequence of events (past and future) draws us in.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, there is evidence that we have more empathy with the acutely ill than with those suffering from chronic conditions.<sup>6</sup> This preference for change comes at a cost. What happens when we empathize with someone in a humanitarian context but their situation does not change? We, as empathizers, will be frustrated. The lack of change may mean we cannot withdraw, either physically or mentally, and, in the worst case, we may vent our frustration on the ‘empathizee’, feeling an urge to punish them for trapping us in their world.<sup>7</sup>

A second important factor is what might be termed the ‘scene of empathy’. A seemingly simple question will highlight what is involved here: When we empathize, is the object of our empathy the victim or the (real or imaginary) helper? We might reasonably assume that we are feeling the pain of the victim and that it is this empathetic engagement that triggers humanitarian action. But this is an oversimplification and in what follows here we will suggest that what we empathize with is not just the victim but the entire *scene of empathetic engagement*—including the helper.

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<sup>5</sup> On triggers to empathy, and literary techniques to enhance it, see Keen 2007.

<sup>6</sup> One possible explanation of this phenomenon is that a temporal development allows the empathizer to end their empathetic engagement. Because empathy can become a burden, a change that allows a return to oneself may be quite welcome.

<sup>7</sup> It may well be that emphasis on change is a peculiarly Western phenomenon, related to the core Enlightenment ideas of progress and *Bildung* (educational and cultural formation and development).

Based on these two factors—temporal change and the scene of empathy—a simple heuristic model for explaining the workings of humanitarian empathy might involve the following steps:

1. What triggers empathy in the humanitarian context is the perception that another person is in distress or at risk. It is not necessary for these things actually to be true: the distress or risk only have to exist in the mind of the observer (see Vermeule 2009).
2. From the observer's standpoint, the perception of distress or risk prompts the mental unfolding of a temporal or narrative sequence leading up to the negative situation. This prehistory typically also involves a degree of innocence on the part of the suffering person.
3. Once the prehistory to the negative situation has been unfurled, the observer is in a position to imagine a future state of affairs in which things have improved.

This temporalization (the process of envisaging the other person undergoing a change—see Fig. 1) seems to be a powerful trigger in getting an observer involved in another's fate.

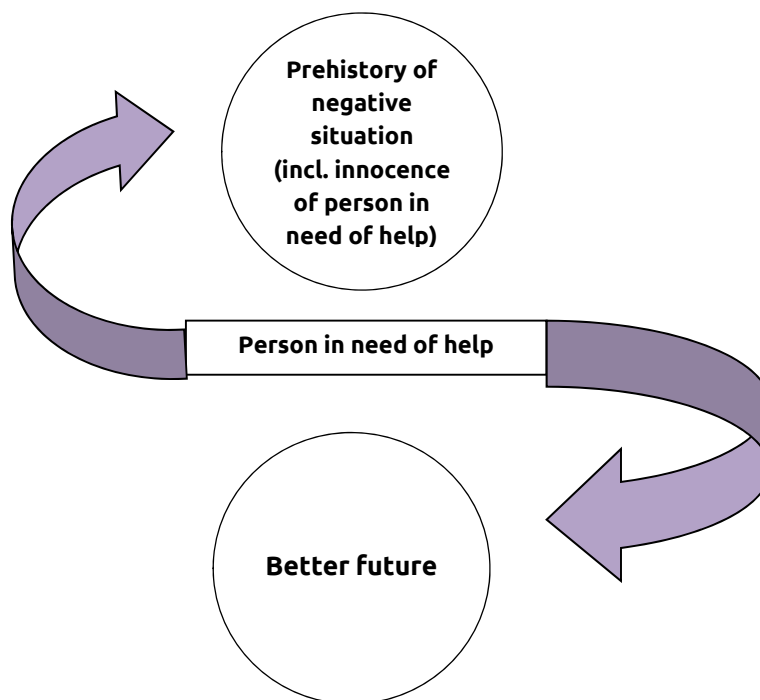


FIGURE 1. Temporalization of a suffering person's situation

4. Importantly, the observer does not envisage the better future coming about on its own: in order to make it happen, he or she mentally introduces a second person into the scenario (Fig. 2).



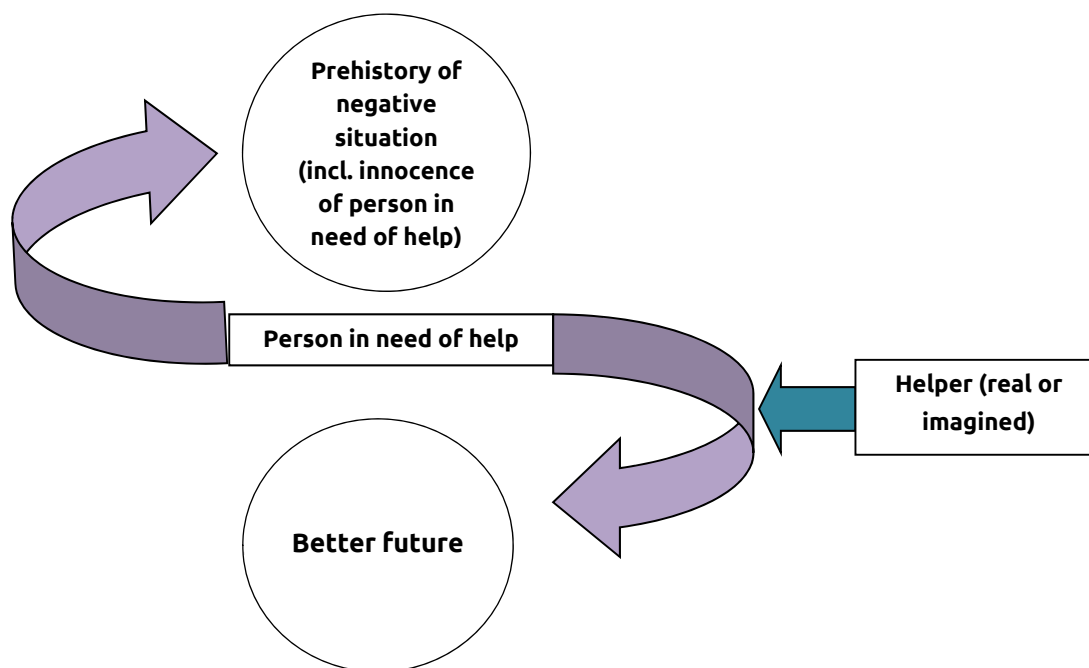


FIGURE 2. The scene of empathy

This model helps clarify what we mean when we say we empathize (“feel with”) a person in need. It points up the fact that a more complex cognitive process is at work than mere mimicry of emotions: empathy in this situation involves viewing the scene from several standpoints and envisaging at least the possibility of temporal change.<sup>8</sup> What we are suggesting, therefore, is that the narratives we construct (and favour) in humanitarian dealings entail a minimum of two perspectives—that of the person in need and that of the helper. Spotlighting an innocent sufferer is insufficient to prompt humanitarian action: the addition of the potential for change and thus of hope is generally also required. A humanitarian helper—even if only imaginary—therefore has to be introduced into the scene as a means of activating the anticipated process.

