

This Book
Will Make You
Kinder



● *An Empathy Handbook* ●

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*For my parents, who gave all that they are to make me all that I am.
And for Kitty. Some worry that being too sensitive to the suffering of others
forces one to withdraw from doing the work; to them I would like to
introduce Kitty, the softest soul and yet the most relentless kindness warrior,
who does the work every fucking day.*



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This is a book about kindness as well as its absence and opposite. For that reason, it includes examples of cruelties no one should experience, which many people do. Violence, trauma, and oppression alter the mind-body in ways that those of us privileged enough to have avoided such experiences are rarely cognizant of. An unexpected reference that calls forth a memory or triggers something bodily in someone who has survived what they should never have experienced can cause intolerable suffering. Requests for content notes, then, are not cases of people being oversensitive—that belief is born of a failure of empathy (more on that to come). All this to say: Content notes are necessary, not a big ask, and this is one.

This book will make reference to: sexual violence, rape, dehumanization, mental illness, classism, poverty, migrantism, border policing, homelessness, fatphobia, transphobia, colonialism, police violence, ableism, interphobia, racism, sexism, homophobia, animal cruelty, and dogs attacking a human.

●●●● Introduction ●●●●

This book will make you kinder. I'm not picking on you; it's just that you're the one reading it. This book will hopefully make anyone who reads it kinder and will hopefully be read by loads of people.

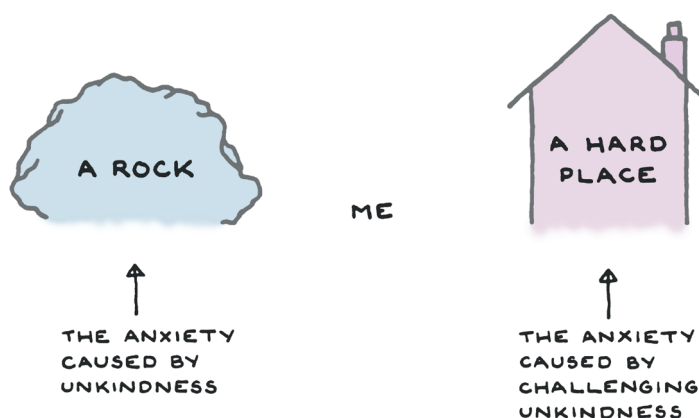
I've found that I have to write a book that makes people kinder.

The reason I have to do that has something to do with the fact that I suffer from anxiety. Anxiety sufferers vary a lot; what triggers paralyzing fear in one can be very different from what terrifies another. Some people are stressed by large, open spaces; others, by confined ones; some unfortunate people are stressed by both.

One of the many things that I find anxiety-inducing is unkindness, including my own. My whole body seizes up in panic when I notice the most minor inadvertent hurts people cause one another. You can imagine the stress that a populist backlash against basic forms of human decency is causing me.

I want the world to be less cruel so that I can find it a less stressful place to live (an ironically selfish motive for creating a better world).

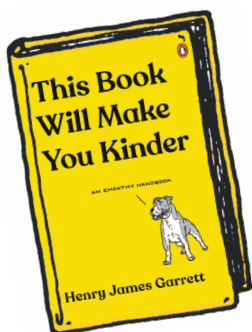
But thanks to the aforementioned anxiety, I'm terrified by many of the routes I might take to make the world kinder. Most of the ways one could go about changing things involve meeting people and talking with them face-to-face. And, stressful though unkindness is, I find interacting with strangers even more so.



I'm caught between a rock and a terrifying social situation: desperate to make people kinder, but stressed out by actually having to talk to them about it.

So a book seems the best route forward for me. If I can sit here, on my own, in my slippers, and write something that will drastically increase your kindness—without us ever having to actually meet—that's the dream scenario for me.

This is that book.



(Secretly, I'm hoping that billions of people read this book and that they all suddenly become as kind as the kindest person I know. Then I can sneak off and live in a tree house with my partner and feel like I did my bit. I don't think it's particularly likely, but it's worth a shot.)

There's one thing I need you to know from the start: I'm not writing this book because I think I'm particularly kind. I don't. I'm not writing from a place of kindness superiority. I've just spent a lot of time thinking about kindness and its limits, because I spend so much of my time stressed out by all the cruelty. And I was lucky enough to get a chance to write those thoughts down.

