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The 'Sin' of Empathy? (with Hannah Anderson and Joe Rigney)

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The moral character of empathy has recently been a subject of contentious online debate among Christians. Joe Rigney and Hannah Anderson, who have both engaged in these disputes with their different concerns, join me for an extended discussion of the question, hoping to clear up some misunderstandings on both sides and to break some differences down to size.

Within the conversation we mention various articles and other material.

Joe Rigney:

The Enticing Sin of Empathy: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-enticing-sin-of-empathy>

Dangerous Compassion: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/dangerous-compassion>

Do You Feel My Pain?: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/do-you-feel-my-pain>

Man Rampant Interview: <https://www.amazon.com/Man-Rampant/dp/B07Z8G12XP>

Abigail Dodds:

The Beauty and Abuse of Empathy: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-beauty-and-abuse-of-empathy>

Paul Bloom:

The Case Against Empathy:

<https://www.vox.com/conversations/2017/1/19/14266230/empathy-morality-ethics-psychology-compassion-paul-bloom>

Against Empathy: <https://amzn.to/3r1A5bA>

Edwin Friedman:

A Failure of Nerve: <https://amzn.to/30TmUz7>

My summary of A Failure of Nerve:

<https://alastairadversaria.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/self-and-leadership.pdf>

Brené Brown:

On Empathy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

Daring Greatly: <https://amzn.to/30TngWt>

Shame and Empathy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQiFfA7KfF0>

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The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account:

<https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Hello and welcome. Today we're going to be discussing something that has been a cause of controversy over the past few weeks and more generally over a number of the past years, which is the subject of empathy. And to discuss this with me today, I have Joe Rigney and Hannah Anderson, two friends of mine who have thought very carefully and written very perceptively about this issue, but come from different perspectives.

So I thought it would be helpful to spend some time teasing out some of the differences that there are, some of the reasons why we're discussing this particular issue, and maybe some ways forward for the debate. So both sides can take on concerns of the other, understand where we're coming from, and hopefully by the end of this conversation, we will have broken some of our differences down to size. So first of all, Joe, you've been a lightning rod for controversy on this particular issue.

Can you give us a sense of what has sparked this debate and your role within it and the different objections that you have faced? Yeah, thanks. I'm glad to be here talking with you guys. So a number of years ago, I got through the writings of someone like an Edwin Friedman and Paul Bloom and various other sort of things.

I started thinking more carefully about the whole question of empathy. And then at some point, I my entry into the conversation, wrote a couple of articles for Desiring God, and then also did an interview with Doug Wilson, which was provocatively titled The Sin of Empathy. And then I would say over the last, I think that the video came out, I want to say in fall of 2019.

And since then, I don't know, every couple of months, somebody watches it. And then I get emails or tagged in Twitter conversations. But I've tried to lay out various issues and challenges I've got as we think through the question of empathy, the question of how do we help the hurting, and so forth.

In recent days, I would say the spark has been that James White kind of picked up the similar kind of language of distinguishing empathy and sympathy, sympathy being a good thing, and empathy being a bad thing. And that kind of lit up a whole bunch of different places. But then that then led back to some of the things I've written, or some of the things that Doug Wilson's written, and they kind of spread out from there and became a what in the world, why are we talking about this sort of thing? And, and so then that there's been now lots of conversations, I think, online and in various capacities about the subject of empathy, and particularly the claim that empathy is sinful, or sent the sin of empathy, that kind of phrase.

And, and if I were to kind of break it down, in terms of what I think is happening, is I've engaged on it, I think there are some substantive issues involved about dynamics, relational dynamics, helping dynamics, counseling dynamics, social dynamics, all of those sort of like substantive issues. And those are real, whatever you call them. And then alongside that, then there's this semantic issue.

So there's a substantive issue, there's a semantic issue, which has to do with what do you call that? And how do we relate different terms like empathy, sympathy, compassion, and so forth. So there's a semantic issue. I think there's an audience issue or an emphasis issue.

So you know, to whom are we talking? How is it being heard? What relevant backgrounds and different contexts are in play? And then there's a rhetorical thing that's really emerged, at least in my own mind, that people have pushed most heavily on me, I think, who there's folks who acknowledge, yeah, maybe you have a point. But to say something inflammatory, like the sin of empathy, to use that as a kind of, they would, you know, the accusation is a clickbaity kind of title is bad as a rhetorical move. And so there's a question about sort of the legitimacy of provocation in a conversation like this.

So substantive, semantic, sort of audience and rhetoric, I think all of those are in play, which makes it super hard to sort of untangle, especially on Twitter. So that's, that's my sort of state of the affairs. But I'd be interested to hear from Hannah, how she kind of sort of entered into the discussion, we had a nice interchange on online the other day.

But kind of as she sort of saw it happen, what did she think was happening and so forth? Right, and I would line up with everything you've laid out as far as defining the timeline and where people were entering at different points and what they were carrying into that. I actually, when we started conversation last week, I was interacting, and I didn't say this explicitly, so no one would have had that knowledge. But I was interacting more with the provocative nature of James White's tweets.

And then because of the phrase, the sin of empathy, and because of the framing of empathy versus sympathy, that I think got backloaded onto your work. And it was understood within the larger conversation that this can all be just collapsed together. I was particularly engaging with that kind of provocative, sympathy is good, empathy is sin, like explicitly, like empathy as a category is sinful.

And I think somewhere along the line, somebody tagged you in that thread. And so it did kind of come packaged in a way that wasn't helpful for discussion. Although I would like to congratulate us on working as well as we could through it, despite all of the context.

The thing that's interesting to me, entering this conversation is, I'm aware of Brown's work, Brenny Brown's work, I'm aware of the cute little video of the woodland creatures, you know, helping each other out. I have seen it more in spaces with friends or people I'm working with that they have a strong affinity to this kind of framing. But my kind of engagement with empathy has come through neurodiversity questions, through autism spectrum related issues that we face in our own family that I face in my extended family.

And so when I see like the language of empathy and sympathy, I'm coming with like, oh, okay, let's talk about this. And then I find like, you know, Alastair has mentioned this before that actually people are talking about a whole lot of different things within this space. And trying to even define what do we mean when we're using this term? Like, what is that carrying? What are we actually debating? What are we actually questioning? I think has been has made the conversation difficult.

I do think like, for me coming from spaces of neurology and neurodiversity, one thing that's been really, really beneficial about coming into the conversation from that aspect is it's really a lot less about emotions when I engage with the idea of empathy. And I would wonder, like one of the questions I have, I'd like to explore is to what degree are we using the language of empathy for something else that's happening? Like maybe we're letting that word do too many things and maybe defining more clearly what we're actually concerned about would be helpful in terms of moving the conversation forward. I think following on from some of those remarks, I noted at least five or six different conversations that seem to be coming into collision at this point.