The presence of a third person—observing and *recognizing* the good deeds of the helper—may also be implied (Fig. 3). This third person may simply be a second-order observer or may be a product of the empathizer’s desire that the good deed in question be recognized.

<sup>8</sup> I can quite imagine that at this point philosophically minded readers will want to argue that account must also be taken of sufferers for whom there is no prospect of change and that we can—indeed should—empathize with such persons. Whilst I agree that we should empathize them, I doubt that we can do it without envisaging a better state for them, and that is what I mean by temporalization (past and future).

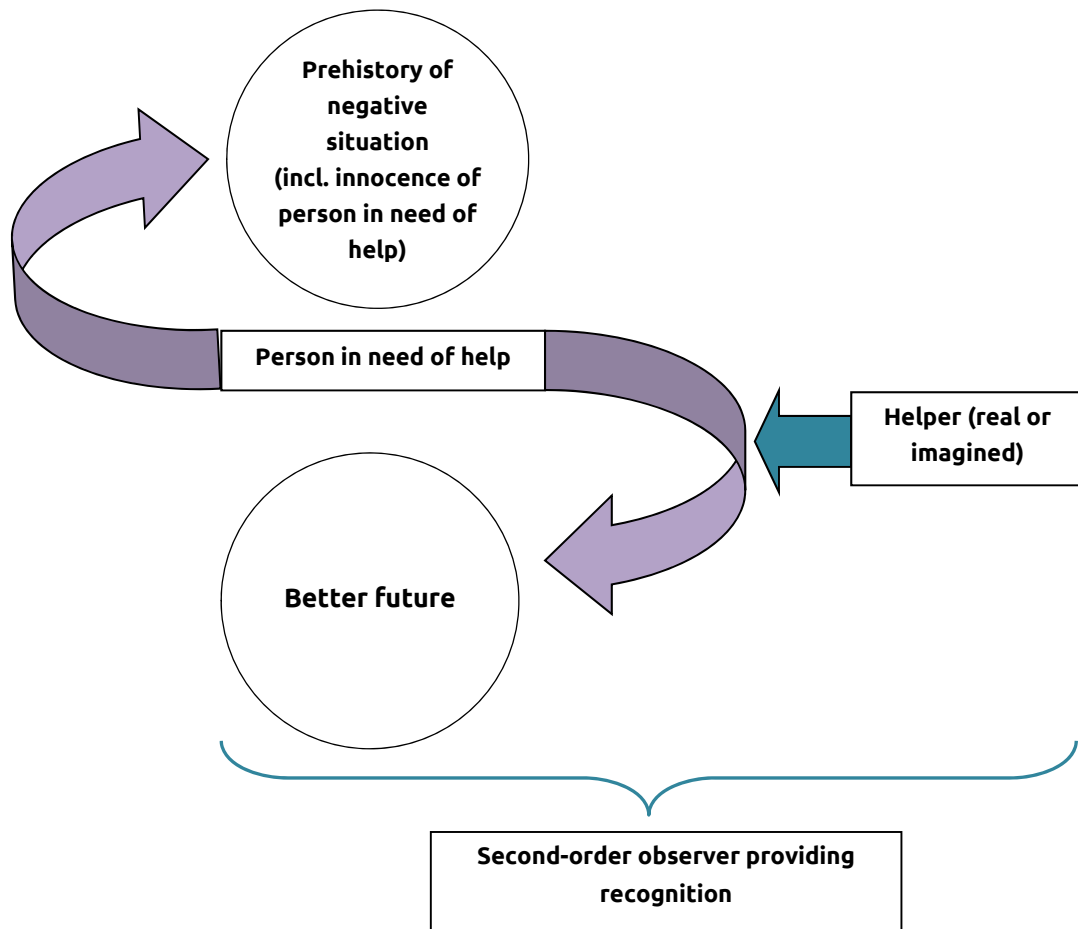


FIGURE 3. Scene of empathy with second-order observer

The majority of personal accounts and narratives relating to humanitarian activity appear to be based on a victim–helper scenario of this kind that enables the ‘audience’ to empathize with the recipient of the help. Even where situations are encountered in which no helper is present, the existence of the latter is implied as a missing element to be supplied by the audience. An example (albeit problematic<sup>9</sup>) of an envisaged helper made manifest is the figure of Oskar Schindler in Steven Spielberg’s eponymous film. Where a helper is ‘given’ like this, the audience can simply identify with them. Although humanitarian endeavour no doubt draws strength from narratives involving a manifest helper of this kind, it is probably rendered even more powerful (though remaining problematic) by the *absence* of such a figure and *the need to imagine them*.

<sup>9</sup> One of the problems, of course, is that we empathize not so much with the Jewish victims as with the alcoholic German industrialist who discovers his compassionate side. The horrors of the Holocaust are imagined from a distance and projected as preventable by individual action; and the whole barbaric enterprise is personified in a psychopathic high-ranking Nazi officer rather than in a seemingly harmless bureaucrat. The most ‘moving’ scene is arguably the one in which Schindler sheds a tear over his failure to do more—and then climbs aboard his luxury German automobile. Emblematic of the critical stance towards the film is its re-labelling as ‘Holocaust Park’. For a range of critical stances, see Loshitzky 1997.

The core narrative of humanitarian empathy thus involves: a victim (or group of victims) in need of help; a temporal trajectory that extends backwards to account for the suffering and forwards to envisage the outcome of intervention; and the presence of at least two personages—the victim and the (real or imaginary) helper.

The trajectory prior to the negative situation is typically described in terms of events (famine, war, injury, and so on) and the future is depicted as likely to be bleak unless something is done—in other words, unless someone currently absent but urgently needed intervenes. The empathetic impetus ultimately derives from this trajectory: because we feel for (empathize with) the person in need, we identify with the helper and feel we should take on their role and bring about change in the situation. Empathy with the person in need prompts identification with the imagined helper, the strong one. And empathy is possible because there is hope of change. There is a cyclical dynamic at work here, in which each element (feeling for someone, seeing the possibility of change, casting oneself in the role of the helper) can trigger the others.