In fact, this book represents my second attempt to write down these very musings. The first was a few years ago. I had thought for some reason that the best place to go to write stuff that would make people kinder was an academic philosophy department.

So, I started a philosophy PhD (on the subject of empathy and metaethics). My goal was to become a professor who wrote papers so compelling that they left the academic sphere and convinced everyone to be more moral. Instead, it was I who left academia. My anxiety (compounded, perhaps, by those unrealistic aspirations) forced me to drop out of my studies.

At that point, I began working in earnest on these drawings. I needed a way to feel I was contributing to a kinder world, as well as a job that my anxiety would allow me to do, and I was spending most of my time with my dog, Billie, who's always cared for me when I've been unwell. Hence, *Drawings of Dogs*—and my peculiar cartooning career—was born (I've since branched out from just drawing dogs).

I draw anthropomorphized animals, plants, and inanimate objects chatting verbosely and try to make gentle, Trojan-horse points about how humans mistreat one another.

I feel ecstatic and incredibly grateful that things have somehow come a weird full circle. Those cartoons (and the generous, beautifully loyal people who've connected with them) have led me here, to writing this book. And what I'm trying to write is a jargon-free version of what I intended to write as a philosopher (with the benefit of everything I've learned in the intervening years as well as a much wider audience): an illustrated book that makes its reader kinder.

YOU + THIS BOOK

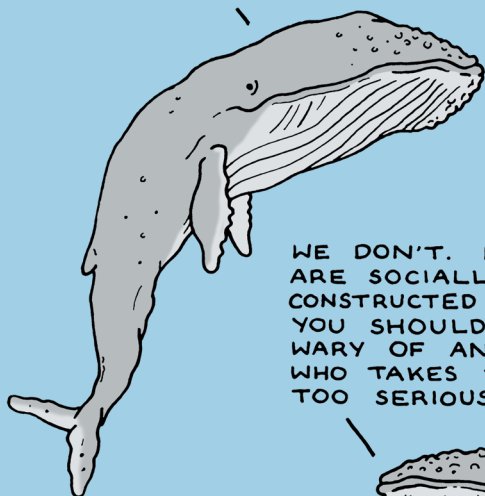
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YOU, BUT KINDER



When I talk about making you kinder, I don't just mean the everyday kindness of taking out your neighbor's bins—although I'd hate to downplay the importance of small acts. I also mean the strong, courageous, moral kindness of fighting injustice or sacrificing something for a worthy cause; I mean the hard work of self-reflection and self-improvement that is the only path to challenging the ways we've been conditioned

MAMA, HOW DO WE
KNOW WHEN WE'VE
CROSSED FROM
ONE OCEAN TO
ANOTHER?



WE DON'T. BORDERS
ARE SOCIALLY
CONSTRUCTED AND
YOU SHOULD BE
WARY OF ANYONE
WHO TAKES THEM
TOO SERIOUSLY.



by our society to be cruel to certain groups en masse. I plan to make you kinder in this sense; I mean to cover all the good and bad that we do to one another (I did say it was an unrealistically ambitious book).

In talking about kindness, I'm also talking about all of morality. And you'll notice that I flit back and forth, using those words nearly synonymously. That's because in my view, morality is the domain of thought in which we inquire as to which kindnesses and abstentions from cruelty we owe to and can expect from one another. (The language of morality is often used more broadly than this. People use *immoral* to capture a wide range of prohibitions on behaviors that they find yucky, threatening, or distasteful. But that's not what morality, as I believe it should be understood, is about.)

MORALITY ≠ WHAT I FIND YUCKY

In my view, to say that something is *morally right* is just to say that it's a form of kindness that is required of you. To describe something as *morally wrong* is to say that it's a form of cruelty you mustn't commit.

So, along with making you kinder, this book's going to help you get a firm handle on that most slippery of subjects: morality.¹



A book that could make everyone kinder, in this sense, is desperately needed right now (although, it's doubtful there's ever been a time it hasn't). Unkindness has been given new energy and legitimacy in recent years. Long-brewing fear and resentment have been redirected from the powerful toward the most powerless people in our society. Cruelty has stepped from the shadows, has rebranded, and now occupies many of the world's highest political offices.