There's this one term that's very load bearing for several conversations of empathy. If you look at Brené Brown's work, it's very important alongside other key terms like vulnerability or shame. And those terms carry a lot of significance within that system,

which has been very helpful for many people.

And so to have a challenge upon that term is something that will at least disorient people who think in terms of that system. How do you fit in that challenge with the genuine insights and benefits that people have had from her work? Alternatively, there's the work of someone like Paul Bloom, who challenges empathy. And again, he has a sort of stipulated definition that not everyone will accept.

You mentioned, Hannah, the context of neurodiversity conversations, where again, it has a more clinical definition. If you're talking about Edwin Friedman, his work on leadership, it's another definition he's working in terms of. If you're talking about the Christian tradition, you've got a different set of ways of talking about these things in terms of compassion, for instance.

So if you're talking about maybe someone like Aquinas or Augustine and the relationship between reason and the passions, and these sorts of things are coming into the conversation. So first of all, do either of you have any thoughts on how we have conversations between these conversations without just butting our heads off each other? Have you found helpful ways to talk between these different frameworks without collapsing them into each other and causing confusion? That's a great question. I think you laid out really nicely there the different conversations more broadly.

But I think probably the biggest confusion that I see in that is precisely that on the one hand, you very clearly have multiple conversations with various definitions of the same term. And it's a recent term in English, right? It's about 100 years old. And its definition from when it was first introduced in terms of art, it was about art appreciation and those sorts of things, has changed markedly over the years.

And so there's this sort of newer term with changing definition even in its short history that then is involved and has sort of settled into very distinct conversations with very distinct, maybe not very distinct, but at least moderately distinct definitions. So you got that. But then on the other hand, the most common pushback I've got from a lot of people is kind of the knee-jerk reaction of everybody knows what we mean by empathy.

And I want to sit there and I go, I don't think that's true at all. Because when I say, okay, what do we all mean? I'll either get quoted like Merriam-Webster's dictionary will get quoted at me as though that settled the matter. Or I find that you do get sort of different definitions.

Somebody's going to quote a more sort of cognitive, and sometimes drawing on the neurodiversity sort of questions about what empathy is doing. And then for other people, it's simply a word for emotion sharing and particularly emotion sharing with hurting people often. And then, so you find very quickly that on the one hand, everybody knows what we mean.

And yet it's quite clear there's contested definitions. And so the only way that I felt that we have to do what we have to do in a situation like that is stipulated definitions. So say specifically, what do you mean by the term? And then what do you want to do with what you mean? But because of that contested space, especially in the wild west of the internet, people are going to push back and say, you're not allowed to stipulate that definition.

You're redefining the term as opposed to going with the actual definition that, quote unquote, we all know. And so that makes it particularly hard and is why choosing your conversation partners wisely becomes really important if we're actually going to try to get into the substance of whatever conversation, whether it's the Friedman anxiety conversation, social dynamics, or the Paul Bloom, how do we help people in a sort of rational, reasoned way, or the neurodiversity question about how do we cultivate in people who may have challenges with interacting and relating with other people and reading emotions off the face and so forth. Like those are different conversations.

You have to stipulate definitions and choose your partners wisely. I do think the definitional quality is a flashpoint. Absolutely agree with that.

I do think everyone just naturally carries in their assumptions, even when you stipulate definitions. I think perhaps one of the challenges that I've found in the conversation is I see the language of empathy. I see like perhaps an illustration or an example, or this is what could happen when empathy becomes toxic.

And I look at that and I would say, I would never call that empathy. I would never call that toxic empathy. Like there's a terminology for what you're describing as a true real thing, but like another term comes to mind immediately, like the loss of boundaries or the loss of self or the kind of collapsing of personhood into another person.

I would say, oh, that's enmeshment. So I think part of the challenge is while I like fully say, yes, you're describing something real. Empathy is not necessarily my sense of, yeah, that's what's in play there.

And I'm not saying that you can't use that term. I just think you have more work to do to prove that that's where it's coming from, rather than this other category that's already established for people that they do know. Yeah.

So that's part of the challenge too. One thing you mentioned, Joe, and I think is behind a lot of this is the fact we're having this conversation in the context of the internet, where there are a lot of different people in very different contexts. And a word online is speaking across all those different contexts without discriminating well between them.

One of the things I've wondered about recently is the way which the internet seems to serve almost as a sorting device for sensibilities, where people with different sorts of

sensibilities and personality types tend to move increasingly into different ideologies. And people can be squeezed out of particular movements when one sensibility takes over an ideology or movement or particular denomination, whatever it is. And I've seen some of that here, that what empathy names is not just a particular idea or an emotion.

It's a deep sensibility for many people. It's how you treat other people who are immediately around you in your space. And people are hearing within that some of the conflicts between the very aggressive, for instance, pugnacious types that you encounter online, who see it very much as a space, a space of context for debates and arguments between different positions.

And those who see it as a space where people are very vulnerable, and you need to be accepting and affirming of people and trying to establish as much as possible some sort of emotional resonance between people. And is there any way that we can tease away the conversation from those issues of sensibility? Because I think there's something different going on there than the sort of moral conversation that you're having about empathy more generally. I think any healthy system should be able to, and movement should be able to accommodate people with very different sensibilities without suggesting that one of those things is bad.

But it seems that the empathy conversation has tended to produce divisions along lines of sensibilities. Is there any way that you see us moving beyond that to have a conversation that brings people of different sensibilities on the same page? Well, I think to Hannah's point there at the end of her comments about, you know, we have words for the dynamic you're describing, Joe, why not just use that one? I'm, personally, I don't want to wrangle about words. I don't, you know, so the substantive issue is the thing I'm mainly concerned about.

And when I've written on it, and written sometimes criticizing those dynamics under the term empathy, and could, I think, explain and justify why I would do that, and yet at the same time have done the exact same descriptive critical work without using the word empathy at all, talking more about compassion or love for the hurting and the same sorts of destructive dynamics that can be in play in without using that word empathy. So I don't want to wrangle about words. And if it's really a semantic issue, I think that mature Christians, that's an important qualifier, mature conversation partners, whether they're Christians or not, ought to be able to go, okay, this is a semantic problem.

And semantic problems are a thing, they might be important. But it ought to place the debate in a very different context than if we're actually differing on the fundamental substantive goodness of the dynamics in play. So I think at one level, to cut through the collision of different conversations online, you have to be willing to acknowledge that the terms can be used in these different ways, and that that's okay.