What could possibly be wrong with this picture?

## II The three dark sides of empathy

Every instance of empathy is undoubtedly different from the next and is embedded in culturally specific modes of behaviour and learning. None the less, empathy has three dark sides that are structurally tied into the ‘scene of empathy’ as described above. Although the following account focuses on one of these darker aspects in particular (no. 3 below), the other two, as I will briefly explain, also involve dynamics that are problematic when it comes to humanitarian aid.

1. Empathy’s first dark side is (temporary) **self-loss**. Leaving aside the tricky question of how selfhood should be defined, what we are essentially talking about here is a situation in which our empathy causes us to inhabit someone else’s skin to such an extent that we relinquish our self-focus and self-interest. Although we do not (unless suffering from some psychosis) actually forget that we are not identical with the other, we may think or act as if their interests were ours. Stockholm syndrome, where a hostage ‘empathizes’ or ‘identifies’ with the hostage-taker, is an extreme example of this phenomenon, but all forms of empathy entail at least the risk of such self-loss.<sup>10</sup>

Here again, readers may be wanting to call a halt and ask whether this alleged ‘self-loss’ is in fact such a bad thing. It may actually be a precondition for something wonderful, namely our capacity to participate in the life of others: our lives are richer because we relate. This may be so, but negotiating our own position becomes complicated when we start viewing and experiencing the world from someone else’s perspective. A basic example of this in the humanitarian context is the habit which empathizers have of not only feeling the suffering of the victim but also adopting the latter’s perspective. This may entail condemning ‘the enemy’, so that an aid-worker empathizing with a group

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<sup>10</sup> On empathy and Stockholm syndrome, see Breithaupt 2009: 89–114.

of victims can easily end up adopting the group's negative sentiments towards another group who may or may not be in some way responsible for the first group's plight.

Self-loss also leads to a 'dilution' of the empathizer. Anyone who routinely adopts the standpoint of others and experiences the world from their point of view may find it increasingly difficult to make a stand of any kind—including against the circumstances that have led to the need for help.<sup>11</sup>

2. A second dark side of empathy is its **tendency to radicalize conflict**. It is commonly assumed that empathy eases friction: if both sides can see the situation through each other's eyes and empathize with one another, it seems reasonable to assume that the conflict will abate and compromise will be possible. In fact, this may not be the case, or it may be the case but be only part of the story.

There may be another dynamic at work in which empathy is associated with side-taking. When empathy arises, it is often in relation to social scenarios involving more than one 'other', yet most of the relevant theories envisage empathy as an intimate relationship between just two people—the observer and the observed. If we consider empathy as something more social in nature, we can envisage a pattern involving three personages—the observer and two parties who are involved in a (frequently conflictual) situation (cf. Breithaupt 2012: 84–91). In such cases, observers tend to take sides—and to do so rather quickly<sup>12</sup>—which in turn may cause them to assume their favoured side's perspective. Once the observer shares the experiences and viewpoints of one side and not the other, empathy with that side ensues. Having become part of the dynamic, this empathy may radicalize the conflict by reinforcing the initial rapid side-taking and thus making the situation appear more 'black and white' than it actually is.

Where both parties to a conflict feel they hold the moral high ground and focus attention on their own distress, empathy becomes part of the problem rather than part of the solution. As I write these lines, hostilities between Hamas and Israel are escalating, with no solution in sight and only the prospect of a long-term accretion of violence. Certainly, there are many who empathize with those caught up in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but they tend to do so with only one side or the other.

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<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche draws an interesting conclusion here. He suggests that empathizers, being unable to take a stand, lack personality and that others therefore cannot empathize with them. He suggests (if I read his point correctly) that one can only empathize with others if one does not judge them (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §207). On this view, a culture of humanitarianism based on empathy would entail the empathizers being unable to evaluate, judge, or condemn the circumstances that create the need for humanitarian intervention. Furthermore, humanitarian helpers would, by default, be unable to distinguish clearly between perpetrators and sufferers and hence would not necessarily favour the party actually in need. Thus helpers would not earn respect from others, and no empathy either.

<sup>12</sup> On the human tendency to make quick judgements, see Todorov et.al. 2009 and Porter / ten Brinke 2009.

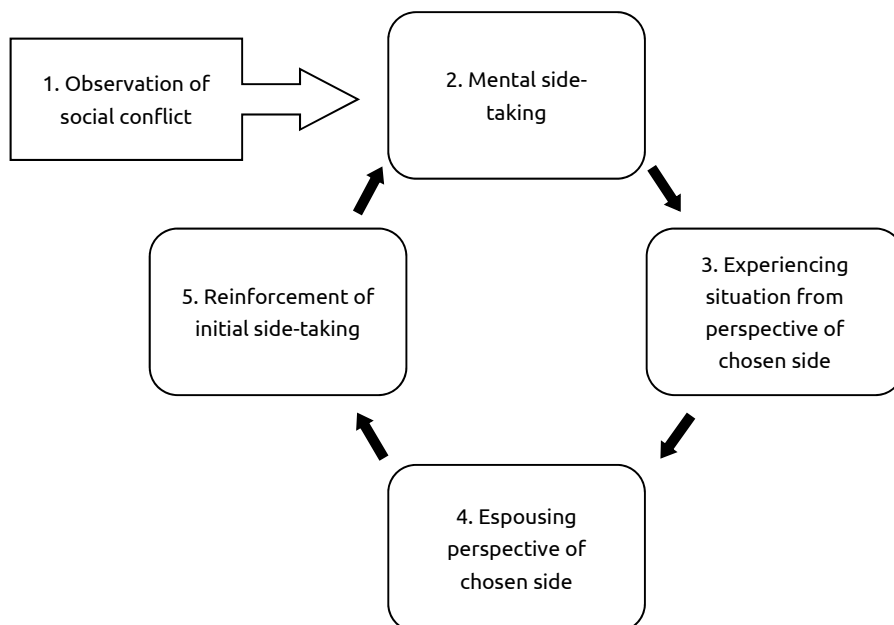


FIGURE 4. Empathy and the bias-reinforcement cycle

There are undoubtedly advantages to the ‘black-and-white’ dynamic: life is made simpler for us, since it relieves us of the need to empathize with ‘the wrongdoers’ or ‘the other side’; it may also result in large numbers of bystanders agreeing about which are the ‘good guys’ and which the ‘bad’, about who is ‘cool’ and who not, about ‘us’ and ‘them’.<sup>13</sup> But this dynamic clearly also has a darker side, particularly in the humanitarian context: by reinforcing the rapid initial side-taking it may deepen divisions. By way of example: where a judge, jury, or member of the public are coming to a view in a court of law, empathy may serve to corroborate first impressions and these may be founded on racial or other stereotypes. The party better able to elicit empathy is not necessarily the party with the better cause, yet it is those who come across as the most in need who generally secure help and—specifically in the humanitarian context—this may prompt a ‘victimhood contest’.

