

Research shows compassion and euthanasia don't always jibe

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New research from Case Western Reserve University found that compassion can produce counterintuitive results, challenging prevailing views of empathy's effects on moral judgment.

To understand how humans make moral choices, researchers asked subjects to respond to a variety of moral dilemmas, for instance: Whether to stay and defend a mortally wounded soldier until he dies or shoot him to protect him from enemy torture and enable you and five other soldiers to escape unharmed.

Leading research has said people make choices based on a struggle within their brains between thoughtful reason and automatic passion.

"But this simple reason versus passion model fails to capture that there's a refined way of thinking with emotions, closely related to empathy and [compassion](#)," said Anthony Jack, Director of Research at the Inamori International Center for Ethics and Excellence, associate professor of [cognitive science](#), psychology and philosophy at Case Western Reserve and lead author of the new research.

Co-authors are Philip Robbins, of the department of philosophy at the University of Missouri, Jared P. Friedman, who just graduated with a BA in cognitive science and philosophy from Case Western Reserve, and Chris D. Meyers, of the department of philosophy at the University of Southern Mississippi. Their study is published in the journal *Advances in Experimental Philosophy of Mind*.

The researchers agree that there are two networks in the brain that fight to guide our moral decisions, but say that leading work, by Joshua Greene at Harvard University, mischaracterizes the networks involved and how they operate.

A new model

"There's a tension between cold hard reasoning—what's called analytic reasoning— and another type of reasoning important to emotions, self-regulation and social insight," Jack explained. "The second type of reasoning isn't characterized by being caught up in reflexive and primitive emotions, as Greene suggests. It's critically important to understanding and appreciating the experiential point of view of others."

Using functional magnetic resonance imagers (fMRI), Jack has found that the human brain has an analytic network and an empathetic network that tend to suppress one another.

For example, in a healthy brain, physics problems activate the analytic network and deactivate the empathetic. Meanwhile, videos or stories that put a subject in the shoes of another activate the empathetic network and deactivate the analytic.

In these studies, students from Case Western Reserve and groups of adults recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk responded to a series of questions about themselves and their views. They were then asked to make choices about a series of moral conundrums.

Among the conundrums were questions involving [euthanasia](#). The respondents clearly made different choices between actions taken for a suffering dog versus a suffering person.

Counterintuitive

"For humans, we privilege their autonomy or life spirit over their basic emotions, such as how much pain they're in. In contrast, our view of non-human animals tends to be more reductive – we see them as little more than their emotions" Jack said.

"Even though people talk about euthanasia with animals as the humane thing to do, people who are more empathetic have the greatest opposition to euthanasia involving a human," he said.

Subjects were presented scenarios that included passive euthanasia, such as halting medical intervention, and active euthanasia, such as assisting in the subject's death.

"More compassionate people didn't think euthanasia was appropriate for humans, even when we told them the person would be in pain for the rest of his or her life," Jack said. "That is surprising, because the way we measure compassion is to assess how much people are concerned by the suffering of others."

Here again, the researchers argue, Greene's model falls short. According to Greene, those who oppose utilitarian thinking (e.g., euthanasia), should have higher levels of reflexive, primitive, raw emotion. Instead, the researchers found that those who were more susceptible to personal distress were actually more likely to support euthanasia.

Opposition to utilitarian thinking was predicted specifically by compassion, not by measures of primitive or reflexive emotion. "Our culture often paints empathy as weakness," Jack said, "Greene's model plays into that view, suggesting that those who don't like utilitarian thinking are intellectually weak and ruled by primitive passions. But these views are fundamentally misleading. Compassion is actually linked

to stronger emotion regulation abilities. Decades of research shows that we have to overcome our reflexive feelings of aversion and distress to be ready and willing to help others."

The researchers found that people judged to be more compassionate and empathetic by their peers – for instance better listeners - tended to oppose utilitarian choices such as sacrificing one to save the many or euthanasia.

The findings suggest that more compassionate people have more of a sense of the sanctity of human life. "The idea that life is sacred may be hard for the reductive, analytic mind to grasp, but it is hardly a primitive or reflexive sentiment" Jack said.

That's not to say that, given more information, the compassionate will continue to oppose euthanasia. The conundrums were limited in an important way: the test subjects knew nothing about the wishes of the person suffering.

The researchers are continuing their studies. They expect to see a different relationship between compassion and moral judgments about euthanasia when more is understood about the person who is suffering, in particular when continued suffering undermines that person's life narrative.

More information: www.bloomsbury.com/us/advances...-mind-9781472507334/

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