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Empathy with the Enemy

I will give you a talisman. Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? Will it lead to *swaraj* [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away.

— MAHATMA GANDHI

MAHATMA Gandhi was one of the great empathetic adventurers of the twentieth century, a master in the art of looking at the world from another's perspective. His philosophy was embodied in what is known as "Gandhi's talisman", a moral code which calls on us to consider the viewpoint of those living on the social margins when making ethical decisions, and to ensure that our actions benefit them in some way. The challenge he raises is to imagine ourselves into the lives of people whose everyday existence might be vastly different from our own, symbolised by "the poorest and weakest man whom you may have seen".

Empathising, for Gandhi, is both an individual moral guide and a route towards social change.

Gandhi flowered as an empathist on the ashrams he founded, both in South Africa and later in India, especially the Sabarmati Ashram near Ahmedabad, where he lived from 1917 to 1930. Ashram life was not just about communal self-sufficiency but also, crucially, about empathy: “our ambition was to live the life of the poorest people,” he declared. And they did. He and his wife and followers lived and worked like subsistence peasants, eating only the simplest meals, dwelling in sparse shelters, growing their own food and spinning their own cloth. Everybody shared in the same collective labour, which included cleaning the latrines, a job normally confined to members of the Untouchable or Dalit caste.

This desire to experience the existence of the poorest Indians, as an act both of solidarity and empathetic understanding, was by many seen as harmless eccentricity. Far more controversial was his insistent advocacy of the need to empathise with one’s political adversaries. Trying to look at the world through their eyes – and so appreciating their values, aspirations and suffering – was essential to build a culture of peace and tolerance. The issue became increasingly pertinent as tensions and violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims grew in the lead-up to Independence from Britain in 1947. Many Muslims wanted their own state, while Gandhi abhorred the prospect of partition and supported the ideal of a united India. A devout Hindu, he called for brotherhood and mutual understanding. “I am

a Muslim!” he said, “and a Hindu, and a Christian and a Jew.” This statement reflected his unwavering belief in the need to empathise with one’s enemies – who were not really enemies but simply other human beings whose lives and values were of equal worth to one’s own. The half a million deaths that occurred during partition in violence between Hindus and Muslims showed that the moral challenge of doing so was too great in that turbulent moment of history.

Perhaps Gandhi was excessively idealistic, and should have admitted the darker sides of human nature that prevented the empathetic understanding he valued so highly. Yet I believe he was right to stress the importance of empathy for those on opposite sides of social and political divides. Empathy enables us to recognise the individuality of others and find common ground, which are necessary ingredients of any genuine and long-lasting reconciliation. As the novelist Ian McEwan puts it, “Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.”

Engaging in an empathetic imagining can be personally transforming but can also raise acute ethical dilemmas to which Gandhi’s philosophy provides no easy solutions. I discovered this in Guatemala, when I found myself in conversation with some of the richest and most powerful people in one of the world’s poorest countries.

I lived for a short time with peasant communities in the Guatemalan jungle, just south of the border with Mexico. It was in the final months of the country’s thirty-six-year

civil war, in which the military had killed an estimated 200,000 indigenous people, mostly Mayans, in their attempts to uproot leftist guerrillas. As the war died down and the peace negotiations to end the conflict neared completion, displaced people and refugees were returning to their former lands. They had requested the presence of international human rights observers to act as a deterrent to possible intimidation – or worse – by the army, who still viewed them as collaborators with the guerrillas. I was one of the observers, temporarily abandoning my apartment in London to sleep in a thatched hut with a dirt floor and no running water or electricity. It was the first time that I had been directly exposed to the realities of poverty in a developing country: there was a shortage of food and some children were dying of malnutrition, water was scarce, housing inadequate and healthcare virtually nonexistent. Combined with the harrowing accounts I heard about the massacres during the war, my stay in the jungle village was a moving and unforgettable experience.