But that's just where we, that's a descriptive fact. And then instead of trying to force,

everybody must say it the way I say it. It's when that sort of dynamic comes into play, that I think we ought to say, no, no, you don't get to do that.

You don't get to just come in and say, this is the only way that this term can be used. And to the degree that that's what people are doing, well, that's not what I'm doing. And I'd resist it and say, no, that's that's illegitimate.

That language doesn't work that way. Conversations don't work that way, especially given the different communities in view, and the discourses in view, and the sensibilities in view, all of those, we ought to be patient and slow. Actually, when analogies occurred to me, I always find it fascinating that, you know, they tried to carry out early Trinitarian debates, you know, across an empire in multiple languages at the same time.

And, and you notice when you read someone like Augustine or some of these other guys, where they're saying, you know, the Greeks use this term, but the Latins use this term. And, and the mature ones in that conversation aren't getting hung up on, are you going to call it the Greek term or the Latin term? Or do the Greek terms and Latin terms sync up precisely, right, in other contexts, but they're trying to say, can we press through that to the substance of what we want to talk about, and recognize the different grammars that might be in play for it. And I suspect that on an issue like this, a similar kind of maturity and sober mindedness is needed in order to make any kind of progress.

You do talk about the difference between the substantive and the rhetorical dimensions, but it seems to me on this particular issue, that those things do get blurred. The idea of the problem, the problems of empathy, I think, encourages certain type of provocation for some people, a more aggressive confrontational attitude. Do you, do you really think that we can tease apart the substantive and the rhetorical dimensions as neatly as you suppose, have said? Yeah, so tease them apart.

At some level on this particular issue, I'm not sure, because, you know, the number of, the number of people who have communicated to me based on what I've written, and said, boy, the way people are reacting, they're kind of proving your point. So there's a way in which the provocative term, and this is, this is part of what Friedman is doing in his work, is saying that the hijacking of communities and conversations by the most reactive and immature members of a community is a big problem. It's a major problem in modern culture, and the internet is like an amplification machine for that dynamic.

The most sensitive, reactive, immature, or sometimes the most, the advocates for those who are perceived to be sensitive, or victims, or whatever, can be the most reactive, and then, and therefore, you get the mob sort of mentality. And empathy is one of the things that kind of sets that off, because of the sensibility sorting that you described, Alistair. And so there's a way in which provoking the reaction is precisely a way of demonstrating the problem.

So when people have said, why did, why did you do it? Why did you say, sin of empathy is sort of the, the title of your interview? And I, and you were, you were just being provocative, and it's like, I was being provocative. That was, that was the point. And in some, I was trying to provoke thought in the same way that a, that, you know, Don Carson writes a book titled, The Intolerance of Tolerance, that's supposed to make you go, oh, what's that about? But thought provoking isn't the only kind of provoking.

There's reaction provoking, and reaction provoking has its uses too. So, and the reaction provoking might actually provoke thought in other people who all of a sudden might be alert to dynamics that they didn't have language for, that they didn't, they didn't know what to call it, or what was happening, why their community was being sort of ripped apart in various ways. And all of a sudden they go, oh, now I see it more clearly.

So I think personally that there's a place for that kind of provocation, but I think it ought to be accompanied by a willingness to be patient, long-suffering, clarifying in the aftermath, so that, that you're not, you're not just throwing bombs and then walking out of the room, but that there's a, there's a willingness to say, I knew what I was doing, and I'm trying to make a very important point about one particular issue here. But I'm not insisting that this is the only way you need to talk, or this is the only way that you need to do it, but I, I would want to say it is a legitimate, not the only, but a legitimate rhetorical strategy in, in the conversation. If I could just back up to the question of substance versus terminology, I hear the appeal, and I very much am sympathetic to it.

But I, I wonder what has thrown me in this conversation is that there seems to be a lot being built on the difference of words and definitions. So, so at the same time that we're saying, well, let's look at the substance of the problem and, you know, it doesn't matter what word we use, there are parts of the argument that the entire foundation for the argument between something like sympathy and empathy is based on word choice. And so that can be very confusing to say in one respect, this nuance is massive, you know, the difference between these two words is the, the difference between, as, you know, James White put it, you know, godliness and sinfulness.

So then to move to say, but it's really the substance of the debate that I'm concerned about. As an interlocutor, that's very confusing to me, to say words matter, really, really matter. But they don't really matter when we're just talking about the substance.

So, so I, I have found that divide between that, that kind of dichotomy between sympathy and empathy to be, to be honest, I think a more Christian way of engaging that is to say, the world is dividing these two things, and they shouldn't be divided, like we're going to reject the paradigm that's being delivered to us the way it's been framed. So, so you're absolutely right that there is this kind of narrative more broadly and pop psychology that empathy is the better virtue. But then to just flip that and say, well, sympathy is actually the better virtue, to me seems like accepting a false paradigm and

then operating within it.

And I would think that maybe our Christian imagination would give us a way to, to deconstruct what needs to be deconstructed, but to build an entirely different way of talking about these things. So I do think the terminology is not insignificant because the argument is built on the terminology. Which, which, and I think it is important to stress though that the, the dichotomization of those was not something that either me or James White, and I'm not sure that he and I are doing precisely the same thing or would, or would align in terms of the substance on the issues.

I think Doug and I are aligned, even if rhetorical strategies even may differ there some. But, but the, the dichotomizing was something that sort of happened independently of us and was already in play, right? That's the Brene Brown sort of, sort of stuff, which is, which is highly influential. And, and so there was two things happening there.

One is what you're pointing out, which is there was a separation or dichotomization where, where sympathy is now a bad thing. It breeds disconnection. It divides people.

And what's interesting there is that as that, as that sort of teaching worked its way into the church, I've seen that video in church training sorts of settings, and as sort of like a, hey, this is what we need to do. There was no outrage over why are we saying bad things about sympathy? That's a, you know, like nobody, nobody rose up in defense of, of sympathy, which was being, you know, attacked and assaulted as this, you know, insufficient and, and poorly done strategy for, for care. But that, that dichotomy was being introduced.

So on the one hand, you have the, the, the language confusion or the conceptual confusion. And then the flips, the additional thing there though, was in the description of empathy itself as the more loving and helpful response is, is a falsehood about it's really important when you're trying to get in the pit with someone that you withhold judgment. That judgment is ruled out.

That's a, to, to, to bring judgment into the conversation is an unloving, uncaring response. And I think as Christians, we ought to just reject that wholesale, but we, we aren't like that's the, the reality is, is that the, the idea that you, that, that someone's feelings and pain are sort of unquestionable, that you can't even ask questions about, is this an appropriate or proper response, even internally, right? That, that the sort of the demand, which isn't a new demand, this is as old as dirt, that people, when they're in pain, want other people to join them in their, in their suffering, wholesale. If it's a grievance of some kind, somebody's wronged me, you need to be on my side.

