Photo of the Day |



A student studies outside on Nov. 3rd, 2026. The unexpected warmth draws people outside in Storrs, CT.
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EMPATHY IS NOT A BARGAINING CHIP

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"In humans, empathy comes naturally. Even day-old infants cry more when they hear another infant cry," psychologist Martin Hoffman wrote in the 1981 paper "Empathy and moral development: Implications for caring and justice."

Hoffman explored the phenomenon of empathy in his psychology research, observing that even newborn infants instinctively respond to the distress of others. Before we can speak, understand politics or even recognize ourselves as separate individuals, we are already capable of responding to another person's suffering.

However, as we have grown older, a feeling so intrinsic seems to have become something that needs justification.

A common critique against pro-Palestine advocates who happen to be LGBTQ+ follows: Why would you support Palestinians if they wouldn't support you? Palestinians are all homophobic, and if you were queer in Palestine, you would be unaccepted — or even killed. Queer people are hypocrites for supporting Palestine.

Besides the presumptuous generalization of an entire population, this argument is particularly disturbing because of what it says about the nature of empathy: that compassion must be earned, that someone's suffering only deserves understanding and attention if they would extend the same sympathy to us.

But empathy is not transactional, nor is it conditional or dependent on whether you like someone or if they like you.

Even if you experience prejudice from a person of color, that should not change your opposition to racism. If you encounter discrimination from a woman, that should not change your opposition to misogyny. The beliefs and actions of individuals should not determine whether we recognize the injustices faced by entire groups of people. Assuming a group of people do not support you does not mean that suddenly overlooking and condoning injustice is OK—especially in the case of a genocide. Recognizing someone's humanity should not require anything in return.

Besides, why should someone have to agree with you on everything to be deserving of human rights? There is a fundamental difference between recognizing and disapproving of someone's beliefs and deciding that their suffering is somehow justified. You can condemn homophobia and transphobia — or any other bigotry — and still be against the murder of innocent people. These are not mutually exclusive or contradictory positions, and they should not be treated as such.

This idea extends beyond Palestine though — in our increasingly partisan and polarized society, empathy itself has become politicized. Our sympathy is only reserved for those whose beliefs align with ours; people on the "other side" are undeserving and their suffering is left to be minimized and mocked. Suddenly someone's religion, personal beliefs and politics become relevant to the background check for compassion.

While yes, I do think that politics reveal your morality, that does not equate to ignoring someone's humanity and their rights. You can criticize and hold someone accountable for their beliefs while still recognizing that they are human. If you see someone's house burning down, you're not going to ask who they voted for before calling the fire department. Compassion does not demand agreement and disagreement does not justify cruelty.

The idea of conditional understanding also undermines the principles people claim to defend. If you only oppose discrimination when its victims are people similar to you, are you really against discrimination?

Human rights cannot become contingent on political compatibility. Injustice cannot become justice merely because its victims are people we disagree with. By that logic, you also only deserve empathy and humanity from the people who happen to like you rather than people who genuinely understand your struggles.

No one is obligated to agree with, forgive or even like everybody. But we cannot treat empathy as some kind of reward for good behavior. Human rights are called human rights for a reason. They are not privileges to be earned nor are they dependent on someone's beliefs, actions or willingness to extend those same rights to others. They are rights we have simply because we are human and human suffering should never be something we evaluate according to what we receive in return. We extend empathy because someone else is human — full stop.