The ethics of compassion

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBMZiaD-OYo&t=29s

Empathy and Compassion

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. It involves putting yourself in someone else's shoes and feeling what they feel. It's about recognizing and connecting with their emotions.

Compassion, on the other hand, goes beyond empathy. It involves not only understanding someone's suffering but also having a strong desire to alleviate that suffering. Compassion motivates you to take action to help and support others.

Empathy and Compassion
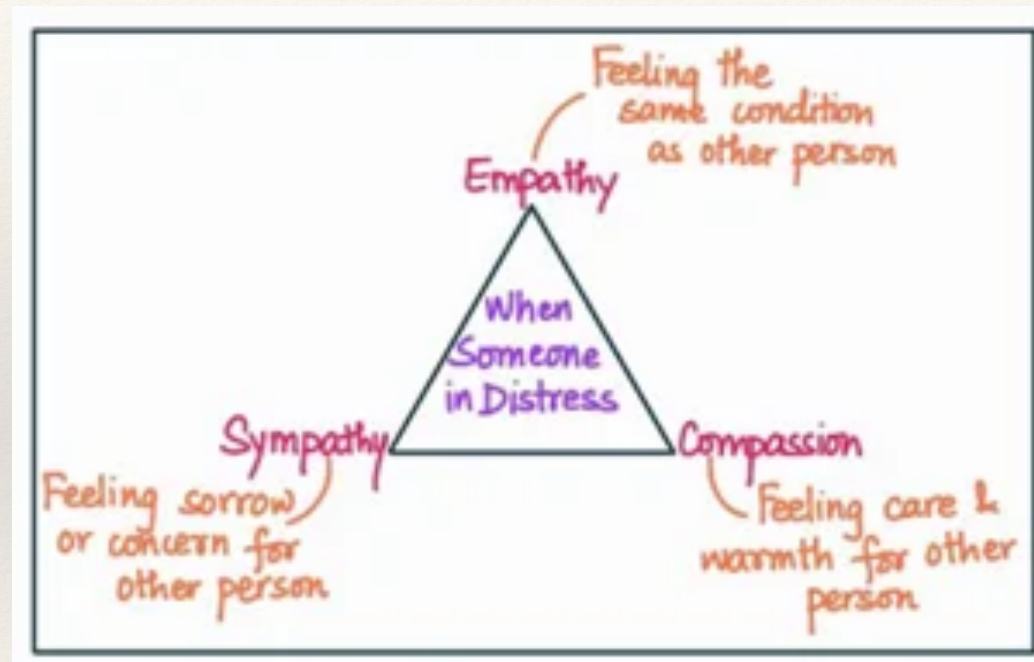
Aristotle's view

Aristotle believed that empathy and compassion are important human traits that can help people achieve happiness:

❖ *Empathy*
Aristotle considered empathy to be the most important human trait and the core of understanding others. He believed that empathetic people use their knowledge of others' situations to inform their emotional responses, and act accordingly.

❖ *Compassion*
Aristotle defined compassion as a feeling of pain at the suffering of someone who doesn't deserve it. He believed that compassion is an emotional response, and that it's part of a moral relationship.

A utilitarian view

A *utilitarian perspective* generally views empathy and compassion as important factors in moral decision-making, but not as the sole determinant, as the ultimate goal is to maximize overall happiness. Essentially, prioritizing the "greater good" over individual emotional responses like empathy.

Key points:

❖ *Empathy as a tool:*
   While not the foundation of morality, empathy can be a valuable tool for a utilitarian to understand the potential consequences of their actions and to identify situations where maximizing happiness might require sacrifice or difficult choices.

❖ *Potential for bias:*
   A major concern with relying solely on empathy is that it can be biased based on personal connections or social factors, potentially leading to unequal consideration of different individuals' well-being.

❖ *Cognitive evaluation needed:*
   A utilitarian would argue that while empathy can signal a situation requiring action, a rational assessment of the situation is crucial to ensure the action taken truly maximizes overall happiness.

A Kantian view

According to Kant, while empathy and compassion can be beneficial in motivating moral action, they are not the primary foundation of morality; instead, he emphasizes the importance of acting out of duty based on reason, meaning that the true moral worth of an action comes from acting according to a universal principle, not simply feeling sympathy for someone's suffering.

