

MODULE 1 TEXTS, VIDEOS AND TASK SHEETS

In this part of the module, you are expected to watch 2 videos and read 3 texts revolving around the theme “empathy”.

Content:

PART 1

- A) Text 1: “Evolution of Empathy” by Frans de Waal
- B) Text 2: “Wired for Empathy: Mirror Neurons” by Gwen Dewar
- C) Video 1: “Empathic Civilization” by Jeremy Rifkin

PART 2

- D) Video 2: “Against Empathy”, an interview with Paul Bloom
- E) Text 3: “Why Paul Bloom Is Wrong About Empathy And Morality” by Denise Cummins & Robert Cummins
- F) Putting It All Together

Introduction

Before reading the texts and watching the videos in this part of the module, please do the following tasks.

1. Define what empathy is according to you without doing any research or reading.
2. “How empathetic are you?”
Please fill in the questionnaire in the following link before coming to class to see how empathetic you are.
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/quizzes/take_quiz/empathy

Are the results really representative of you? Why?/Why not?

PART 1

A) TEXT 1:

EVOLUTION OF EMPATHY

by Frans B. M. De Waal, 2010

At the movies, we can't help but get inside the skin of the characters on the screen. We despair when their gigantic ship sinks; we exult when they finally stare into the eyes of a long-lost lover...

1. The term “empathy” is used to describe a wide range of experiences. Emotion researchers generally define empathy as the ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. But to some, the concept seems rather **unsound**. What does it mean to say “I feel your pain”? Isn’t that just a fanciful flight of the imagination? No. For one thing, it turns out nonhuman animals—even mice and geese—show evidence of empathy. For another, empathy has a neurological basis. We tend to think of empathy as a uniquely human trait. But it is something apes and other animals demonstrate as well.
2. In our evolutionary history there is a **deep-rooted propensity** for feeling the emotions of others. This capacity likely evolved because it served our ancestors’ survival. Signalling their state through smiling and crying, human infants **urge** their caregiver to take action. During the 180 million years of mammalian evolution, females who responded to their offspring’s needs out-reproduced those who were cold and distant. Having **descended** from a long line of mothers who nursed, fed, cleaned, carried, comforted, and defended their young, it is not surprising for humans to develop empathy.
3. It is hard to imagine that empathy—a characteristic so basic to the human species that it **emerges** early in life, and is **accompanied** by strong physiological reactions—came into existence only when our lineage* split off from that of the apes. It must be far older than that. Examples of empathy in other animals would suggest a long evolutionary history to this capacity in humans.
4. Perhaps the most **compelling** evidence for the strength of animal empathy came from a group of researchers at the University of Parma, in Italy. They were the first to report that

monkeys have special brain cells that become active not only if the monkey grasps an object with its hand but also if it merely watches another do the same (Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Fogassi, & Gallese, 1996). Since these cells are activated as much by doing as by seeing someone else do, they are known as mirror neurons, or “monkey see, monkey do” neurons. In another study conducted by Masserman, Wechkin, & Terris (1964), it is reported that rhesus monkeys refused to pull a chain that delivered food to themselves if doing so gave a shock to a companion. One monkey stopped pulling the chain for 12 days after witnessing another monkey receive a shock. Those primates were literally starving themselves to avoid shocking another animal.

5. Mice, too, respond to the **display** of pain by their companions. Researchers at McGill University put pairs of mice together and injected one or both of them with a substance that induces **mild** stomach ache. Mice reacted to the pain by wriggling and stretching their legs. But the intensity of the reaction depended on social cues. Mice wriggled and stretched more when their companions were also in pain (Langford et al., 2006). Moreover, mice exposed to the sight of a suffering cage mate were quicker to back away from an unpleasant heat source—suggesting that witnessing their companion’s discomfort made mice more sensitive to their own pain. So there is nothing particularly human about finding the painful experiences of others unpleasant.

6. This, however, does not by any means suggest that its impact on humans is trivial. On the contrary, biology holds us “on a leash,” in the felicitous words of biologist Edward Wilson (2000), and will let us stray only so far from who we are. We can design our life any way we want, but whether we will **thrive** depends on how well that life fits human **predispositions**. One should hesitate to predict what we humans can and cannot do, but we must consider our biological leash when deciding what kind of society we want to build, especially when it comes to goals like **achieving** universal human rights.