3. The third dark side of empathy I wish to highlight has to do with the **vicarious pleasure we may derive from the pain or misfortune of others**—a paradoxical sentiment we might call ‘**sadistic empathy**’. What this reveals about us as empathizers is not so much our malevolence as our tendency to focus on ourselves.<sup>14</sup>

One powerful motivator of empathy is anticipation of the other’s feelings, and the more clear-cut the situation, the more readily this occurs. Situations

<sup>13</sup> On the dynamics of bystander-agreement, see Robert Kurzban and his colleagues (Kurzban et. al. 2007 and DeScioli / Kurzban 2009).

<sup>14</sup> This form of empathy is not confined to individuals with aberrant psychological dispositions: it is an everyday phenomenon. We are highly social beings, but our pro-sociality often flips over into competition. More precisely: our cooperation is always accompanied by competitiveness. Thus, if we see a friend suffer, we feel for them, but we may often also derive a degree of pleasure from their misfortune—or we may feel for them precisely because they are less of a threat in that moment of adversity.

involving suffering tend to be especially readable or 'aesthetic', and the resultant ease with which we anticipate the other person's feelings, paradoxically, brings with it a degree of pleasure. In most other everyday situations, where suffering is not involved, we may not know what others feel or think and we do not attempt to find out. Hence, suffering can serve as an empathy enabler—and can therefore appear desirable.

Anticipation can also apply to positive states. When I give a gift to someone, I imagine the joy of the receiver. As an aid worker, I may well imagine the happiness of the one I help. The figure of the helper, real or imagined, makes empathy possible *and at the same time* frequently turns empathy into a self-focused affair for the empathizer.

The gift-giving example points up another aspect of this empathetic sadism: manipulation. The person who anticipates the other's feelings can also create the situation that evokes them. Manipulative empathizers engineer the circumstances that allow them to anticipate the other person's feelings. This is where true sadism may occur: sadists may either hurt another person directly or lead them into situations in which they will suffer harm. Empathic sadists are committing violence *in order to feel empathy*, or at least in order to understand how the other person feels.

Acts of sadism can be a perverse way of simulating empathy. Empathy (and indeed remorse) cannot be viewed as a mitigating factor in relation to violent crimes such as torture, rape, and abduction. Instead, it should be seen as a potential cause. Sadists may suffer a deficiency of empathy, but this need not be the case.<sup>15</sup> They may also use sadistic acts or fantasies to heighten their experience of empathy. Extreme situations are ideal for gaining an understanding of what others are feeling and co-experiencing their pain. Sadistic empathy highlights the self-focus involved in empathy in general.

There is an obvious link here to humanitarianism. Clearly, I do not want to suggest that people involved in humanitarian work seek to inflict pain and suffering on others. However, there is a potential danger here associated with the pleasure that is to be derived from knowing the pain of others. As long as there is pain and suffering, the helper is needed, affirmed. The helper is born out of the other's needs. The helper also understands the other, can 'feel their pain'. Paradoxically, because the helper derives knowledge, a sense of self-importance, and indeed a degree of pleasure from the suffering, he or she may actually be inclined to reinforce it. Empathy becomes a vehicle through which the aid-worker is affirmed in their role—not just morally, in their good deeds, but also emotionally, by making them feel good about their acts of empathy.

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<sup>15</sup> What I say here probably does not apply to psychopaths, who do not seem to compensate for their empathy deficiencies. See the various studies by Kent A. Kiehl, including his very readable book *The Psychopath Whisperer: The Science of those without Conscience* (Kiehl 2014).

### III A modest proposal for humanitarianism without empathy

Some readers may consider that, whilst these dark sides of empathy are indeed problematic, they are not widespread. They may hold that empathy remains the ultimate motivation for humanitarian work and that this should not change. They may fear that without it, many humanitarian activities would never be undertaken. If anything, these readers may consider that humanitarianism's worst enemy is not empathy itself but the callousness or empathy-fatigue experienced by so many in the field and so often claimed to be induced by the media's emphasis on human suffering. Others, whilst accepting that human motivation often takes peculiar and irrational forms, will point to outcomes: empathy appears to do more good than harm.

From a historical point of view, I can agree with both of these positions. It is probably true that empathy has done more good than harm. There is no doubt that the long eighteenth century's discovery of 'sympathy' (David Hume and Adam Smith's approximate equivalent to our 'empathy') played a major role in the evolution of the human rights movement.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, therefore, we all need to be aware of the importance of empathy in exercising our humanity. Notwithstanding this, I should like to enter a modest plea for the removal of empathy from the aid and intervention equation. Empathy is something felt by the empathizer; it is often focused on the self rather than the other; and it frequently ends up creating narratives about the empathizer rather than about the empathizee. Empathy is the big 'I' that feels your pain. It is not the villain of my story, but it is not the hero either.

What I propose is that rather than focusing on empathy, we should turn our attention to the 'we' feeling and its impressive qualities. Once we see other people as part of the 'we', it becomes clear that our sense of fairness, justice, and wellbeing also applies, without exception, to them. There is a 'call of duty' involved here as well: when 'we' or a part of the 'we' is in need, we are required to respond. This sense of obligation is almost entirely absent in empathy. Again, the 'we' has no interest in belittling or glorifying either the giver or the receiver of help. As part of the 'we', we expect no recognition or praise for our intervention—such action comes naturally.

Of course the 'we' can also be abused. My use of the term in the present article may sometimes bring with it echoes of the 'royal we', with its presumption of speaking on behalf of others (see fn. 2). But anyone who is part of the 'we' has the right to make their voice heard.