Several years later, in the late nineties, I returned to Guatemala. But this time I encountered a completely different world, and not just because the civil war had ended in 1996. I had decided to write my dissertation on the country's oligarchs – the thirty or so families of European origin who dominated the economy and politics, and who kept Guatemala impoverished. They were the owners of big coffee and sugar cane plantations, the banks and major industries. They held key cabinet positions and had collaborated with the military during the civil war, having

funded death squads to assassinate individuals who they saw as potential threats to their power. They flew around in private helicopters, did their shopping in Miami and were known to hold racist views about indigenous Mayans, who made up 60% of the population. Although the oligarchs were powerful, few researchers had ever spoken to them; they remained a hidden force in Guatemalan society. I felt that a necessary starting point for bringing about social change in the country and eroding the oligarchy's influence, was to gain a deep understanding of their psyche and worldview, to discover what made them tick. How did the inheritors of power think about issues like poverty, violence, and indigenous land rights? So I decided to talk to them, using the pretext of exploring the uncontroversial topic of Guatemala's post-war recovery.

After a few interviews at their wood-panelled offices and sprawling rural estates, it was clear that many of my assumptions about the oligarchs were accurate. For instance, they displayed strong racial prejudice against the indigenous population. One told me a story about "a very swarthy, small, ugly-looking, flitty-eyed Indian". Another complained about the "ignorance" and "lack of ambition" of the Mayan workers on her plantation: "You offer to pay them more for doing some more work," she said, "and all they can say is 'no thanks' and then throw themselves into a hammock!" They were repeatedly described as backward, deceitful, filthy, stupid, and lazy.

Since my overriding aim was to understand the oligarchy's mental outlook – rather than confront them – I swal-

lowed my immediate desire to retort when hearing their racist statements, and instead made an effort to step into their shoes. I recognised that most had grown up within a small, inward-looking, elite community where such views were entirely normal, having been nurtured for centuries. Their racism was hardly surprising. But my attempts to empathise with them certainly did not bring on a wave of Gandhian tolerance and mutual understanding; I considered their opinions detestable. These were the kinds of attitudes that had made possible the tortures, rapes, and murders of so many thousands of indigenous people during the civil war, a tiny fraction of which I had heard about first-hand during my earlier stay in the jungle village.

This situation embodied the problem of what I call “empathetic dissent” – how do you empathise with someone whose views or values you disagree with? It is an issue we face in our daily lives. You might be having dinner at a friend’s house and one of the guests tells an anti-Semitic joke which offends you. Should you call on your empathy and tolerance, and try to step into the shoes of the misguided comic to understand his mindset? Or is the ethical response to point out the joke is repugnant? Often, I have found, both can coexist.

This raises a crucial point that is often misunderstood, no matter what a person’s politics, religion, or moral code might be: the process of empathising does not destroy the possibility for moral judgment. You can gain an understanding of somebody’s worldview without having to agree with their beliefs or principles. Moreover, the ability to step

into someone’s shoes can place you in a strong position to reason with them and persuade them to change their views. Knowing that the joker at dinner was brought up by anti-Semitic parents can be an opening into a later conversation with him about where our moral values come from, and how much our families shape our central beliefs, which may well start to shift his thinking.

I stepped further into the moral maze of empathy when I interviewed a woman named Adela Camacho Sinibaldi de Torrebiarte, a member of one of Guatemala’s wealthiest and most distinguished aristocratic families. Her chauffeur picked me up in a Mercedes from the dusty city centre and drove me to the sanctuary of one of Guatemala City’s exclusive gated communities for the super-rich. We parked in front of her mansion besides several sleek sports cars. A uniformed maid showed me inside, where Adela, sun-tanned and chic, was busy booking a flight to Miami. Family portraits hung on the walls in gilded frames.