So, how could a book possibly make you kinder? My strategy will be to answer two questions:

- ♦ Why are we kind?
- ♦ Why aren't we kinder?

Working out why humans are kind at all is a good place to start. If we can't agree on why humans are a bit kind, we're unlikely to agree on the best route to making them all a bit kinder. And I don't think we do agree on the basic source of human kindness.

There are a number of explanations on offer, and they suggest different acceptable limits to our kindness and different routes to expanding those limits. I'll present a specific account of human kindness and morality, one that gives empathy a central role,² and build from there in getting us all to step it up a gear.



OOOOOH,
TOPICAL!



(A quick aside: I want it to be clear that what I offer here is one account among many of the foundations of morality. Many people will disagree with it, and that's OK. Although I sincerely believe this account to be in some sense *the truth* about morality, and I'd quite like you to agree, I also recognize that other people believe alternative accounts just as sincerely, that I don't have privileged access to the truth of the matter, and that one group trying to enforce its view of morality on another is morally reprehensible—and has, ironically, been the pretext for many atrocities. All of this should go without saying, but it's the fault of people who have tended to look like me that it does not.)

I want to engage you in these abstract questions because it's my view that this is where our moral discrepancies get their foothold, though we tend not to notice it. Arguments about politics, morality, and how we should live rarely end in anyone changing their mind. How often have you felt you're wasting your time in an ethical dispute, like you're a pair of monolingual UN diplomats and all the translators are on strike, leaving you ardently talking past one another in different languages?

People talk past each other on moral matters because their true disagreement exists elsewhere; the real source of disagree-

ment is often that those involved arrived with different ideas about what and how much we owe to one another. When one person's starting point is a far more limited conception of what morality can demand than the other's, there's little chance of them seeing eye-to-eye on specific moral questions. But we never move the conversation further back, to the abstract questions about what morality demands—or what morality even is.



Those who hold narrow views of our duties to one another are wrong, in my view. Those who think, for example, that as long as you're not breaking the law, you can't be acting immorally simply don't get morality.

We owe each other far more than we tend to recognize. But we need to have that conversation head-on. My hope is that when we do, we'll see that we are far from doing enough. This book will help everyone who reads it reset their threshold for how much kindness is owed, leaving you with the realization that we've all been falling short for some time (that's OK, though; it's what we do with that realization that matters).

Most of the books that aim to make you kinder do so by getting specific. They get down to the nitty-gritty in a particular area of politics, applied ethics, or social justice; they try to show you specifically what you've been getting wrong, and how you ought to change your actions going forward. We need books like that; I've read some incredible ones and have had my behavior changed by them.³

But with this book, I'm aiming to get a bit more meta. I want to go beyond the specifics, further back than any *particular* kindness question, and see if we can find some solid ground. I want us to move closer to a world in which we arrive at political disputes with a shared background assumption that we owe one another an awful lot, so that we can focus on the problem of how to act on that assumption.

With this book, I'm going to argue that you are kind because of empathy,⁴ and the only reason you aren't kinder is because you make mistakes that switch that empathy off.

WHY ARE YOU KIND?

THROUGH EMPATHY, YOU SHARE
IN THE FEELINGS OF OTHERS.

WHY AREN'T YOU KINDER?

YOUR EMPATHY IS LIMITED
BY MISTAKES.

Our evolved capacity for empathy—our capacity to experience those feelings we witness in others—is in my view (and hopefully in yours, by the end of this book) the source of human kindness and the foundation of morality.

Our automatic tendency to empathetically partake in the pain and pleasure of others is a sufficient explanation of our concern for people's well-being and our motivation to act kindly. But if the empathy you experience right now were the beginning and end of the kindness discussion, there wouldn't be much point in this book.

Turns out, our empathy malfunctions when we make certain types of mistakes.

When you don't know enough about others and how your choices affect them, or when you hold false beliefs that similarly obscure the lived consequences of your actions, it's impossible for your empathy to motivate you to act as it otherwise would. Certain kinds of ignorance can result in you witnessing someone in pain and feeling no part of that pain. Ignorance can switch your empathy off.

Therefore, it's not your actual, currently occurring empathy that counts; it's the empathy you would feel if you weren't making any mistakes. It's empathy in the absence of empathy-limiting ignorance that matters, morally speaking.