When it comes to enhancing cooperation, the distinction between empathy and the 'we feeling' goes beyond mere philosophical hair-splitting: these two options each lead to different sets of priorities, practices, expectations, and goals. Aid-workers and activists wishing to promote humanitarianism via empathy will focus

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<sup>16</sup> Hunt 2007; Laqueur 2009. That said, the alternative account offered by Seyla Benhabib (2011), in which the development of human rights is traced through constitutionality and cosmopolitanism, is one that should not be neglected.

on the plight of those in need and will create a narrative of possible change in which emotions akin to pity will feature prominently. Empathy is a mode of engaged observation. Its aim is to bring about a change in a situation of suffering. Once this aim is achieved, the empathetic helper can withdraw. By contrast, if the focus is on the 'we' feeling, the key aspect will be participation. If 'we' are in need of help, then 'we' must all understand the situation and work together. There may be a division of labour in critical situations, but the understanding is that all sides 'do' something and the credit goes to everyone. There is generally no end to a 'we' relationship—enduring hospitality is one of its many markers.

In sum: one can agree on the need for humanitarian aid without assuming empathy on the part of either the leaders or the individual field-workers of humanitarian organizations.

As previously mentioned, empathy may involve a variety of biases. Although it can help overcome in-group/out-group preference and lead to a sense of 'we', it can also help create new biases that lead to those in need being 'over-victimized' or lionized. Establishing commonality, sharing experiences, acting together, discovering the 'we'—all this creates the basis for humanitarian action without the need to claim overwhelming and restrictive similarity. Empathy may or may not play a part in this.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Notwithstanding all that has been said here, empathy remains a key human characteristic and undoubtedly helps shape us as people (see Tomasello 1999; Preston / de Waal 2002). Unlike Jesse Prinz (2011), who reduces empathy to shared feeling and thereby banishes its more intellectual component—namely, *understanding* both the feelings *and* the situation of others—I do not reject empathy on the grounds that it is overly emotional or irrational.



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# Sympathy or Solidarity? The Material and Cultural Embeddedness of Empathy: A Response to Fritz Breithaupt

Frank Adloff

Fritz Breithaupt presents us with an asymmetric notion of empathy and rightly stresses the darker sides that are undoubtedly also a feature of this human faculty. His essay is, in addition, full of stimulating and extremely interesting insights which I am unable to examine more closely here. None the less, I believe that a number of the aspects he mentions could be elaborated in even greater detail. The models he proposes, for example, should be formulated in a more context-sensitive way. Again, there are certain passages in the text where I find myself wrestling with his terminology and I believe a number of the points he makes could be defined more clearly. Finally, we have to ask what Breithaupt means when he says that although empathy has, historically speaking, helped motivate humanitarian action, it does not provide 'the best basis' for it.

Let us begin with Breithaupt's core model: the scene of empathy. The model is an innovative one and in my view incorporates a number of important insights. The main one, for Breithaupt, is the idea that empathy follows a trajectory, in other words undergoes change with time. But this process can actually be spelled out even more precisely: media-brokered humanitarian help follows a very specific dramatic course—what amounts, in fact, to an emotional schedule, a ritual sequence of events.

Humanitarianism is based on social bonds, empathy, and identification. The process of identification can be construed broadly along the lines of George Herbert Mead's influential model featuring, on the one hand, role-taking, and, on the other, ability to sympathize with others (Mead 1934). The question arises as to whether emotional comprehension and concurrence are necessary, or at least helpful, as preliminaries to role-taking, in other words empathy. Empathy is not purely cognitive: we can share and empathize with another's emotional state or we can react emotionally to the emotions we perceive in another (Bischof-Köhler 2012). Thus empathy can result either in sympathy or, where the suffering perceived in the other is unpleasant and frightening, in a situation of personal stress (Davis 2006).

When empathy finds expression as sympathy, it can trigger action. It does this according to specific temporal sequences based on specific 'feeling rules' (Schmitt and Clark 2006). According to Western feeling rules (as Breithaupt correctly points out), not everyone is eligible for sympathy: the ideal recipient is a victim of misfortune, not themselves responsible for the suffering in question. Individuals who are especially vulnerable—children, for example—garner particular sympathy from us and are seen as particularly deserving of our compassion (van Oorschot 2006). Thus, more people feel sympathy for AIDS-infected children than for their

parents. Sympathy-entrepreneurs such as aid organizations use mass media to let the public know who merits sympathy; and trusted sympathy-brokers such as prominent public figures help to enhance this picture of deservingness.

The socio-emotional 'gift economy' is seen as being a two-way street: the general expectation is that a display of sympathy or a show of support will be rewarded with at least an expression of gratitude. If the help required involves too great an effort, turns out to be futile, or elicits no appreciation, the urge to sympathy quickly fades. Similarly, an overly bald assumption that help will be provided can obstruct the voluntary transfer of sympathy by the giver and instead elicit negative reactions.<sup>1</sup>

One key motive for human action is the desire to protect and affirm one's own identity (Turner 1987). The chief goals here are to maintain ontological security and deflect anxiety. Where these goals are achieved, interaction elicits positive emotions; where they are not, feelings such as fear, guilt, shame, and anger arise. By refusing to help, or by acting immorally, we put our own moral identity at risk. The resultant feelings of guilt and shame are particularly painful. We dissolve them either through morally good actions or by fending them off using various defence-mechanisms. Guilt does not of itself preclude sympathy or role-taking or helpful action (Turner and Stets 2006), but once it reaches a certain level, defence mechanisms are likely to come into play. Projection, displacement, and attribution are common examples of such responses. Sociologically speaking, the most important mechanism of this kind is negative attribution—that is to say, the externalization of negative emotions onto other social or cultural groups (thus precluding the giving of help). A specific example of this would be viewing the victim of an accident as being to blame for it.

The processes by which charitable giving and the provision of humanitarian aid take place point to the highly complex structure of emotions and cultural 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 1979) that regulates, and thus facilitates, such actions, or, where there are imbalances, causes them to fail. Feelings of guilt and shame can play a positive role in prompting pro-social forms of action. If such feelings are too strong, however, the action is inhibited. A person begging in the street, for example, may provoke embarrassment, as may an over-emotional appeal for aid or a portrayal in which the victim's situation is too close to home. For help to be prompted, there needs to be sufficient closeness between giver and receiver but also sufficient distance to protect the giver from negative emotions.

Humanitarian help and charitable giving thus tend to occur where 'strong' parties are in a position to help 'weak' ones. Social asymmetrization acts as a bridge spanning the uncertain ground on which helpers find themselves vis-à-vis those seeking help. The perceived differential in status between helper and afflicted forms a solid emotional bridge between them and acts as a powerful spur to assistive action.