She spoke about the pressures on her family’s business interests, the terrible state of the Guatemalan economy, and the difficulties of booking overseas flights. I felt little desire to commiserate with her problems, and felt compelled to contrast her situation with the Mayan women grinding corn at dawn in the village where I had stayed a few years earlier. Another world. But around half way through the interview, the conversation unexpectedly changed direction. Adela began telling me about the kidnapping of her son toward the end of the civil war. He was in his mid-twenties at the time and recently married. In a quivering voice, she

described how he was abducted by armed men and held captive for two months. The family eventually paid a huge ransom for his release, but her son was permanently scarred by the traumatic experience: he became psychologically volatile and had to leave Guatemala. By the end of the account her eyes were reddened with tears, and her hands clenched hard as if she were holding the pain.

I was completely unprepared for such a revelation, and for my own reaction. I had never, in fact, considered how the war had affected Guatemala's powerful families on a personal level. Oligarchic leaders had been assassinated and their children kidnapped by the guerrillas and other armed groups during the conflict. They had not faced nearly the same scale of violence as indigenous people, but they undoubtedly suffered. I suddenly found myself empathising with the enemy – seeing the war from their perspective – and felt genuine compassion for them. Adela's story about her son (who was roughly my own age when kidnapped) had moved me, even upset me. I didn't know what to do with my feelings. Amongst my circle of left-wing social activist friends, it was taboo to express any concern or caring for the economic elite, who were deemed to be a faceless class in cahoots with the army and US imperialism. But after talking to them face to face, and hearing them tell of their own experiences, I was coming to see them as individuals who, despite being complicit in appalling oppression, knew pain like anybody else.

In his book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), the Scottish thinker Adam Smith wrote that the primary

source of "our fellow-feeling for the misery of others" is our imaginative capacity for "changing places in fancy with the sufferer". My encounter with the oligarchs showed this humanizing power of empathy at work, the "fellow-feeling" that Smith saw as the beginnings of morality. But here it was an unnerving "fellow-feeling for enemies".

As my research in Guatemala continued, it soon trapped me in a much more serious ethical conundrum. During the course of multiple interviews, over several years, I eventually gained the confidence of a few members of the oligarchy, who were keen to tell "their side of the story" about the country's social and political turmoil. Speaking off the record – a few years after the end of the civil war – they revealed highly sensitive information about particular members of the oligarchy who had been involved in funding paramilitary death squads to murder selected peasant leaders, journalists and left-wing politicians during the conflict.

Having developed an empathetic bond with my informants – a number of whom had introduced me to their kids and invited me over for meals – I felt bound to respect their trust and not to divulge this confidential information publicly. To do so could put them and their families in physical danger, since those incriminated might trace the source of any revelations. Nobody was safe in a country like Guatemala, where extreme violence was still part of everyday life. Should I risk creating – albeit indirectly – the possibility for even more bloodshed? Yet in keeping the information to myself, I was withholding evidence that could potentially be used to prosecute those responsible

for the slaughter of the civil war. The campaigner in me naturally felt that everything possible should be done to hold to account all those oligarchs who had links to death squads. Their actions disgusted me more than I can express, and I wanted to contribute to the struggle against impunity.

I had never felt so morally conflicted. I was caught in a dilemma that has perplexed philosophers for centuries. What do you do when there is a clash or divergence between different moral systems to which you adhere? On the one hand I was motivated by a relationship-based ethics of empathy, which drew me towards keeping what my informants had revealed confidential. On the other hand I felt the compulsion of a rule-based ethics of justice, which demanded that I should publicly tell all. This is sometimes described by moral theorists as a conflict between sentimentalist or care ethics, and rationalist or Kantian ethics. Gandhi offered, unfortunately, no help in adjudicating between the two. He seemed to assume that empathy and justice would always run in the same direction, and that by following his talisman “you will find your doubts ... melting away.” Yet my empathetic identification with the oligarchs had made the practice of my personal ethics painfully complicated.