7. If we could manage to see people on other continents as part of us, drawing them into our circle of reciprocity and empathy, we would be building upon, rather than going against, our nature. For instance, in 2004, the Israeli Minister of Justice caused political uproar for sympathizing with the enemy. Yosef Lapid questioned the Israeli army’s plans to demolish thousands of Palestinian homes in a zone along the Egyptian border. He had been touched by images on the evening news. “When I saw a picture on the TV of an old woman on all fours in the

ruins of her home looking under some floor tiles for her medicines, I did think, ‘What would I say if it were my grandmother?’” he told Israel Radio (Bennet, 2004, para. 2). Lapid’s grandmother was a Holocaust victim. This incident shows how a simple emotion can widen the definition of one’s group. Lapid had suddenly realized that Palestinians were part of his circle of concern, too. Empathy is the one weapon in the human repertoire that can rid us of the curse of xenophobia.

8. Empathy is fragile, though. Among our close animal relatives, it is switched on by events within their community, such as a youngster in distress, but it is just as easily switched off with regards to outsiders or members of other species, such as prey. The way a chimpanzee bashes in the skull of a live monkey by hitting it against a tree trunk is no advertisement for ape empathy. Bonobos are less brutal, but in their case, too, empathy needs to pass through several filters before it will be expressed. Often, the filters prevent expressions of empathy because no ape can afford feeling pity for all living things all the time. This applies equally to humans. Our evolutionary background makes it hard to identify with outsiders. We have evolved to hate our enemies, to ignore people we barely know, and to distrust anybody who does not look like us. Even if we are largely cooperative within our communities, we become almost a different animal in our treatment of strangers.

9. This is the challenge of our time: globalization by a tribal species. The point to keep in mind is that political ideologues by definition hold narrow views. They are blind to what they do not wish to see. However, the possibility that empathy is also part of our heritage ought to make us happy, but we are not in the habit of **embracing** our nature. When people kill each other, we call them “animals.” But when they give to the poor, we praise them for being “humane.” We like to claim the **latter** tendency for ourselves. Yet, it will be hard to come up with anything we like about ourselves that is not part of our evolutionary background. What we need, therefore, is a vision of human nature that encompasses all of our tendencies: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

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The text is adapted from

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About the Author

Frans B. M. de Waal, Ph.D., a Dutch-born primatologist, is the C. H. Candler Professor at Emory University and director of the Living Links Center at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center in Atlanta. He is the author of *Our Inner Ape* and *The Bonobo and the Atheist*.

Text Analysis

Read the text and answer the following questions.

1. Fill in the table below.

Main idea of the text	
Key points & Examples	
Writer's Technique a) tone: b) purpose:	

2. Why is it important that empathy is a part of our genetic makeup and evolutionary history? What does that show us?

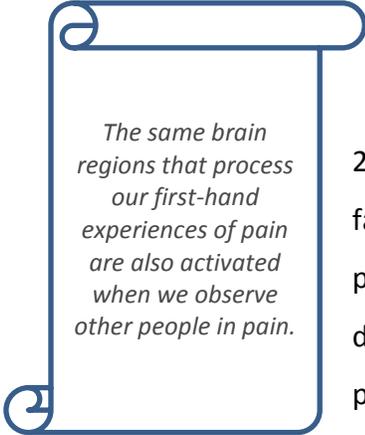
3. In paragraph 6, what does Edward Wilson imply by saying “biology holds us ‘on a leash’”?

4. In paragraph 8, what does the writer mean by saying “empathy is fragile”?

5. Can people embrace their nature and feel empathy for others? Why/not?

B) TEXT 2: WIRED FOR EMPATHY: MIRROR NEURONS

1. Mirror neurons are “smart cells” in our brains that allow us to understand others’ actions, intentions, and feelings. The mirror neurons are in many areas of our brains, and they fire when we perform an action such as grasping an apple, and similarly we see others doing it. As it turns out, our mirror neurons fire when we experience an emotion and similarly when we see others experiencing an emotion, such as happiness, fear, anger, or sadness. When we see someone being sad, for example, our mirror neurons fire and that allows us to experience the same sadness



The same brain regions that process our first-hand experiences of pain are also activated when we observe other people in pain.