One aspect that is far too poorly researched in this connection is the creation of virtual communities—via the television, for example, or on Web 2.0. Such activity

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<sup>1</sup> Conversely, a specific kind of emotional regulation and balancing is required on the part of a recipient of help. Their conflicting experiences of, on the one hand, being helped and valued, and, on the other, suffering humiliation and low status ascription, must be balanced in a way that allows them to continue to accept the help.

generates proto-sociality and establishes an interactional order through which common definitions of problems are worked out (Wenzel and Scholz 2010). This explains the mobilizing effect of television when it comes to disaster-related giving. The giving of support to far-off strangers—victims of famine or disaster, for example—generally only occurs where it has proved possible to establish an emotional and asymmetric social relationship with them. Media portrayals of disasters, for example, create narratives that will translate directly into emotional identification and corresponding support. If there is no asymmetrization and no compassion, and negative feelings predominate instead, the portrayals fail.

In principle, then, Breithaupt is correct when he highlights the limits and asymmetrical nature of empathy and, at the end of his essay, contrasts this with the horizontal bonding of a 'we feeling'. However, I would suggest a different conceptual emphasis here. Empathy should not be viewed as diametrically opposed to the 'we feeling'. It does not seem to me to be intrinsically linked to asymmetry: it is just as much the basis of the horizontally cohesive feeling of solidarity as it is of asymmetrically configured sympathy or compassion.

As indicated previously, adopting the point of view of the other should not be viewed as a purely cognitive process. We initially understand the other primarily through empathy, in other words at an affective level—we have an affective experience of alterity and this opens us up to the other. A distinction must be drawn here between basic empathy and complex or narrative empathy (Hollan 2012; Zahavi 2012). The first is a form of holistic, affective understanding (the immediate apprehension of pain, joy, sorrow, etc.). Only in the case of narrative empathy is there reference to culturally based interpretive frameworks that prompt us to sympathize asymmetrically with specific groups of people—or to block such sympathy (cf. Breithaupt 2009). Where there is a symmetrical starting-position, by contrast, the horizontal bonding of solidarity can come into play. This is because the roles of helper and helped are theoretically reciprocal here: the person receiving the help could one day be the person giving it. The reason that solidarity is such a rare phenomenon in the humanitarian domain is that in the current post-colonial setting resources continue to be unequally divided between global North and South and relations are therefore not configured in ways that would theoretically permit reciprocity. Solidarity—Breithaupt's 'we feeling'—is only possible among equals.

Summing up, then, we can say that empathy forms the basis for humanitarianism in a historico-genetic sense (see also Scheler 1948). Without empathy there can be no humanitarian aid. Empathy is thus necessary, but it is not sufficient: ethics and good reasons cannot be replaced by empathy alone. Furthermore, empathy (meaning affective understanding of the other) can take active effect either as asymmetric sympathy or as symmetric solidarity. Both of these depend partly on socio-structural factors (levels of resources) and partly on cultural feeling rules that determine how help itself, and the relationship between helper and helped, are structured.

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# Twilight of Empathy: A Response to Fritz Breithaupt<sup>1</sup>

Christine Unrau

Fritz Breithaupt challenges the widespread notion of empathy as a wholly positive phenomenon in general and, more particularly, as the basis for humanitarianism. In his critique of the much-cherished, indeed idolized, human capacity for empathy, he prepares the ground for what appears tantamount to a Nietzschean ‘transvaluation of values’—or at least a considerable shift in appraisal. He argues that it is not just the specious manifestation of empathy—for example, in interventions termed ‘humanitarian’ but undertaken for economic or political reasons—but empathy itself that is the problem.

In what follows, I will comment on the three ‘dark sides’ of empathy identified by Breithaupt in his essay, referring also to his book *Kulturen der Empathie* (Breithaupt 2009). I will discuss the implications of these ‘dark sides’ for the relationship between empathy and humanitarianism and then briefly examine the alternative approach which Breithaupt proposes, namely a refocusing on ‘we identity’.

Breithaupt does not define what he means by humanitarianism. My own argument is based on a concept that goes beyond the classic definition of humanitarianism advanced by the International Committee of the Red Cross, which restricts it to the ‘impartial, neutral, and independent provision of relief to victims of conflict and natural disasters’ (Barnett 2011: 10; see also Pictet 1979). I also take into account participants in humanitarian endeavour who, in addition to providing emergency relief, turn their attention to the root causes of suffering (Barnett 2011: 22). In this sense, ‘humanitarianism’ denotes the whole set of ideas and practices aimed at the morally motivated protection of the life and health of vulnerable populations across borders.

## Empathy and side-taking

The model underlying Breithaupt’s argument is the ‘scene of empathy’, an idea based on narrative theory and findings from cognitive science. It attempts to shed light on the crucial and puzzling question: ‘Why do we feel empathy when we do?’ The answer that emerges here is somewhat troubling, since it suggests that the triggers for empathy are not necessarily in line with morality and are therefore not always the best guides when it comes to action. This finding leads directly to one of

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Fritz Breithaupt, Frank Adloff and the participants of the conference ‘Humanitarianism and Changing Cultures of Cooperation’ in June 2014 for an inspiring discussion, Volker Heins and Andreas Kamp for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this text, and Margaret Clarke for her thorough editing.

the 'dark sides' of empathy: its potential to encourage unthinking side-taking and thereby to radicalize conflicts.

The thesis about 'narrative empathy' which Breithaupt expounds in detail elsewhere (Breithaupt 2009: 11) is based on the assumption that we understand others by engaging them in fragments of narration—in other words, by mentally bridging the gap between two events that are not necessarily linked to one another. By working out or imagining the other's possibilities for action, the observer comes to see the world through that other person's eyes (ibid. 10). Conversely, where this process of narration/understanding is absent—in 'stagnant' or unexpected situations where there is no 'before' or 'after' amenable to narrative bridging—empathy does not occur. Hence, if someone 'just suffers', without our knowing what is going on, our empathy will clearly be less than in situations where we can imagine both the story that led to the person's plight and the (better) times that lie ahead (ibid. 11).

This identification of temporality and the potential narrative sequencing of events as prerequisites for empathy is in itself an important insight. In terms of humanitarianism, it serves as a crucial reminder that empathy is not a reliable detector of urgency. Thus humanitarian crises that are in some sense 'stagnating'—the ongoing problem of AIDS and the plight of generations of refugees trapped in permanent camps are cases in point—receive far less attention and attract far less donor-support than natural disasters.