Such dilemmas emerge at times for many of us, and are often rooted in what psychologists call “empathetic bias” – where empathising disposes us to favour somebody we know, in possible conflict with the rule of law or ethical principles. Say, for instance, you find out that the teenager next door, who you have known since he was a child, has

been involved in some burglaries. As a law-abiding citizen you should report him to the police, but you are reluctant because you know him as more than a burglar. You know that he was adopted and has had a tough upbringing, not receiving the emotional support he needed from his family. He’s basically a good kid who really needs some mentoring to get him back on track, and you know just the person who could help. Turning him in could lead to a jail sentence, as he has been in trouble with the law before. You are convinced that jail time will only make things worse. So which path do you choose – legal justice or empathy?

A possible move in such cases is to adopt a third, adjudicating principle. One could follow the advice of Adam Smith, who might suggest you take the position of the “impartial spectator”, which he visualised as a little man within our breasts who is “the great judge and arbiter of our conduct”. The impartial spectator is – at least in theory – capable of considering all aspects of a situation, and the perspectives of everyone involved. Smith might well say that our dilemma has emerged because we know the teenager too well, introducing a distorting partiality into the case which has aroused our feelings for him to an excessive degree – clearly a case of empathetic bias. We can resolve the dilemma by adopting “the eyes of a third person”, who may conclude that we should report our neighbour and not let our personal connection come into it.

Smith’s argument suggests a useful rule-of-thumb: to empathise with all the relevant actors in a situation before making a judgment. In the case of the teenager next door

this would involve, at the very least, taking into account the perspectives of the boy and his parents, also imagining the viewpoints of people who might be burgled in the future if your neighbour is not reported. The purpose is to become aware of the possible consequences of your decision for all those who might be affected by it. Doing so might persuade you, on balance, to break a particular law or moral principle. In some cases, empathising in this way can help you identify a law as being unjust, which is what happened to many of those who opposed the laws upholding Apartheid in South Africa.

Smith's rule-of-thumb proved helpful when deciding whether to release publicly what I had learned about the involvement of Guatemalan oligarchs in the financing of death squads. I made an effort to step into the shoes of my informants and consider the potential impact on them, and I attempted to imagine the perspectives of those seeking justice for family members who had been killed by paramilitaries during the war (I had met several of the victims' relatives personally). In the end, I did go public with a selection of the evidence I had gathered, a selection which I believed could not be traced to my informants. But some evidence I consciously withheld. I still wonder whether I made the right decision – but I suppose such lingering uncertainty often follows a moral dilemma.

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The ideal of empathy is more prominent today than at any moment in the past. Psychologists argue that it is the key

to emotional intelligence. Empathy skills are now taught in schools throughout the Western world. Barack Obama, in his political campaign, reintroduced for public discussion the principle that for Adam Smith was the foundation of morality and justice, declaring, "We seem to be suffering from an empathy deficit – our ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes, to see the world through those who are different from us – the child who's hungry, the laid-off steel worker, the immigrant woman cleaning your dorm room." Indeed, this is how empathy is normally discussed: imagining life from the perspective of the deprived or marginalised, the voiceless or powerless, just as Gandhi advises in his talisman. But if empathy is truly to take its place as a central value in contemporary culture, we need to put it to the test in the most difficult situations, where it can lead us into a moral maze: into seeming contradictions and confusion rather than clarity. This is precisely where I was taken during my conversations with members of the Guatemalan oligarchy.

I suggest that we should approach empathy as the ultimate form of travel, a means of transporting ourselves into other lives in ways that can illuminate our own. There is no need to limit where we take our journeys. We must extend our empathetic imaginations not just to the dispossessed or disadvantaged, but also to those whose views and actions we might oppose or disdain, from wealthy bankers to bombastic politicians to racist work colleagues – even the sibling who broke a favourite toy. There are few better ways of bringing us face to face with our own prejudices,

uncertainties and inconsistencies. That is how empathy can become both a moral guide and a basis for a philosophy of living. Socrates saw the path to the good life in the effort to “know thyself”. The lesson of empathy is that we will only discover ourselves by stepping outside ourselves. 🍷