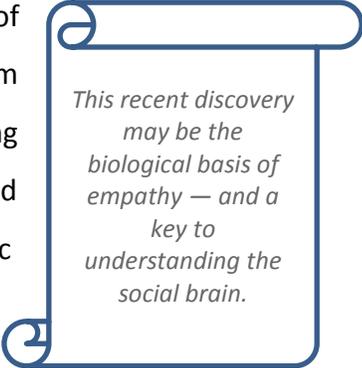
and to feel empathy. We do not need to “think” about the other person being sad, we actually experience it.

2. Trailblazing research by neuroscientist Jean Decety suggests a fascinating neurological link between our own, first-hand experience of pain and our **perception** of pain in other people. When typically developing kids (aged 7 to 12 years) were presented with images of people getting hurt, the kids experienced more activity in the same neural circuits that process first-hand experiences of pain (Decety, Michalska, & Akitsuki, 2008). This automatic response--termed "mirroring"--has been documented in a number of other studies, including studies of adults (Lamm, Decety, & Singer, 2011; Jackson, Brunet, Meltzoff, & Decety, 2006). The phenomenon may reflect the activation of mirror neurons, nerve cells that fire both when a person performs an action and he sees that action being performed by others.

3. Mirror neurons may explain how people can experience "second-hand" pain or emotion. But to respond with empathic concern, we need other information, too. It is also necessary to understand the perspectives of other people and to overcome our own negative reactions to the display of another person’s pain or distress. Moreover, when we observe the emotional signals of others, we recruit brain regions **associated with** theory of mind, the mechanism that permits us to take the perspective of another person (Schulte-Rüther, Markowitsch, Fink, & Piefke, 2007). This theory of mind mechanism, along with the ability to keep our own emotional reactions under control, may be of crucial importance for showing empathic concern, or sympathy. If I do

not consider your perspective and control my impulses, I might react to your pain as if it is primarily an irritant or assault on me. So empathy and empathic concern are not just ideas. They are **rooted** in concrete, measurable, physical phenomena, and are part of our nature. That does not mean we are not heavily influenced by ideas, but it suggests that humans do not depend on entirely on cultural training to develop a sense of empathy.

4. Brain-imaging research seems to **confirm** this link between theory of mind and empathy. For instance, when people have been asked to evaluate the emotional facial expressions of others, they showed activation in the brain regions **associated with** theory of mind tasks (Schulte-Rüther et al., 2007). And theory of mind is probably important in other ways. For instance, Jean Decety and his colleagues have investigated how the brain distinguishes between the victims of accidents and victims of aggression. To better understand how theory of mind contributes to the perception of "second hand" pain, Decety's team showed kids two sets of images. One set **depicted** people experiencing painful accidents. The other set showed people who were being victimized by aggressors (Decety et al., 2008). In both scenarios, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) **revealed** that **merely** looking at images activated brain regions **associated with** the first-hand experience of pain.



This recent discovery may be the biological basis of empathy — and a key to understanding the social brain.

But when kids watched images of one person **deliberately inflicting pain on another person**, additional brain regions (in the orbital medial frontal cortex and the paracingulate cortex) were activated. Brain imaging research and studies of brain-damaged patients suggest that these regions are **associated with** social interaction, emotional self-control, and moral reasoning (Blair, 2007; Sturm, Rosen, Allison, Miller, & Levinson, 2006).

5. Were the additional brain regions activated because the kids were engaged in social and moral thinking? It seems very plausible. The activation was not caused by the mere presence of multiple people in the images, because researchers controlled for that. And when kids were debriefed at the end of the experiment, most of them commented on the unfairness with which the victims had been treated.

6. We are, literally, wired to connect. Humans are social, and empathy is a fundamental component of the human condition. In the new Afterword to his fascinating book, *“Mirroring People: The new science of how we connect with others,”* Professor Iacoboni (2009, p. 279) points to the importance of this ground-breaking research. Mirror neurons “help us to be empathic and fundamentally attuned to other people. This is perhaps the most important finding of all, and it is a beautiful one.”