That's loyalty. It's like, like, I, I see what you're describing there. I mean, I absolutely understand the false paradigm of this kind of forced loyalty and side taking.

And, and we see that everywhere. And the degree to which the terminology of empathy is being used to, to bring that in, you know, to suitcase it in. I'm very much, you know, I'm sympathetic to that.

I'm just, I find it, I find it difficult to say, okay, here's what Brene Brown is doing. And here's all the way this is flawed. Well, we're just going to flip that.

And we're going to argue why sympathy, you know, because you can keep one foot on trees and on shore, because there is the, the conversation, as it's been framed, hinges heavily on a distinction between those two. And my sense is that distinction did not originate in the church. Right.

That it did not originate in our spaces, that distinction originated in, you know, kind of pop psychology categories. And I'm like, why not both? Like, why can't we clarify the proper relationship between sympathy and empathy? Why can't we give better definitions? And again, some of this is coming in to, I come in with, with the background of neurodiversity. And I see this moment being brought to us, not necessarily by the emergence of a new term, but a new type of social dysfunction.

And I see this entire conversation being brought to us by the fragmentation of human relationships because of modernity. So I mean, one of the things that one of the things that I think is going on here is that people come into the conversation with a different sense of where this is playing out. And many people have been deeply wounded by the church in their past, and they experience a sense of judgment and alienation from the church.

And the church instantly, leadership can, as they see it, take an instant posture of judgment upon others, without actually entering into their situation, and helping them to work out how to inhabit in a healthy and righteous way, the framework of orthodoxy. So one of the ways I've tried to think about this is there's a difference between orthodoxy as a house that is orthodox, and it's established according to the proper theological architecture, and it's going to stand, etc. There's a very great difference between that and making that structure your home.

And for many people, they found the structure of orthodoxy to be quite inhospitable. They've not actually been led in a pastoral way to inhabit it in a way that is a home for them. It's been something that has come with an experience of trauma, alienation, whatever.

And so when people hear this conversation about empathy, what they're hearing is a reinforcement of the lack of pastoral sensitivity that they've experienced in their past, and the ways in which the church has been a place where their position has not really been understood, and there's not even been an effort to try and understand it. And so this instinctive posture of judgment, let's get the lines drawn very clearly, and that's the

way that we're going to respond to every situation. They see the empathy conversation as expressing the dangers of empathy, as reinforcing that, rather than actually challenging something that's led to a collapse of trust between many congregants and their pastors.

How would you speak to that particular concern? Because it seems to me that that's one of the things that is very strong in driving this particular response to your term. Yeah, I mean, I think that is a real challenge, problem, phenomenon. It's really there.

And so the question is whether or not the importing, building a different structure, sort of in a, we're using Brene Brown, I think, here as a sort of cipher representative of a larger way of operating in the modern, in the contemporary context, where empathy is sort of seen as the supreme virtue, which is something that, you know, Friedman was pointing out 20 years ago, but that was already current, that what leaders need most is empathy, what leaders need most is empathy. And Friedman was the one waving the banner saying, I'm not sure that that's actually going to do what you think it's going to do. There's something else under the surface there.

But given that that's a real problem, the question is, is the insistence on empathy as sort of a cardinal virtue, which is, I think, what is why it's there, part of what the reaction is, that you've said, like people then, given their negative experiences, harmful experiences in a church context, find solace in other communities, even within the broader church, where empathy is sort of elevated, and then therefore empathy becomes sort of an unassailable, unalloyed virtue. And I want to say, well, I want the care, I want Christlike compassion and care for sufferers, but then the other side of the coin is sort of that we live in a moment where people's feelings, and that's a slippery word in itself, right? People's emotions, people's passions, part of our challenges are the vocabulary loss in relation to that sort of phenomenon, whatever we mean when we say feelings and emotions, that people's feelings and passions are elevated as God, right? And then empathy is, I think, used, can be used as a way of getting other people's feelings to be God. So other people's feelings become God.

And so there's, you're trying to fight on two very different fronts there. One is, we haven't cared well for real sufferers, and instead of judged them harshly or tried to correct their theology in the moment of pain, and we've driven them away. And I want to slap that down, and have.

I mean, I've, you know, when I, one of the things when I first started to write on this, and was talking it through with some friends and said, I want to go after this empathy thing, what I think is hiding under there, and what that is. And they said, well, first, what's the other danger? Like, what's the, what is that, what is that a reaction to? And so we talked that through, and had some of the conversations about correction, you know, correction disguised as comfort. So when someone's in the middle of their pain, and someone

comes along and said, well, God works all things together for good.

And it's like, that's true. And this isn't the time necessarily for that sort of correction disguised as comfort. And so their recommendation, which I thought was wise, was first hit that, go ahead and direct some fire at that problem of uncompassionate compassion, or correcting compassion, or whatever you would want to call it.

And then having done that, then take up the danger that you really want to talk about in the present moment, which is the empathy thing. So I did that. But the interesting thing about the reaction is nobody reacted against the first thing, even though I was describing all things work together for good, that statement as a demonic strategy.

In certain contexts, nobody objected, why are you putting all things work together for good in the mouth of the demons. And the reason I think is because everybody recognized that was a problem. Everybody's experienced that everybody knows that's a problem.

But what I don't think people are sufficiently maybe they didn't read the article and just read that's true particular line from it. That's also fair. But I think even I could get up and describe that problem.

And I think I could even do it as a, you know, the sin of truth telling, and talk about sort of speaking the truth, but not in love, and the way that that happens. And I think I'd get lots of amens and nods, because people would know I've seen that and that is a problem. And we know what you're doing rhetorically.

Or I had a student who pointed out this example, which I thought was very astute. And he said, when someone if someone were to write about the sin of anger, all of us reckon would go, we would nod, it wouldn't raise any eyebrows. Because we know that implicit there is sort of sin of unholy anger, because we know that anger isn't always sinful.

Or hatred would be another example. Hatred is not always sinful. If we said the sin of hatred, people would know it.

But empathy, which is also I think, a passion, at least at some level in this conversation is a passion, that emotion sharing thing, which to Hannah's point about different contexts, right. But for many people, it's a passion. And therefore, but the sin of empathy is the sort of thing that if you said people don't get it at all, because I don't think they can recognize and imagine such a good thing being such a bad thing.

And that's a problem. So to circle back, you're trying to fight on two different fronts. And usually it's different people trying to fight on different fronts.

So certain people are going to be more alert to one danger, and certain other people are going to be more alert to another danger. And this is why pressing through the

substance is important to say, oh, good, you're you're really hitting that one hard. I just want to say amen to your desire to care well for sufferers, and so forth.