Fritz Breithaupt, however, goes one step further, or should I say back, by asking exactly what triggers narration—in other words, the process of inventing possible causes and effects—and thus also empathy. He dismisses primary curiosity as a candidate, arguing instead that we start narrating because we have, for whatever reason, *already* taken someone's side. Narration serves to explain, justify, and deepen this spontaneous act of side-taking (ibid. 12). It is a second step in the process. The actual decision to take sides, claims Breithaupt, happens spontaneously and is driven by other mechanisms. This account then serves as the basis for Breithaupt's swingeing criticisms of empathy. Not only, he says, is it problematically selective; it can actually lead to the radicalization of conflict—rather than, as is often assumed, to its alleviation. Since it serves to justify a particular taking of sides, it reinforces this precipitate initial decision and renders any change of perspective unlikely.

The claim that empathy may radicalize rather than alleviate conflict is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's argument about the role of compassion in politics. In the famed second chapter of *On Revolution* (Arendt 1963), she argues that compassion should not be brought into politics, firstly because it is something internal and incommunicable and therefore always open to the suspicion of hypocrisy (ibid. 91–4), and secondly, and most importantly, because of its immediacy and intensity. Since the 'passion of compassion' abolishes the worldly 'inbetween' of the political sphere, it cannot countenance the kind of arguing, convincing, persuading, and compromising that is characteristic of that sphere. According to Arendt, this is why compassion, if it does get brought into that sphere, results in a propensity to direct (in other words, violent) action (ibid. 81 f.).

Of course, humanitarianism is not the same as politics. Nevertheless, as soon as the former extends beyond 'Good Samaritan' face-to-face interaction, there begins to be a lot of overlap between the two (see, for example, Weiss 2014). And again,

compassion is not the same as empathy, but it may be one aspect of it. Given this dual overlap—between humanitarianism and politics and between empathy and compassion—Arendt’s findings on the incompatibility of compassion and politics can also be seen as bolstering the case against empathy as the best basis for humanitarianism.

## **Empathy and sadistic pleasure**

Another pitfall or ‘dark side’ of empathy, as Breithaupt sees it, is its ability to turn into a potentially sadistic form of voyeurism. Since an observer can derive pleasure from the experience of empathy, they may have an interest in maintaining the situation of suffering that induces this empathy in them.

As Breithaupt explains in both essay and book, the existence of a ‘tip-over’ point at which the highly principled empathetic observer turns into a sadistic voyeur is not simply the result of individual propensity to perversion but of structure. In the book, he illustrates this using the example of the well-known character of Effi Briest in the eponymous novel by Theodor Fontane. Effi is constantly misunderstood, brutally misrepresented, and denied any kind of voice. As the reader becomes aware of this, they begin to construct the ‘real’ Effi narratively and thus develop empathy for her. However, it is precisely this constant brutal misrepresentation that gives the reader a point of access into the story and an opportunity to become involved. Paradoxically, therefore, the reader/observer seeks the suffering of the character as a means of participating in the story (Breithaupt 2009: 176, 182 f.).

Breithaupt is right to warn us to be wary of our own empathetic experiences and to ask ourselves whether these experiences are really oriented towards the other. Here again, a parallel with the Arendtian argument is discernible. In Chapter 2 of *On Revolution*, Arendt dismisses pity as a sentiment dependent on, and therefore having an interest in, the suffering of others:

*[W]ithout the presence of misfortune, pity could not exist, and it therefore has just as much vested interest in the existence of the unhappy as thirst for power has a vested interest in the existence of the weak. Moreover, by virtue of being a sentiment, pity can be enjoyed in its own sake, and this will almost automatically lead to a glorification of its cause, which is the suffering of others (Arendt 1963: 84).*

In this case, it is the overlap of empathy and pity that may bolster the case against empathy as a suitable motivational force in humanitarianism.

But action, including humanitarian action, can also serve as a way of avoiding the mutation of empathy into sentimental and potentially sadistic indulgence. It does this by potentially precluding voyeurism: someone who takes action—by organizing relief or working as a doctor in crisis-ridden regions—is less likely to indulge their empathetic concern for others in ways that potentially perpetuate the latter’s suffering.



## Empathy and self-loss

While I generally agree with Fritz Breithaupt on these two ‘dark sides’ of empathy—uncritical side-taking and potential sadistic pleasure—I see greater problems with the third, namely the problem of self-loss. Breithaupt argues that engaging in empathy can lead a person to identify with others to such an extent that they lose their self-focus and self-interest. Moreover, thinks Breithaupt, this can result in such a ‘dilution’ of the person’s personality that they may be unable to ‘make a stand’ and consequently find themselves incapable of condemning the circumstances that led to the need for humanitarian intervention. This thesis is surprising given Breithaupt’s insistence elsewhere in the text on the strong association between empathy and side-taking. In addition, as is clear from a footnote in this part of the paper, the thesis is based on a particular—and problematic—reading of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*, especially §207, which describes the ‘objective man’. In my view, this reference is emblematic of Breithaupt’s argumentation regarding this particular ‘dark side’ and I would therefore like to examine it in some detail. The following is a quotation from the paragraph referred to by Breithaupt:

*The objective man is really a mirror: he is used to subordinating himself in front of anything that wants to be known, without any other pleasure than that of knowing, or ‘mirroring forth’. He waits until something comes along and then spreads himself gently towards it, so that even light footsteps and the passing by of a ghostly being are not lost on his surface and skin. ... If you want him to love or hate (I mean real love and hate as god, woman, or animal would understand the terms) he will do what he can and give what he can. But do not be surprised if it is not much, if this is where he comes across as fake, fragile, questionable, and brittle. His love is forced, his hatred artificial and more like un tour de force, a little piece of vanity and exaggeration. He is sincere only to the extent that he is allowed to be objective: he is ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ only in his cheerful totality. His mirror-like soul is forever smoothing itself out; it does not know how to affirm or negate any more (Nietzsche 2002 [1886]: 98).*

Nietzsche paints a vivid picture of the ‘objective man’. That this man can be equated with the ‘empathetic man’ (or woman) is, however, questionable. For one thing, the ‘objective man’ is incapable of real love or hate and this does not square with the notion of empathy in the sense indicated by its etymology: the term *empathes*, the adjective from which *empathia* is derived and which first appears in the first century CE, meant ‘passionate’ in the general sense (Passow 1847: 891). But even if we take empathy in the more commonly understood sense of ‘the understanding and simulation of the feelings of others’ or the ability to ‘slip into someone else’s skin’ (Breithaupt 2009: 8), its equivalence to Nietzsche’s ‘objectivity’ remains uncertain. In particular, the notion of empathizing with the ‘strong self’ as

opposed to with the weak and vulnerable is somehow counter-intuitive and not borne out by everyday experience.