Key points about Kant's view on empathy and compassion:

❖ *Not the primary motivator:*
Kant argues that relying solely on empathy to guide moral action can be unreliable as emotions can fluctuate, and true moral action should stem from a rational understanding of duty.

❖ *Potential for manipulation:*
Kant worries that relying heavily on empathy could lead to biased moral judgments based on who we feel closer to emotionally.
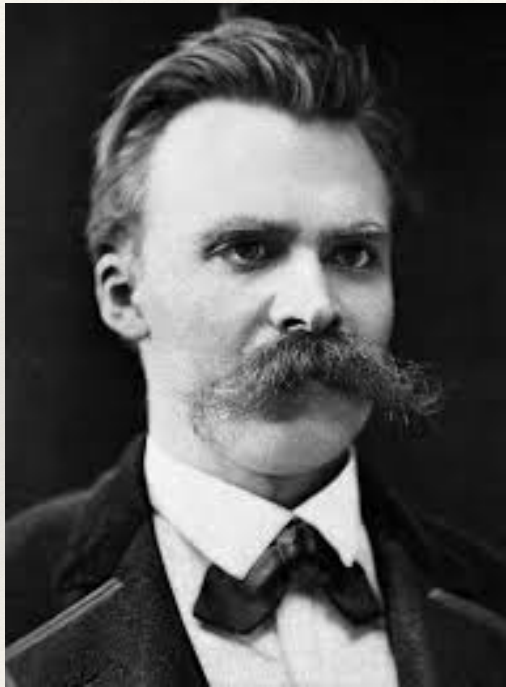
❖ *Role of reason:*
Kant believes that our moral actions should be guided by reason, applying the categorical imperative to determine what is morally right, regardless of our personal feelings towards the situation or the people involved.

A radically different view: Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900): German philosopher

Best known for
"GOD IS DEAD"
and his two essays,
"Also sprach Zarathustra" (Thus spoke Zarathustra)
and
"Jenseists von Gut und Böse" (Beyond Good and Evil)

Nietzsche: a critique of morality

Nietzsche distinguishes between *master morality* and *slave morality:*

- **Master morality** is characterized by values such as **strength, power, creativity, and self-affirmation**. It arises from those who see themselves as strong and independent.

- **Slave morality**, on the other hand, emerges from the perspective of the weak, valuing traits like **humility, compassion, and equality**. It is reactive, arising from resentment ("ressentiment") toward the strong.

He associates slave morality with Christianity and other systems that glorify self-sacrifice and deny individual vitality.

Nietzsche's view

The Will to Power:

- Nietzsche argues that life is fundamentally driven by a "will to power"—a striving for growth, dominance, and self-overcoming. He sees traditional morality as suppressing this drive.

Beyond Good and Evil:

- Nietzsche rejects the binary notions of "good" and "evil" as absolute categories, viewing them as constructs of specific cultures or power structures. He encourages individuals to go "beyond good and evil" and create their own values based on their unique perspectives and circumstances.

The Death of God:

- Nietzsche's famous proclamation that "God is dead" reflects his belief that traditional religious and moral frameworks have lost their credibility in the modern age.

The Übermensch (Overman):

- Nietzsche introduces the concept of the **Übermensch** as an ideal figure who creates their own values and lives authentically, free from the constraints of conventional morality. The Übermensch embodies strength, creativity, and the will to power.

Comparing the different frameworks

Features	Utilitarian	Kant	Virtue Ethics	Nietzsche
Goal	Maximize collective happiness	Follow universal moral laws	Develop moral character	Affirm individual will of power
Focus	Consequences	Duties and rules	Virtues and florishing	Individual strength and creativity
Source of morality	Collective utility	Rational principles	Human nature	Individual creativity
View on suffering	Minimize suffering	Irrelevant to morality	Suffering can build virtue	Necessary for growth