Empathy – ignorance = morality (or, the kindness we owe one another).

Making someone kinder, then, has more to do with getting rid of the bad reasons they have for limiting their kindness than it does with providing new reasons to be kind. Ultimately this book is about helping you become better at spotting empathy-

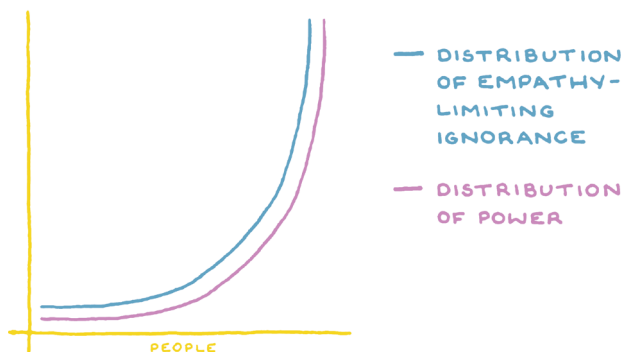


limiting mistakes and less prone to making new ones; to that end we'll explore a taxonomy of common types of mistakes.



We must also be mindful of the fact that the ignorance that makes humans cruel is not evenly distributed. And that's because power is not evenly distributed. A large chunk of empathy-limiting mistakes have as their subject members of an oppressed group or marginalized community. It's more likely that people (like me) from more privileged groups will hold those beliefs and maintain that ignorance, which enables us to be cruel to oppressed folk, than vice versa.

Not everyone is equally responsible for the “empathy deficit,”⁵

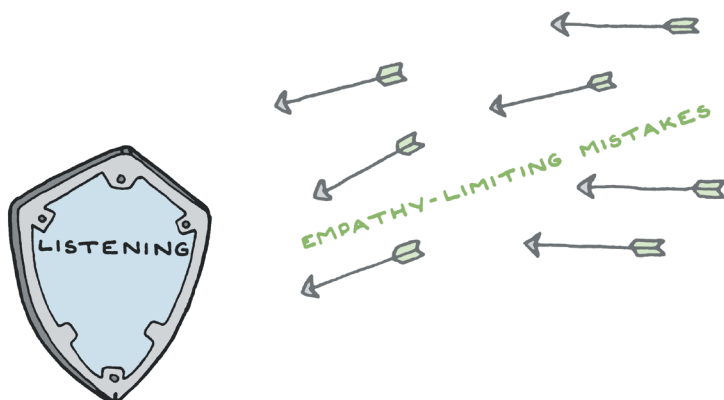


and I'm at pains to make sure that no one finishes this book thinking that was my message. I'm not claiming that everyone needs to strengthen their empathy toward everyone else; that,

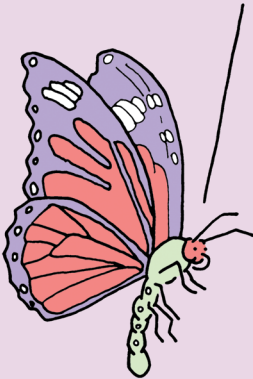
for example, survivors of men's sexual violence need to find a way to empathize more wholly with violent men. Not in the slightest.

Oppressed people are already doing a good enough job of empathizing with their oppressors.⁶ Our society is set up to encourage only *some* forms of empathy-limiting ignorance: those that justify and therefore cement power. It's set up that way not through some mysterious conspiracy but because only certain types of stories get told; we learn a lot about some groups' experiences and are encouraged in our ignorance of others'.

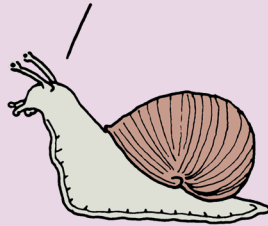
It follows that the best defense against some of the most common empathy-limiting mistakes is listening to marginalized people directly. If you seek out those voices that have been actively silenced and listen to and believe what they have to say, you'll be far less likely to make a mistake that stops you from empathizing. To be clear, by listening, I don't just mean partaking in audible conversation (in the sense used here, deaf people are able to listen); by listening, I mean an active effort to receive what someone is communicating, through any medium, to you.



HELLO, I AM A
BUTTERFLY.



HELLO CATERPILLAR.
YOU ARE A
CATERPILLAR.



TRANSPHOBIA