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The text is adapted from

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About the Author

A graduate of UC Berkeley, Gwen Dewar received her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, where she was trained in anthropology, behavioral ecology, primatology, and evolutionary and comparative psychology. Her research has focused on the evolutionary origins of intelligence, social learning, and teaching. I founded the website “parentingscience.com” in 2006 to provide the skeptical, science-minded parent with evidence-based information about parenting and child development.

Text Analysis

Read the text and answer the following questions.

1. Fill in the table below.

Main idea of the text	
Key points & Examples	
Writer's Technique <ul style="list-style-type: none">• tone:• purpose:	

2. In what way would you criticize the ideas/arguments in the following excerpt taken from the text?

“Mirror neurons are “smart cells” in our brains that allow us to understand others’ actions, intentions, and feelings. The mirror neurons are in many areas of our brains, and they fire when we perform an action such as grasping an apple, and similarly we see others doing it. As it turns out, our mirror neurons fire when we experience an emotion and similarly when we see others experiencing an emotion, such as happiness, fear, anger, or sadness. When we see someone being sad, for example, our mirror neurons fire and that allows us to experience the same sadness and to feel empathy. We do not need to “think” about the other person being sad, we actually experience it”.

3. Which part in the text does the excerpt below relate to? Which idea/fact does it exemplify?

“Iacoboni mentioned that children on the Autism Spectrum may struggle with social interaction because their mirror neuron systems are not functioning properly. The discovery of mirror neuron deficiencies in people with autism opens up new approaches to diagnosing and treating the disorder.”

4. What is the most interesting idea/fact/argument for you in the texts? Why?

5. Can you think of other examples on animal empathy?

Academic Writing

Analyze the articles and find 2 or 3 examples for each academic style features in the following table.

Academic Style	Examples
objective tone	
tentativeness	
academic vocabulary	
formal grammar	

C) VIDEO 1: “EMPATHIC CIVILIZATION”

The RSA video in this part of the module has been created based on the American economist and social critic Jeremy Rifkin’s book “The Empathic Civilization”.

Watch the video entitled “Empathic Civilization” in the following link and answer the questions below.

<https://www.romankrznic.com/outrospection/2010/06/01/485>

1. What is the significance of mirror neurons? What do they indicate about humans?
2. What causes children to think and learn that life is fragile and vulnerable? What are the implications of this way of thinking?
3. According to the speaker, what are the future implications of empathy? How can it help humans?
4. Do you agree with the idea that it is possible to extend our empathy to the entire human race? Why, why not? Explain with your own examples.
5. Which information was the most interesting for you in the video? After watching the video, what new insights have you gained?

Synthesis & Discussion

1. The text, "Wired for Empathy: Mirror Neurons," ends with the following words of Professor Iacoboni:

"Mirror neurons "help us to be empathic and fundamentally attuned to other people. This is perhaps the most important finding of all, and it is a beautiful one.""

a) What makes this finding beautiful?

b) How is this idea elaborated and exemplified in the video "Entitled Empathic Civilization"?

2. "Empathy is really a package of abilities, and there is overwhelming evidence that empathy and empathic concern can be shaped by experience and culture."

How do the video and the reading texts illustrate this statement? What is the evidence to back up your explanations?

3. Can empathy be taught? Is it possible to train people to be more empathic? Explain by referring to the texts and the video.

Personalization & Reaction

Having read the texts, answer the following question, then discuss your ideas with your friends.

Is your definition of empathy different from the definition explained in the texts? If yes, explain how. Would you change your definition after reading the texts?

PART 2

D) VIDEO 2: "AGAINST EMPATHY: An Interview with Bloom"

The interview in this part of the module is with Paul Bloom who is a psychology professor at Yale University and author of "Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion". Watch the YouTube video entitled "Against Empathy" in the following link and answer the questions below.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjBhxq_YpiQ

1. Bloom is against empathy because

a) _____

b) _____

2. Why does Bloom disapprove of misguided giving?

3. What does Bloom mean by saying "empathy is picky"? How does he exemplify this view? What are your own examples for this?

