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The Empathy Paradox

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Shand, John (2022). The Empathy Paradox. Daily Philosophy.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://daily-philosophy.com/john-shand-empathy-paradox/>

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Shand, J, The Empathy Paradox. Daily Philosophy, February 2022. <https://daily-philosophy.com/john-shand-empathy-paradox/>

The Empathy Paradox

By John Shand

To be empathetic is to have a good and reliable understanding of how others feel and think. To be unempathetic is to either have a poor and unreliable understanding of how others feel and think, or to be oblivious to their feelings and thoughts. These characteristics manifest themselves in what one says and how one acts towards and treats others.

It is often supposed that greater empathy is a good thing. But this is a mistake, unless one assumes that being empathetic will inevitably bring it about that one treats others better. But there is no logical reason to suppose this. Being empathetic may be a good way to know how to do hurt to someone in respect of their feelings and thoughts more acutely and damagingly. Not being empathetic may result in such hurt too, but that will be because of poor understanding, or lack of awareness, of the feelings and thoughts of others, not through calculated use of good understanding enabling one to better get people where it really hurts.

It could be factually that greater empathy tends to make people shy away from hurting others, as the person doing the hurting will know what is being done with acuity, but this need not necessarily so. Being empathetic is a factual not a normative matter, and it may be a better way of being cruel to someone than simply being incomprehendingly insensitive or oblivious to their feelings and thoughts. This aside however is not the central focus this paper, though it is a background which it is beneficial to hold in mind.

It certainly is not the case that in order to be empathetic one has to *know* that one is empathetic. Many people are regarded, indeed vaunted, as empathetic 'by nature' or 'intuitively', with little or no reflection involved or cultivation of it. They have an innate talent for it. Some people, on the other hand think they are empathetic, even think it is quality they have to a special degree and more than more than others. This goes back to empathy, other things being equal, being regarded as a good thing, and thus people are motivated to claim they are empathetic. A comparison with others who lack it which may even be self-congratulatory.

The paradox of empathy arises from knowing whether oneself or another is empathetic. Let us say someone is not empathetic. The lack of empathy could well make it appear to oneself that one is empathetic. The evidence of one's empatheticness would have to derive from one's being empathetic, that of understanding the feelings and thoughts of others. But in this case of the unempathetic person they are unable to see that they are not empathetic because they do not understand that the reactions of other people to them through their feeling and thoughts that indicate the lack of empathy.

Something that could be repeated and show itself in different ways. Let us say some one is empathetic. But how would one know that one was really empathetic rather than it just seeming so as it does to the unempathetic? The evidence for one's being empathetic would be the same in both cases, it's just that in the case of the empathetic person the evidence would

be accurate and genuine but in the case of the unempathetic person it would be inaccurate and illusory. But there seems no way for a person to be in a position to distinguish the two.

At this point one might appeal to others. To whether others think we are empathetic or not. This however gets us nowhere. It only pushes the problem onto whether those other people are themselves empathetic, *ad infinitum*. But we could never know which of them is empathetic or which unempathetic for the same reason we cannot know whether we ourselves are empathetic or unempathetic, so therefore we could never know who would be able to judge accurately whether we are empathetic or not. Indeed, those who consider themselves as empathetic are just likely to back each other up as empathetic because they treat others in the same way, without their actually knowing whether that is being empathetic or not. This is especially so because empathy is regarded as a good thing and people are motivated to believe that they are empathetic and are a good judge of whether others are.

The paradox is therefore, that the very quality that leads us to being good at understanding the feelings and thoughts of others does not put us in a position to know whether we are good at understanding the feelings and thoughts of others, or merely *seem* to be to ourselves and to others.

If there is a lesson to be learnt it is that we should be wary of being sure that we are empathetic and behaving empathetically, and being self-congratulatory as to the putative virtue (though whether it always is a virtue is doubtful) we think we therefore possess, because we can never know if we are really.

We can take a guess, even hope, and it might be true, as we like to think of empathy as a virtue. But that is as good as it is going to get. We can never acquire the evidence to know whether we are empathetic or not, for in order to know whether the evidence is genuine we would already need to know if we are empathetic or not. There is no difference in how it is to a person between the reality of being empathetic and the appearance of merely seeming that one is empathetic.