These doubts as to the equivalence of objective and empathetic man in turn raise questions about the argument (that self and empathy are contradictory) which this passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* is meant to illustrate. Nietzsche's 'objective man' may have no self, but it does not automatically follow that the empathetic person has none either. People can be 'empathetic' in the traditional, intuitive way and in the sense of Breithaupt's 'understanding others' feelings', yet not be 'diluted', nor—in Nietzschean terms—be 'receptive' or have a 'mirror-like soul . . . forever smoothing itself out'. One outstanding example here is Saint Francis of Assisi, arguably one of the most empathetic characters in European history. His fellow feeling for the poor and marginalized caused him to break with family and friends and forgo a life of prosperity. To demonstrate his intentions, he went as far as to strip bare in public, causing quite a scandal. As the founder of a new spiritual movement, he went on to display a radical non-conformism vis-à-vis the religious and political institutions and practices of his day (Boff 1991 [1981]: 161–71). If unconventionality and spontaneity are indicators of the kind of 'self' which Breithaupt (in his interpretation of Nietzsche) regards as incompatible with empathy, Saint Francis is a counter-example to his thesis.

Another counter-example, this time from the realm of humanitarianism and at a more 'aggregated' level, is the organization Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders). Experiences of empathy, particularly during the Biafran crisis, were key in prompting the foundation of the organization in the early seventies (Redfield 2013: 19). In his essay *Le Malheur des autres*, co-founder Bernard Kouchner describes the motivation as follows: 'Where we could not bear the suffering of others, we strove to ease it'.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, this organization, whose main focus is medical humanitarianism, has made *témoignage*—speaking out about the atrocities it witnesses—a core element of its practice (Redfield 2013: 98–102). From this point of view, MSF can be seen as further evidence that empathy and assertiveness need not be mutually exclusive.

This is not to deny that empathy brings with it the *danger* of loss of agency and judgement and that training and control are required here. What is more, this danger exists not only for the empathizer but also for the empathizee. In the humanitarian context in particular, this second form of the danger may be the more dominant one, given that recipients of aid are often treated as passive victims and are denied agency and judgement by the humanitarian empathizer.

### Replacing empathy with a common 'we identity'

Having completed his critique of empathy—and of our idolization of it—Breithaupt outlines an alternative approach based on a common 'we identity'. Besides affording the reader a welcome glimpse of hope in an otherwise rather gloomy quest to find a motive for humanitarianism, this proposed approach indicates, *en passant*, that for Breithaupt humanitarianism, unlike empathy, is worth

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<sup>2</sup> 'Si nous ne supportons pas les souffrances des autres, nous nous efforcions de les atténuer': Kouchner 1991: 12) (author's translation).

championing. The new option is indeed free of many of the shortcomings afflicting empathy, particularly temporal limitation. Here again, there is an implicit parallel with Hannah Arendt's argumentation in *On Revolution*. Having dismissed both compassion and pity as appropriate motive forces in politics, Arendt calls for a return to 'solidarity' as the only one of the three motive forces that 'partakes of reason' and is therefore 'able to comprehend a multitude conceptually, not only the multitude of a class or a nation or a people, but eventually all mankind' (Arendt 1963: 84).

Breithaupt's suggestion that we should turn our attention from suffering to participation is also appealing. It chimes with Didier Fassin's argument about the prevailing 'humanitarian reason', a rationale whereby, as he puts it, 'inequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering, violence is expressed in terms of trauma' (Fassin 2012: 6). According to Fassin, this tendency to focus on suffering rather than on inequality and injustice exerts what he calls a 'salutary power' on us as empathizers because it 'relieves the burden of this unequal world order' (ibid. 252). Focusing on participation rather than suffering, as Breithaupt suggests, may help us avoid this self-therapeutic concern for 'others'.

That said, a more detailed account of Breithaupt's proposal would have been helpful—though I recognize that a full development of his argument was not possible given the editorial constraints. One question left unanswered is how a 'we identity' is to be created—a problem with which generations of political thinkers have grappled and which remains unresolved even in the case of the nation-state. Aristotle, arguing at *polis* level, located the basis of common identity in 'political friendship'; a different approach—developed by Hobbes and famously returned to by John Rawls—envisaged a 'social contract'; others, including Machiavelli and Rousseau, advanced the notion of a form of civil or political religion as a means of fostering a common identity and encouraging citizens to live harmoniously with one another; more recently, thinkers like Martha Nussbaum and Elena Pulcini have turned to emotion as a basis for common identity. All in all, then, the call for a common identity probably raises more questions than it answers. Nonetheless it is a line of thought that merits further investigation.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

In questioning our picture of empathy as one of humanity's 'beacons', Fritz Breithaupt identifies three 'dark sides' of this phenomenon that seem to presage the twilight of empathy. I have argued that the notion underlying the first 'dark side'—namely, that empathy and self-affirmation are incompatible—does not hold up: being empathetic, unlike being 'objective' as Nietzsche defines this, does not preclude being assertive or taking a stand. Breithaupt's other two 'dark sides', by contrast, point to something important: empathy may indeed exacerbate conflict and may indeed tip over into sadistic voyeurism. Questioning the assumption that empathy is a wholly positive and valuable motivator of humanitarianism is

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<sup>3</sup> On experimental research concerning the prerequisites for the development of a common we identity and its importance for global cooperation in general, see also Messner et.al. 2013: 21 f.

therefore an important endeavour and chimes with the warnings articulated by Hannah Arendt and Didier Fassin about bringing compassion and pity into politics and humanitarianism. However, as I have also argued, humanitarianism is not automatically affected by the dark sides of empathy: engaging in humanitarian action may actually help to counter the sadistic tendencies associated with empathetic voyeurism. In addition, the alternative of a 'we identity' leaves many difficult questions unanswered.

In view of these reservations, I would argue that, rather than taking empathy out of the equation altogether, as proposed by Breithaupt, we should make an analytic distinction between different aspects of humanitarianism. In Aristotelian terms, we might say that empathy, though often—and quite rightly—the *efficient cause* of humanitarianism, should not serve as the guiding principle in its *energeia* or enactment.

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