4. Empathy is not wise due to the fact that _____
_____.

5. How do Trudeau and Trump exercise empathy as politicians? What does this indicate?

6. What does Bloom mean by saying "empathy is a gun that points both ways" ?

7. Is Bloom totally against empathy? Explain why. What does he emphasize instead of empathy?

E) TEXT 2: Why Paul Bloom Is Wrong About Empathy and Morality

By Denise Cummins Ph.D & Dr. Robert Cummins, 2013

Some experts believe empathy leads to bad moral judgments and bad social policy.

To most of us, the more we empathize with the **plight** of others, the more ethical and moral we behave towards them. Yet a number of psychologists and philosophers reject this view. Empathy is "*narrow-minded, parochial, and innumerate*" claimed Paul Bloom, a Yale professor of Psychology in a recent New Yorker article (May 20, 2013). According to Jesse Prinz, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at City University in New York "...empathy is **prone to biases** that **render** moral judgment potentially harmful."

Academics who distrust empathy seek to improve public policy by making us aware of **inherent biases** in human reasoning. As Bloom and Prinz point out, people have very different reactions to the suffering of individuals than to the suffering of unseen groups. We are happy to donate to save an individual but not willing to raise our taxes to save larger numbers of people. Because of this **inherent "bias"** in human nature, these critics argue, empathy is at best a starting point—a motivation to get us thinking—but then reason and **deliberation** should take over and dominate the **subsequent** discussion, judgment, or policy-making. As reasonable as this argument may seem, it is really an argument for throwing the baby out with the bathwater—with equally disastrous consequences. Here is why.

The desire to censure empathy **stems** from the belief that empathy and other emotions necessarily lead to anarchy and retributive justice*, while reason necessarily leads to order and good judgment. Yet sufficient evidence from the annals of human history plainly shows that reason, untempered by empathy, is just as likely to lead to tyranny and genocide as it is to lead to good judgment. When compassion and reason are decoupled, judgment is not improved. Instead, the door is opened to **inhumane** practices.

Human history is replete with examples of principle-based atrocities. The reasoning underlying genocide and "ethnic cleansing" seems perfectly logical to people who subscribe to a twisted belief system—bring about a "greater good" by "cleansing" the world of "bad" people—but it's empathetically bankrupt. What drives and **sustains** the suicide bomber? The belief in the

purity of his principles, principles that require one to blind oneself to the suffering and carnage of the innocents at his mercy.

It was the cold light of reason—based of course on false beliefs—that gave us laws permitting slavery, burning human beings at the stake, and bear baiting as a form of entertainment. It was empathy for the victim that ended these practices. It is empathy that prevents a man from beating his wife when the law in some countries fully permits (or even requires) him to do so. It is empathy for the victim that brought us the Red Cross, Amnesty International, and the scores of other humanitarian organizations that grace our world. It is empathy that makes us want to rescue victims, and it is empathy that prevents us from killing their tormenters—despite our rage and lust for retributive justice.

To Bloom, empathy belongs only to the realm of the personal—how, for example, we treat our family and friends. But it has no role to play in moral judgment. Morality from this perspective isn't about the creature in front of you, it is about society as a whole. That is what morality looks like from a high-altitude bombing perspective.

We can certainly see all mankind as our family. The problem is that we don't. Volumes of psychological research show that we show more empathy towards those who are like us than those who are not. The answer is not to scrub out empathy. The answer is to expand our empathy to include those who are not like us. That is what drove so many white Americans to argue for the **abolition** of slavery, the end of Jim Crow laws, and the institution of civil rights.

The way that has worked best is to point out the similarities between ourselves and those who are suffering—to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. Even though I do not look like you or act like you, nonetheless I am like you when it comes to the capacity for suffering, and so I deserve to be treated the same as you. It is **precisely** our ability to imagine the plight of the nameless and faceless that elicits our empathy and our desire to act. What **diminishes** one's ability to empathize? Power over others: When people are primed to feel powerful, they display less empathy-related mirror neuron activity in their brains than when they are primed to feel powerless.

