

Istvan Czachesz, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg

Morality after Empathy? Current Trends in the Cognitive and Neuroscientific Study of Empathy and Their Implications for Biblical Interpretation

This paper surveys current trends in the cognitive and neuroscientific study of empathy and considers how they inform the understanding of the role of empathy in biblical literature. Inspired by the work of Frans de Waal, the pioneering monograph of Thomas Kazen (2011) examined the role of empathy in the ethical dimension of biblical law. The first part of this paper will extend Kazen's approach, exploring how multi-layered (de Waal) and multi-dimensional (Decety) models of empathy stand up against empirical evidence and how the complexities of textual transmission and readers' perspectives factor into the use of empathy in the creation and application of biblical laws. Examples from the New Testament (Golden Rule, Good Samaritan) will be added to the previously discussed Pentateuchal materials. The second part of the paper looks at the limitations of empathy as a basis of moral behavior and considers recent arguments against the universalistic approach advocated by de Waal and evolutionary science. (1) Recent developments in the study of the Theory of Mind (Goldman/Shanton 2015) suggest that our understanding of other people's thoughts and emotions (as well as our understanding of the past) is largely determined by our momentary cognitive and emotional state. (2) Social relationships (between organisms) can be analyzed as opportunities for exploitation rather than altruism (Jones 2007) and empathy in this framework is part of Machiavellian intelligence. (3) Morality as understood in the Western world is possibly a fairly recent cultural phenomenon, related to the spread of literacy (Decety & Cowell 2014). These challenges to the conventionally assumed connection between empathy and morality will be illustrated using selected examples from the Gospels and Pauline epistles. Finally, the question will be raised as to how far biblical literature can be considered a source of moral values in light of the foregoing analysis.