And I would like very much for you to be able to say amen to hey, let's not make feelings into God. You know, the question that that raises for me is, who, who is this conversation directed toward? Because how we go about framing things is related to who we're talking to. So I, I understand how the the internet can take something and just, you know, grant access to everyone coming from all their different positions.

And you can in no way right toward the masses, you have to write towards specific people. So I'm curious who you're writing to. Well, so, you know, initially, so if I was talking about the writing aspects of it, obviously, I wrote those articles for Desiring God, and therefore have a particular sort of audience in mind, which is sort of the general Desiring God, the reformed evangelical audience that that likes Piper, in general, that sort of thing.

When I did the video, obviously, that was with Doug, and it was called Man Rampant was the name of the show. And, and obviously, the the direction of the conversation is it's an interview. It's a kind of an academic stipulated definitions, you know, kind of fun sort of sort of thing, but directed towards, I would say, particularly sort of men's concerns or something like that, like this is, this is directed at men.

Now, of course, it's not going to stay there. And I think one of the ironic things I've actually had somebody tell me that one of one of a critic at one point said that they got together a bunch of sort of abuse survivors to watch the to watch the Man Rampant thing. And, and then they were all appalled by it.

And, and I just thought, and you think that's my fault? Like, like that, that you think that was my fault that you got together a bunch of abuse survivors to watch a video called Man Rampant, and the sin of empathy? Because and this is to your point, like you can't I don't know, I guess my question back at some level is, is there any way to sort of isolate audiences today? Or do you just have to live with the fact that you can try to speak very particularly to a particular audience? And yet, no, you have to know, it's not going to stay there. And if it and once it jumps into the other audience, it's going to provoke whatever reaction is going to provoke and you have to sort of be content to take the heat and try to patiently clarify across those discourses. I hear that.

And I guess my, my one kind of, like just quizzical pushback is when I think of the spaces you're writing toward, and I think of the conversation being directed toward men, I don't think they're the ones that stereotypically need to be challenged about being too empathetic. So when I think of the people who succumb to this temptation, it is women in these spaces who lose their identity in Christ because it has been absorbed into their children, or it has been absorbed into their husband. I mean, I have seen that in a discipleship frame within conservative spaces.

And it's why I wrote Made for More, because what I saw happening in women was a complete, not complete, that's, that's an exaggeration, there was a significant loss of self. And I, in my own mothering, have had to say, wait, I'm the person, I'm the mother, I am the one that must lead, I must create space between us. And so I think part of what's curious to me is if this is your defined group, that rhetorically, they might need something else.

Like men who are already stereotypically as class traits, not prone this direction, don't need to be told, don't go this direction. You know, that was a challenge for me. I wasn't challenged by myself watching it feeling like, but I was thinking in terms of a pastor, and I'm like, hmm, is this what he needs to hear? So, and I think to that, this is where the sort of Friedman background, which is part of what we talked about, obviously, in the in the video becomes into play, because that's Friedman's whole, you know, entry into the conversation is directed at leaders, and therefore, as thinking about men in the church as leaders, pastors, and so forth.

The ways in which empathy becomes a mask for anxiety. And in a Christian context, I think that's particularly acute, I think in certain circles, it's, I think it's a particular danger. So I see the temptation of pastors having no way to deal with people who say, I'm hurt, therefore you sinned.

I'm hurt, therefore you sinned. And they're wanting to go, but I'm not sure that that, a, that's, that logic doesn't work straight across. I'm hurt, therefore you may have sinned works.

And, and yet, then there's a there's a wider community dynamic in play that says, if you try to hear both sides, or look at both sides, or investigate, or ask questions, or, or push or resist at all, then you're being heartless, you're not caring well, you're, you're re-traumatizing. And in the present moment, I think that's a very timely word to say, it's not don't care for the those who are really suffering, and those who have really been wronged. It's, you have to be able to maintain a certain kind of self differentiation, you have to maintain a certain kind of integrity in your own self, in order to be able to act sober-mindedly and rightly.

So in some ways, pushing on the end, and even though men and what you like you said, men and women tend to have women tend to be more empathetic. And my friend, Abigail Dodds has written very compellingly on part of why by God's design, that is the case. She's got a great article called I think, the beauty and the abuse of empathy, and and does a great job and actually, I think gets into some of the neurodiversity stuff that that you mentioned earlier, Hannah, about why women tend to be more empathetic and men not.

But there's also the reality that men tend to, men don't handle female distress well. So this is really significant, because I heard the conversations being gendered. The

examples were about how men should relate to women, about a husband to a wife, and a pastor to a abuse survivor that I would consider, I would assume, you know, was a woman.

And that was unsettling. And I don't mean that in an emotional way. I mean that in a rational way.

I mean that in a moral way. I will go with you in terms of empathy is a terrible basis on which to make moral decisions. Empathy should not be used for moral reasoning.

Absolutely, because I don't think that's what empathy has been given to us to do. And insofar as the world is saying to make judgments or to withhold judgment based on empathy, I would absolutely say 100% empathy is not the basis of moral reasoning or moral decision making. And as a leader, you must be able to make decisions in a way that is not based simply on empathy.

I was struggling with... So here is how I understand empathy. It is the ability to form communion. Healthy empathy is the ability to form union and relationship and attachment and bonding with other people.

And that's why unhealthy or toxic empathy becomes enmeshment, becomes a boundaries issue, a self-issue. So I hear us talking about emotions, and I keep thinking to myself, no, this is fundamentally a question of self. This is fundamentally a question of individual versus communion.

This is fundamentally a question of unity and union. Empathy is the... Neurologically, this is the way we bond with other human beings. It's a social skill.

It's a socialization. And when it's absent, it's very clearly absent. And we can see the loss of that.

So when I hear it reduced in conversations between genders about how men feel like women are imposing their emotions on them, I just... It drives... I want to lose my mind. Okay, not my emotions. I want to lose my mind.

Because I'm like, that's not what's going on. We're talking about union. And we need to give a pathway to pastors to... I also want to affirm, having been married to a pastor for 15 years, or 20 years, he's only been in ministry for 15 years, pastors lose their sense of self with their congregations very, very quickly.

They take on too much. They lose their sense of self, and that harms them, and it harms their congregation. That is absolutely something they need to be taught in.

But I really don't understand why it's about how to relate to your wife and how to relate to the abuse survivor that comes in and talks to you. To me, that's a totally different

category. That's not empathy.

That's not a question of empathy. Well, but I've struggled to... It seems to me that the issues that are coming up here, I've imagined a very different sort of context within which these things are applying. And I often wonder, at many points, I see Brené Brown's points, and I think, well, within the right context, I'm all in favor of that.