As a final admonition, Bloom warned *“empathy will have to **yield** to reason if humanity is to have a future”*. Instead, it is the marriage of empathy to principle that has always been and

will continue to be our salvation. It is our ability to generalize and to direct our empathy through the use of reason that is our saving grace. Without that, it is easy to create a holocaust, a crusade, or a jihad.

Glossary:

retributive justice: justice concerned with punishing or rewarding an individual

The text is taken from Cummins, D., & Cummins, R. (2013, October 20). Why Paul Bloom Is Wrong About Empathy and Morality. *Psychology Today*. doi:<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/good-thinking/201310/why-paul-bloom-is-wrong-about-empathy-and-morality>

About the Author

Denise Dellarosa Cummins is a retired Adjunct Professor of Psychology and Philosophy, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests include the evolution and development of higher cognition in artificial and biological systems. Her experimental investigations focus on Causal Cognition, Social Cognition, and Moral Cognition.

Text Analysis

Read the text and answer the following questions.

1. Fill in the table below.

Matching arguments (with Bloom)	
Opposing Arguments (against Bloom/ to criticize Bloom)	
Writer’s Technique <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tone: • purpose: 	

2. Are the writer's claims convincing?

3. What are
 - a) strengths in his arguments?

 - b) weaknesses in his arguments?

4. Is there something the author leaves out that would strengthen the argument?

Synthesis & Discussion

1. If you were Bloom, how would you react to Cummins' criticisms?

2. Read the newspaper excerpt below and evaluate it considering Bloom and Cummins' arguments. What do you think is the problem about empathy here? What can be done to overcome such a problem?

In 1949, Kathy Fiscus, a three-year-old girl, fell into a well in San Marino, California, and the entire nation was captivated by concern. Four decades later, America was transfixed by the plight of Jessica McClure—Baby Jessica—the eighteen-month-old who fell into a narrow well in Texas, in October, 1987, triggering a fifty-eight-hour rescue operation. "Everybody in America became godmothers and godfathers of Jessica while this was going on," President Reagan remarked... Each day, more than ten times the number of people who died in Hurricane Katrina die because of preventable diseases, and more than thirteen times as many perish from malnutrition. (Taken from: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/05/20/the-baby-in-the-well>)

Personalization & Reaction

Having studied different viewpoints on empathy in this module, which viewpoint do you think best fits your opinion about empathy. Support your answer with examples.

Academic Writing

Analyze the reaction-response article entitled “Why Paul Bloom Is Wrong About Empathy And Morality” and find 2 or 3 examples for academic and non-academic style to fill in the following table.

Academic Language	Non-Academic Language
✓	X
✓	X
✓	X
✓	X
✓	X
✓	X

F) PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Prompt Analysis

Analyze and answer the prompts below considering the related input given in Module 1. Use the checklist below to critique your own answers.

1. Define empathy. Explain the roots empathy is associated with. Which one do you think explains the nature of empathy best?

2. Discuss the implications of animal studies/experiments on understanding empathy. In your opinion, what are two other important factors that affect the development of empathy?

3. How do mirror neurons lead to empathy development? To what extent does empathy depend on mirror neurons?

4. Why does Bloom stand against empathy? What arguments does he put forward? Do you agree with his ideas? Explain with your own examples.

MODULE 1 - Checklist

Academic Writing	√ or X
I have presented my ideas in an effective manner.	
I have used formal language.	
I have checked for mechanics.	
Understanding Writing Prompts	√ or X
I have read the prompt carefully and underlined the key words.	
I have brainstormed ideas and arranged them in groups.	
My writing accomplishes the goal set forth in the prompt.	
Paragraph Development	√ or X
I have a clear, focused topic sentence.	
I have used the required pattern(s) of organization.	
I have fully developed my ideas with sufficient supporting details	
All of my sentences support the main/controlling idea.	

My paragraph(s) is/are organized in a logical way.	
My sentences are related in a meaningful way to each other.	

**MODULE 1
ACADEMIC WORD LIST**

TEXT 1	TEXT 2	TEXT 3
unsound propensity rooted urge descended emerge accompanied compelling display mild thrive predisposition achieve embrace latter	perception root confirm associated with depicted reveal merely deliberately	plight prone to bias render inherent deliberation subsequent stem inhumane sustain abolition precisely diminish yield