

# The Dark Side of Empathy

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## *The Atlantic:*

I'm not usually in favor of killing, but I'd make an exception for the leaders of ISIS. I'd feel a certain satisfaction if they were wiped off the face of the Earth. This is a pretty typical attitude, shared even by many of my more liberal friends, even though, intellectually, it's not something that we're comfortable with or proud of.

Where does this malice come from? Psychologists have standard explanations for murderous feelings towards groups of strangers, but none of them apply here. I don't think ISIS is a threat to me or my family or my way of life; I'm not driven by disgust and contempt; I don't dehumanize them; I don't think of them as vermin or dogs.

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You can see this process at work in research published last year by the psychologists Anneke Buffone and Michael Poulin. Subjects were told about a competition between two students in another room of the lab. Half of the subjects read an essay in which one of the students described herself as being in distress ("I've never been this low on funds and it really scares me"); the others read an essay in which she was mellow ("I've never been this low on funds, but it doesn't really bother me"). The subjects were then told that they were going to help out in a study of pain and performance, wherein they would get to choose how much hot sauce the student's competitor would have to consume.

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I've come up with similar findings in a series of studies done in collaboration with the Yale graduate student Nick Stagnaro. We start by giving people a simple test that measures their degree of empathy.

Read the whole story: [The Atlantic](#)