I think there is a time to suspend judgment. That's not a total suspension of judgment. It's not a denial of a place for judgment.

It's saying, within this particular context, that's not the way that you need to lead. You need to get into that person's position and help them work their way out of their problem with your judgment active. But that's not what you're going to use as a tool within this situation.

It doesn't mean that you're a prisoner of your empathy. That's the only mode that you can operate with. It's part of your repertoire, and it's the thing that you need at this particular point in this particular situation.

And the gender dynamics, I think, are very much a hidden part of this conversation. Because if you're reading Friedman's work, it's written for someone—I don't think it's written for someone who's primarily ordered towards empathy in that basic emotional mode. It's written for someone who's leading and sees people who operate within that more empathetic mode, and their claims upon him or her are ones that he doesn't really—he or she doesn't really know how to deal with those.

It's not his primary mode. And then the question then becomes, how do you create boundaries when you can't—you feel this sense of duty towards this person, and you feel that you could easily get sucked into them? How do you establish a boundary that's healthy there? And so his work is very much about the context of leadership that is very much looking outwards, establishing boundaries between inside, outside. This is me, this is you, and this is the space between us.

Whereas Brennan Brown is working within a very different sort of context, I think. And if you're dealing with a kid, for instance, you will need a lot of empathy. It's not the only thing that you'll need, but you will need to be actually step into their position of pain and be with them there for a while and help to shepherd them out of it.

But in the same way, a pastor, I think, if a pastor can't enter into something of the pain of a congregant and be present with them in it, it's going to be very difficult for him to exercise that other important function of setting clear boundaries. And I think it's the interplay of those two things that has—it seems to me that that's got lost somewhere in the conversation, that there are gender dynamics here, because we lead with different aspects, I think. For a woman, there is a lot more emphasis upon the union and the

communion as something that really is important.

But for a man, I think it may be more a sense of having to deal with the claims of empathy upon you and actually keeping a strong sense of this is the direction that needs to be taken. But recognizing you need the empathy there. If you don't have some ability to enter into someone's pain, to see where they're coming from, to see where the impasse might be for them, you're not actually going to be able to bring them towards what is good.

And for Edmund's work, I found incredibly helpful in speaking to some of the struggles of dealing with a very empathetic context when you're not naturally oriented that way. And on the other hand, Brené Brown's work, I think, is incredibly helpful in learning how to overcome some of your natural standoffishness or whatever it is, and to be able to enter into a situation that actually has traction with people and is able to move them forward without sacrificing the interests of healthy boundaries for you and the group that Friedman's concerned with. And why not both, Joe? I think it is both.

And I mean, I think so one of the interesting things that happened as a result of the Mandrampin is that obviously there was a fairly strong reaction in certain quarters, including in my own context, my wider church community here. And the reaction was pretty stark both directions. So I had multiple people, both men and women, coming and saying, man, that was really helpful.

You put your finger on some things that I'd been trying to wrestle through and hadn't known how to talk about it. You gave me, that was really helpful, giving categories and whatever else. And then of course, there was other people who had a similar reaction to Hannah's, just about, well, look at all the examples you're using and so forth.

And then even stronger reactions than that, that were far more, I don't know, reactive, weren't simply a sort of reflective, deliberative sort of thing. And then, so, and I hadn't rewatched it. Obviously I did the thing and no one wants to watch themselves on TV.

That's just weird. So I hadn't rewatched it. So when it reemerged again, I don't know, a few months ago, I finally went back and rewatched the whole thing, sort of expecting on my own part to kind of cringe based on the negative reactions that I'd sort of been heard over time.

And when I went back and watched it, I found myself again and again going, oh, we did say that. We did say it's really important to, in the moment of the suffering, you don't say anything. You don't need to say anything.

It's just tears and cry. Like you don't have to, you're not correcting anybody. And so all of the sort of qualifications about the necessity to, the necessity of entering into the pain of others to walk alongside them in suffering.

We just, Doug and I were simply saying the word for that, we think is the better word is compassion or sympathy. That's the word we wanted to use for that is coming alongside, want someone in their suffering and pain, walking with them as long as it takes. But we were waving the flag for, but reserving the right to maintain an allegiance to God and an independence of mind and a sober-mindedness to assess what's actually good for them here.

And so when I watched it again, I was actually, I guess, pleasantly surprised about how many of those sort of statements are there. And so the interesting thing to me has been the divide. And oftentimes my experience in the reactions has been those who agreed with it in substance, even if they didn't like some of the framing or the rhetoric or sort of stuff, but they got the point, were able to sort of repeat back to me, this is what you were wanting to do.

Whereas it's frequently been the case that critics have tried to impute a sort of position that wasn't in the video and certainly isn't in the wider body of work. And that's been to me illuminating because it feels like it is more about some kind of sensibility and sort of the way that it's heard. And the only thing I know to do in the face of that is to continue to try to find other words to describe the same thing and not get hung up on, you have to say it the way that I say it.

But I have to agree though, at some level, the illustration, I mean, it's a form and function question. So I don't think it's simply illustrations are neutral. Like the context in which you place the discussion is instructive and it teaches and it teaches something.

So my question is why those illustrations? Why that? Yeah. Like, is there this threat that women's emotions are going to overcome men? And I want to say this because you need to know this about me as well. In my relationship, I am the less effective one.

I am the less emotive one. My husband is creative, deeply emotive. And sometimes I am just like, I'm standing there trying to figure out what's happening right now.

So I'm sensitive to, I am female, but I don't exist in class traits. I'm atypical and I'm fine with that. And I know that.

And I recognize that at the same time, I do a lot of work discipling women. And so I know how they act as classes. And I feel like I stand in this bridge between men and women and trying to explain the other to the other.

And so I'm not reading into you have this agenda, right? Or there's this deeper thing. I literally don't understand why this conversation takes that shape. Yeah.

So one of the stories I think we tell in the video, which, and this is relevant in terms of how part of what made me more sensitive to it was, is the story. I think it's about the bachelor party where everybody's going around giving advice to the groom. And one guy

says to him, in marriage, it's going to be the case that you and your wife are going to get in some conflict.

And sometimes you're going to send against her. And when you do, you should repent quickly and clearly and sincerely and make it right. You should be the first leading in there.

But there can be other times where you don't think you send against her, she's still upset. And in such cases, you should never apologize to your wife. And I remember the first time I think, I think it was Doug on his blog or some place, maybe as a sermon or something, use that story.

And I remember the gut check that I feel, I still feel it of, if your wife's upset with you, but you before God, don't think you send, never apologize to your wife, do not apologize. And I remember going like, no, you're not allowed to do that. Yeah.