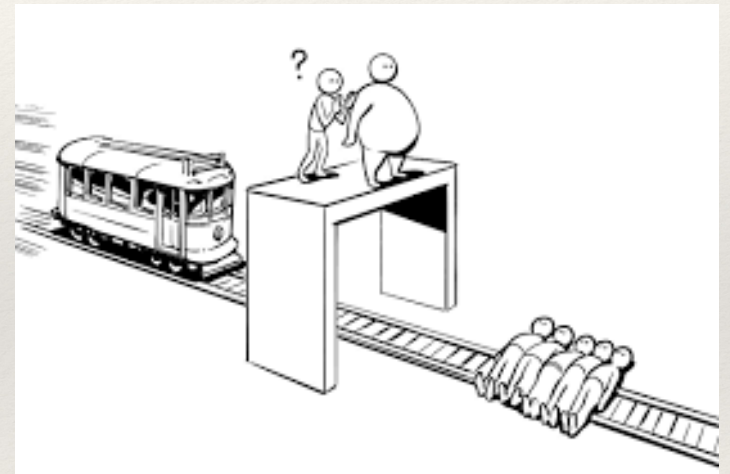# Can empathy influence judgement?
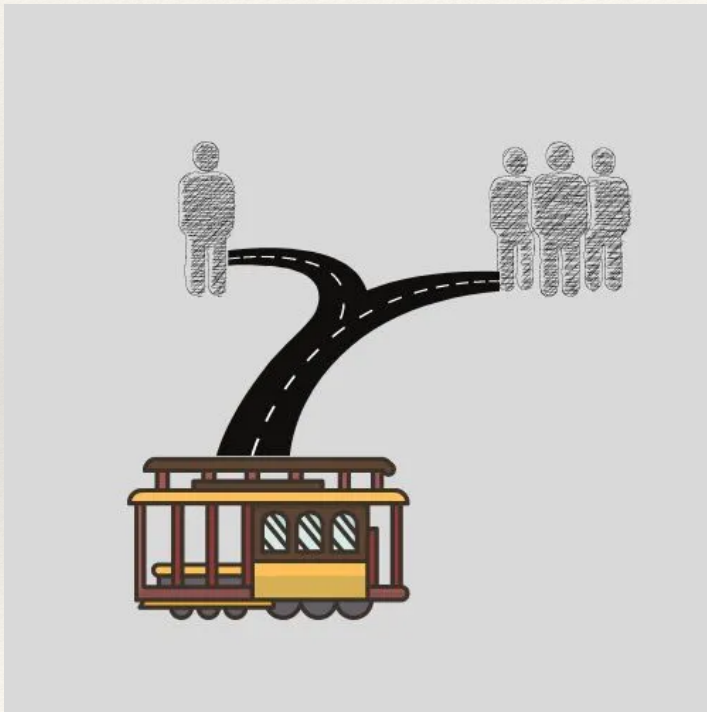
Trolley problem:

Can empathy influence judgement?
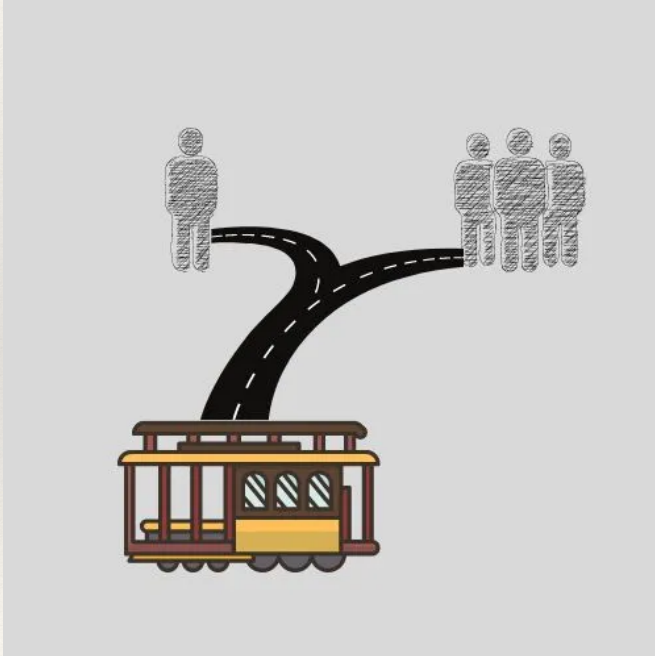
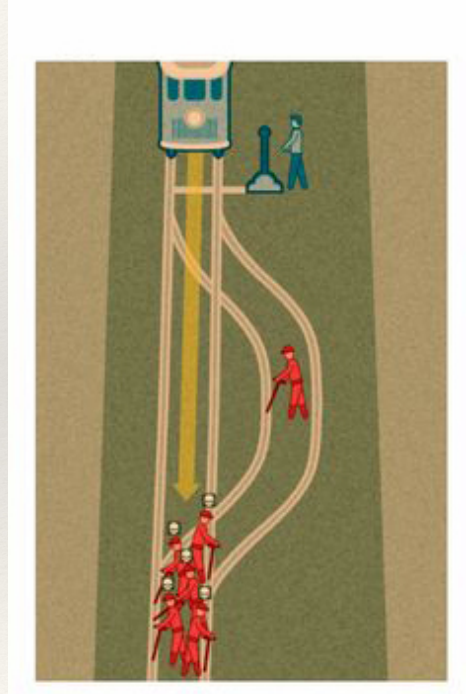*Trolley problem:*

