

# Five Things Worth Knowing About Empathy

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A tortoise lies on its back, legs waving in distress, until a second tortoise crawls up to turn it over. Millions have watched this [scene on YouTube](#), with many leaving heartfelt comments. “Great sense of solidarity,” says one. “There is hope,” says another.

The viewers are responding to what many interpret as empathy — a sign that even in the animal world, life isn’t just dog-eat-dog. Alas, they’re probably wrong. As one reptile expert observed, the second tortoise’s motives were likelier more sexual than sympathetic.

Consider it a cautionary tale for our times, in which politicians urge us to cultivate more empathy, and scientists churn out volumes of work on the subject, with more than 2,000 published papers in 2019 alone. For all its popularity, empathy isn’t nearly as simple as so many blogs and books make it seem. Researchers can’t even agree on what empathy means: One paper noted 43 different definitions, ranging from basic shared emotions to more lofty mixtures of concern and kindness.

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