But that's not empathy. That's not living with understanding. Like I totally would say that same thing.

And Nathan will tell you, he'll laugh at me because I won't apologize if I didn't do something wrong. Like I will literally just say to him, I'm not saying I'm wrong because I didn't do anything wrong. So that's something different.

Well, I don't think so because I think what the socialization piece of this then is where the social dynamics come into play is that servant leadership, sacrificial leadership, Christlike leadership in the home, the way that that's often framed and pushed is that you would in fact, put, push a husband, even though you don't think you did something wrong, she's more valuable. She's more important. Her feelings are more important than you sort of insisting on your own way.

And it would be couched in those kinds of terms because her, and, and I think many godly husbands, which is part of who our target was in this, are very sensitive to the distress of their wife. And if, and they don't, they don't like it. It's very uncomfortable.

They, they don't like it when their wives are unhappy with them. And so it's very difficult to maintain the kind of emotional integrity to, to resist, especially if you're in a community context where the pressure is going to be put on, like, come on, just, just make it. And, and so this is where the apologies is appeasement, right? Just come together.

And you see that. So using that illustration in the home is that's a universal thing. I thought, no, no, I hear the pressure to appease.

Absolutely. I guess I'm saying a wife can be emotionally upset and it not be the husband's fault and her emotions be valid because conflict isn't necessarily rooted in sin

all the time. Sometimes it's miscommunication.

Sometimes it's a misplaced sense of priorities or what needs to happen next. And so I would completely agree. Don't apologize if you haven't sinned, because that's like a lie, like confessing to something you haven't done is a lie.

But to say my wife is upset and I'm just disturbed by that. You should be disturbed by that. Totally.

I agree. And, and so like, to me, this falls under the category of live with understanding. And the understanding is I'm going to try to figure out and understand why, what is causing this emotional response from you.

We're not going to be guided by the emotional response. It's not a GPS. It doesn't tell us what to do.

We're not going to make moral decisions based on the emotions, but the emotions are, are signals. There are turn signals and we have to pay attention to that. And so like, that's what strikes me as like you don't want husbands.

You want to tell husbands, do not sin by taking on guilt that is not yours. Do not lie against the truth in this way. But your wife's emotions are not a threat to you.

They're not, they're a gift. I, it seems to me that one of the things behind this conversation is there, there is something of a difference between empathy as an instinctive mode that someone has and the sort of sensitivity that I think that Friedman is really challenging. So his work, I don't think is primarily directed to people who feel a pronounced sense of empathy themselves.

Rather it's to people that really feel this responsibility to be sensitive. And I think that's a particular issue for many church leaders at the moment where a lot of debates hang upon this requirement to be sensitive and the raising up of certain victim groups or something like that. And the need to be sensitive is something that makes it very difficult to hold a hard line on certain issues.

I think sexual ethics being a great example of this in the past few decades. The, how do you show a proper sensitivity and concern for people and love for people while also being very clear on these are the boundaries and we're not going to budge or blur these boundaries. These really matter.

These are a matter of Christian orthodoxy. And that I think is where Friedman is getting at. This isn't primarily about instinctive modes, which nor is it about the way that the broader way that you can relate to a person within that fundamental structure.

There can be a lot of room for the sort of empathetic relationship that Brennan Brown's

talking about. But I think this is part of the area where people are talking across purposes. One thing I found interesting is the way that people talk about the importance of empathy, but they apply it very selectively.

So for instance, let's take situations from past couple of days with the way that people respond to any suggestion of reading into a shooter's situation, the struggles that he might be experiencing, et cetera. Empathy cannot be applied that nor should you empathize with certain groups more generally in society. There can be a quite a strong resistance to the idea of empathy applied towards certain people or certain classes.

And there's almost as if the lack of judgment within typical empathy means that you need to select very carefully who you're going to show empathy to in the first place. And it seems to me we need to get at some descriptive account of how what is called empathy is functioning within our society and how as Christians we can take what's good about that and also identify what's wrong with it, what's dangerous and damaging, and present some better alternative. I'll be interested to hear your thoughts on this, Hannah.

I think that's the way forward is to recognize there is a way to understand that does not mean affirmation. Okay. And so when I think of empathy in a very clinical sense, and again, cross purposes, but I think this illuminates where we are in this cultural moment.

It is primarily about your ability to recognize and interpret another person's emotions and to recognize and interpret your own emotions. So it is not about accepting them. It's not about affirming them.

It is simply the skill because it gets, because it's lacking, it gets taken down to bare bones. It is simply the skill to know, to know why that person is doing what they're doing, what they're potentially thinking. It's a theory of mind to be able to imagine the mind of another person.

And when I see it explained that way, I think this is absolutely what we need. We need the ability to understand without having to affirm, to be able to not just be beside, but like, I now know rationally what you are thinking and why this happened or what your actions are doing. And I find in my parenting with my son, I act as the bridge because my son is neurodiverse, my husband's neurotypical, the two of them.

And I, part of what I do is say to my husband, this is what my son's thinking. This is why he responded to you this way. This is his logic.

And to me, that's empathy. It's the capacity to understand while not saying this is okay, because there's still a lot of behavioral kind of rebellious in nature. So I wonder if the way forward is to be able to say to the groups that you're not allowed to give empathy to.

It's because as Alistair said, it comes with affirmation. It comes with acceptance of the

emotion, the acceptance of the thought process. And I think what we really need for connection and union within this moment is the ability to know and understand and recognize what another person is doing and why they're doing it.

Hannah, to that point, I think I a hundred percent agree. And I think that it's interesting to me that you used over and over again in that description, the word understand, because that's precisely the word that I think we, that's the word I would want to lean on. And I think it's the biblical word for it.

When you think about, I had a conversation about this with someone and he pointed out, you sort of live with your wife in an understanding way. You're talking about that, which doesn't imply that you think your wife is right about everything or whatnot, but that there's an attempt to sort of approximate. And it's only an approximation because I'm a man and therefore engage with the world as a man and she's a woman and so forth.

But that there's not a big sort of wall of separation that prohibits me from attempting to understand from her vantage what just happened and why the way the world is. And that that's an obligation on Christians. And so I think that, and it's not simply a cognitive thing.

It involves the imagination. It involves at some level, the emotions and sort of a phenomenological, like what does it like to be that person? Recognizing it's only an approximation because otherwise we fall into a projection where I'm projecting what I would feel into that situation and attributing it to them. But what's interesting is that you insisted there on, it doesn't carry with it affirmation.