Footbridge problem:
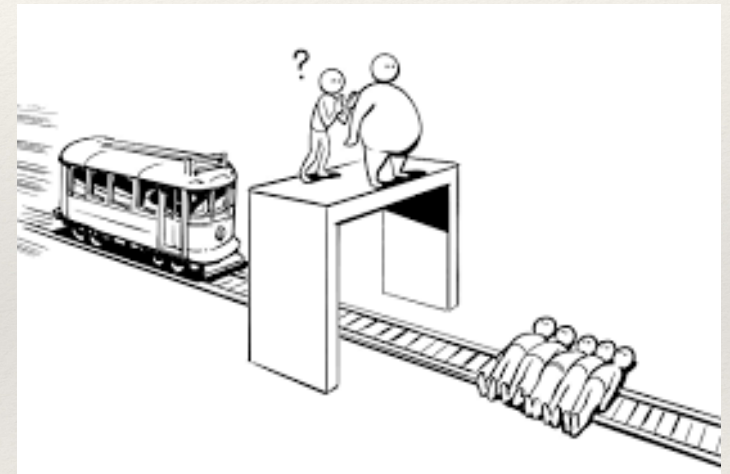
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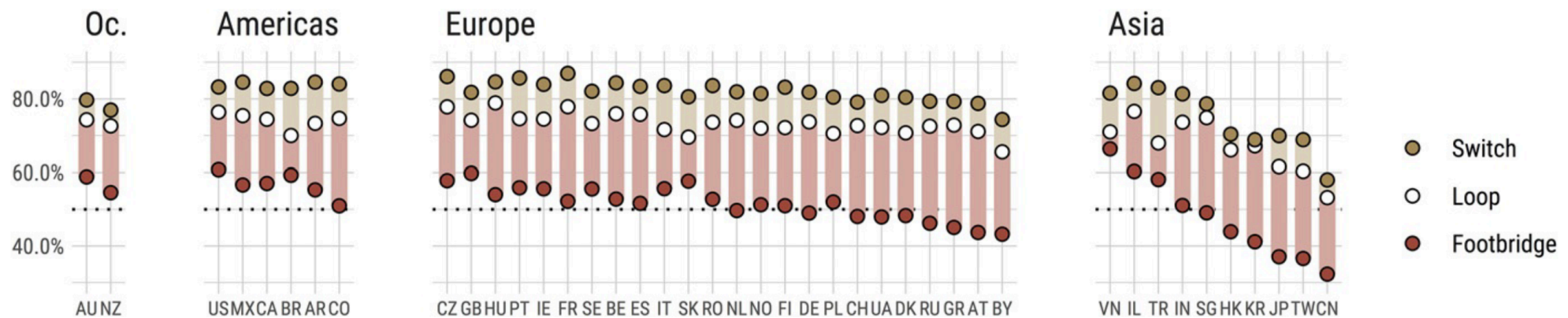
Trolley problem:

Loop problem:

Footbridge problem:

Can empathy influence judgement?

Willingness to sacrifice:

"Were we incapable of empathy – of putting ourselves in the position of others and seeing that their suffering is like our own – then ethical reasoning would lead nowhere. If emotion without reason is blind, then reason without emotion is impotent."

Peter Singer