But that's precisely, I think the way that in the wider cultural moment, it does carry with it the wider, that affirmation is essential. And to Alistair's point about, these are the studies that come out these days, which show up in Vox or whatever as this anomaly, like, whoa, highly empathetic people also tend to be highly polarized and tribal. And part of what, in talking about the sin of empathy or the dangers of empathy or whatever, it's trying to put our finger on what's going on there.

And it's not, I don't think a mystery to say we're finite creatures. And therefore to the degree that we're going to enter in, it's going to be selective. This is one of Paul Bloom's major points in his work on the, against empathy, is that empathy is highly selective.

And therefore- You can only deal with one person at a time. Exactly. And one of the, and again, this is where on the rhetorical side of things, it's been fascinating to me, watch on the one hand, people strongly react to my criticism of empathy.

And then I've seen some of those same critics turn around and say, write articles or write very critically about evangelicals empathizing with Ravi Zacharias. And I want to say exactly, I 100% agree that that's a place where when you see someone, when the Ravi

story breaks and pastor's instinctive, or, and it's not, it wasn't universal, it wasn't at all that way. But when some are saying, oh, but, and trying to understand him, that was anathema bad at all levels.

And I want to say, that shouldn't be your first reaction at all, be precisely for the reason that empathy is not a universal good. Yeah. But I think that illuminates another challenge.

On what basis is your understanding being built? And I think in a lot of places, our understanding of what another person is experiencing or thinking or doing is being built on our own emotions and our own sense of what would happen or how I would perceive myself in that moment. And that's not empathy either. Like that's very self-referential.

And I'm not sure that we can escape that other than by questions and asking and clarifying and letting this other person tell me, like you explain what's going on inside of you so that I can understand it. Because otherwise, I'm just relying on my internal resources to make a judgment or to come to some understanding of what's going on inside of you. So I think this is also something that we have to actively pull out of each other and be willing to say, explain it to me.

I don't know what your experience is like. I think that's one of the things that has been an important part of the conversation that has maybe not come to the surface, but the way in which to maintain a sense of otherness between the person that you're showing compassion to. So first of all, you're not projecting onto them.

And also, you're not just doing this by virtue of affiliation, because you can always see yourself and people who are like you. The challenge is relating to the feelings with understanding of someone who's very different from you. So you give the example, Hannah, of dealing with someone who is neuroatypical.

And that is a challenge that pushes you outside of your instinctive mode. And I think there's more of a moral character to that than just the instinctive affiliation with people who are like us, which can often be very dangerous, particularly in a context where, for instance, racial divides, things like that, where you naturally can affiliate more with people who are like you, who go to the same church as you do, who are living in the same community, whatever it is. And there, I think, maybe what we're looking for is that ability to actually connect with people without dispensing with judgment, without projecting onto people, without being very selective in the people that we are able to reach out to in that way.

But to expand our capacity to relate to people, whether through talking with Karen Swallow Pryor recently about the importance of reading good novels that push you beyond your instinctive associations and the people that you'd naturally affiliate with, and the ability of that to serve moral purpose. You can think about the work of Harriet

Beecher Stowe and others like that, that gave people, or Charles Dickens, that gave people a sense of what it was like to be someone experiencing great oppression within their social systems, and the ability of that to provoke people to take compassionate action. And I think compassion here, I found a helpful term to lean upon in thinking about something that retains that otherness, because it is something that requires that movement of action.

But it's not terminating on the self. And I think empathy can often be about assuaging our own feelings. It's one of the reasons why empathy can often drive arguments, for instance, for killing unborn Downs children in the womb, because you feel something that's alienating about their experience in the world.

And there's no sense of that person's life can have value as that life. It may not be something that I see myself in, but that is something that we should treasure and protect and honor. And there, I think, the same instinct in assisted suicide, other things like that, so much of the instinct there, I think, by not being able to draw that distance, it ends up being terminated upon ourselves.

So when we're showing charity, it's about feeling better about myself, feeling no longer guilty. And that's not quite the same thing as actually moving out in charity to someone else, and wanting to make things better for them. So just to wrap up, I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on this before we conclude.

I just, I think that, Alasdair, your point there at the end about the difference between sort of the instinctive empathy, or empathy as a sort of instinctive reaction, and sort of, therefore, under the category of passions. And then, Hannah, I think this is probably coming from your, the neurodiversity sort of discussion of empathy as a learned skill that involves understanding what it's like to be someone else, or to put yourself into their position, and understand what it looks like, but without necessarily affirming it. I think that sort of distinction, and this is part of what, you know, circling back to the beginning, the word empathy seems to be used to apply to both of those phenomenon, which are not the same phenomenon.

And then, therefore, if you're wanting to criticize the first one, and the dangers of the first one for leaders, or the dangers for of the first one for communities, when that becomes ascendant, to try to do that, because it goes under that name of empathy, but without sort of implying that the second understanding, and the imaginative work of understanding what it's like to be someone else, that that's a good thing that we ought to not just sort of, that doesn't just happen for some, it needs to be taught, and it's a skill to cultivate. That's the difficulty that we're facing, and my hope is that, you know, it is possible for a conversation like this to be illuminating for people, precisely because it's making those kind of distinctions, and saying, here's the danger we need to be afraid of, and it goes under the name empathy, and here's the good thing we need to cultivate,

also goes under the name empathy, and that's where I would want to kind of continue to push people in the midst of the conversation. Yeah, and I don't think it's going away, and this would be the only thing I would add, is I think a lot of this is rooted in the fact that socialization, and bonding, and attachment in our time has fallen on the individual.

It used to be distributed through institutions. It used to be distributed through the infrastructure of society, and as that has fragmented, the ability to do this kind of work has separated those who can do it well, and those who can't, because not because there's anything wrong with being able to do it well, or not do it well, but that the shape of society has demanded it of us, not just because of progressive kind of movement, but because we are so alienated from each other by the shape, by the loss of, you know, just community. We are alienated from each other, and so to be able to help people cultivate this skill, I do think is, and be aware of the way it will be perverted and become toxic.

It is the need of this moment because of the way we have been fragmented and isolated from each other. So it is maybe your bomb worked and got everybody talking. We'll see.

I think those final remarks really resonate with me, Hannah. I think there's a great sense of vulnerability that people have simply because they don't have context of formation. They feel very isolated.

They feel fragilized, and so within these broader contexts of social media, they need some sense of affirmation and belonging and presence of others with them, but in a healthy society, those things are provided in a great many different contexts that allow for a realm of judgment to exist without it intruding upon that realm of communion that can exist alongside it, and I wonder whether much of what we need to do here is to consider how we create spaces that enable us to engage in the integrity of relationship, but also in the judgment that needs to take place and the difference that needs to be maintained between people. Joe and Hannah, thank you so much for joining me. This has been a long conversation, but I hope it's been as illuminating for the listeners as it has been for me.