Cartaphilus

ISSN: 1887-5238 n.º 20 |2024 | pp. 41-62

EMPATHY AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN THE WORK OF JUAN RULFO: THE STORIES OF FAILED RESCUE

EMPATÍA Y CONDUCTA PROSOCIAL EN LA OBRA DE JUAN RULFO: LOS CUENTOS DE RESCATE FRACASADO

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Abstract: This article examines the interplay between empathy and prosocial behavior in the works of Mexican author Juan Rulfo (1917–1986); specifically, it examines how the lack of empathy and altruistic motivation shapes the nature of rescue behavior in three stories from *The Plain in Flames* (1953): "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," and "Talpa." The common threads running through these works allow them to be studied as a trilogy that will be referred to here as "The Stories of Failed Rescue." These stories will be analyzed through the prism of empathy, prosocial behavior, and the interrelation between the two topics. This analysis will provide a unifying interpretation of the works, highlight their essential similarities, and allow to read them together as a statement about human nature and human relations.

Keywords: Empathy; Prosocial Behavior; Juan Rulfo; Rescue Behavior; *The Plain in Flames*.

Resumen: Este artículo examina la relación entre la empatía y la conducta prosocial en la obra del autor mexicano Juan Rulfo (1917–1986). En particular, se analiza cómo la falta de empatía y de motivación altruista determina la naturaleza de la conducta de rescate en tres cuentos de *El Llano en llamas* (1953): "¡Diles que no me maten!", "No oyes ladrar los perros" y "Talpa". Los hilos conductores que atraviesan estas obras permiten estudiarlas como una trilogía, a la que denominaremos "Los cuentos de rescate fracasado". Estos cuentos serán analizados desde la perspectiva de la empatía, la conducta prosocial y la interrelación entre ambos conceptos. El análisis proporcionará una interpretación unificadora de las obras, destacará sus similitudes esenciales y permitirá comprenderlas como una reflexión sobre la naturaleza humana y las relaciones sociales.

Palabras clave: Empatía; Conducta prosocial; Juan Rulfo; Conducta de rescate; *El Llano en llamas*.

Introduction

In one of the most touching scenes in Juan Rulfo's work, Macario strives to comfort the scorpion-stung Felipa by helping her to cry with his own eyes (Rulfo, 2012: 44). Macario's act reflects a strong synergy between empathy and prosocial behavior: by crying together with Felipa, he shares her distress and simultaneously tries to alleviate it. However, a closer look at the other stories of *The Plain in Flames* (1953) reveals that this is not always the case, and that, more frequently than not, one behavior appears without the other.

This article explores the interplay between empathy and prosocial behavior in the works of the Mexican author Juan Rulfo (1917–1986); specifically, it explores how the lack of empathy and altruistic motivation shapes the nature and consequences of rescue behaviors performed by Rulfo's characters. First, a discussion drawing on recent studies in developmental psychology and social psychology will introduce the concepts of empathy, prosocial behavior, and the nature of their interrelations. This interdisciplinary framework will then be used to analyze three stories by Rulfo, which I will refer to here as "The Stories of Failed Rescue" or "The Failed Rescue Trilogy:" "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," and "Talpa." The objective of the analysis is threefold: to shed light on the emotional relationships and interpersonal interactions between the main characters; to understand the interplay between their feelings, motivations, and actions; and to use these insights to propose a new and unifying interpretation of these seemingly unrelated stories.

Development

There are many ways to define empathy. In their review, Cuff et al. (2016) identify no fewer than 43 distinct conceptualizations of the term. That said, empathy can be broadly defined as the ability to perceive and share the emotional and mental states of others.[1] For instance, when one sees a close friend in pain or distress, one may experience a similar feeling of distress. This relative degree of congruence between one's own feelings and those of others is the defining feature of affective empathy; it is known as emotional matching or state matching, and is not restricted to negative emotions (Morelli et al., 2015). Moreover, empathy is not restricted to affective responses but may also include a cognitive dimension reflected in the capacity to adopt the other's point of view, a phenomenon known as perspective taking (Decety, 2005). Finally, empathy can be evoked by either real or fictional beings and is generally biased toward close others, such as friends and family (Cialdini et al., 1997). In short, empathy is a complex process that consists of both affective and cognitive components, involves a matching emotional

[1] For similar perspectives, see Cohen and Strayer (1996), and Decety and Moriguchi (2007).

response to others and/or an insight into their mental states, and is highly modulated by the social context.

It is worth mentioning two additional concepts related to empathy: sympathy and personal distress. According to Eisenberg et al. (2013), both empathy and sympathy are other-oriented emotional responses. However, whereas empathy is defined as an affective response that is identical or similar to what another person is feeling (emotional matching), sympathy reflects a feeling of sorrow or concern for another's well-being (different emotion). Contrary to empathy and sympathy, personal distress is a self-focused, aversive emotional reaction to the feelings or condition of another.

As with the case of empathy, the field of prosociality has been plagued by definitional ambiguity. However, based on an exhaustive review of 273 articles published between January 2010 and May 2021, Pfattheicher et al. (2022) define prosocial and altruistic behaviors essentially as acts of positive social behavior that promote or are intended to promote the welfare of others. This definition encompasses a wide variety of prosocial behaviors, ranging from simple everyday acts of helping and caring to actions taken in exceptional circumstances, such as emergencies. According to Schroeder and Graziano (2014), it is possible to distinguish and characterize the different forms of prosociality by answering a set of four W questions: What are the main types of prosocial behavior? Why would anyone choose to aid another? When are prosocial behaviors displayed? Who helps others?

The types of prosocial behavior. Prosocial behaviors are interpersonal actions intended to benefit others. They involve one or more benefactors and one or more recipients. As such, they can be divided into four general categories: helping, altruism, volunteerism, and cooperation. Helping is a broad category that includes acts such as casual helping, caring, consoling, donating money to charity, and more. Altruism may be considered a subtype of helping in which the benefactor helps with no expectation of reward or benefit to him or herself, and possibly has to bear some costs for the help given. It is also worth mentioning rescue behavior, an extreme form of altruism that will be further discussed later. Volunteerism involves behaviors that benefit a group of people in need within the context of an organization, and cooperation refers to contributions for the common good of the group.

The motivations for prosocial behavior. Batson et al. (2008; 2011) identify four possible motivations for prosocial behavior: egoism, altruism, collectivism, and principlism. While egoistically motivated behaviors are performed primarily for the self-benefit of the helper, altruistically motivated behaviors aim to benefit the recipient. Finally, the collectivism motivation aims to benefit a valued group as a whole, and principlism is the motivation to uphold a moral principle, like justice or equality.

The when and who of prosocial behavior. Two of the main factors that determine when prosocial behaviors are displayed and who helps others are cost-reward analysis and in-group bias, respectively. According to the cost-reward model, prosocial acts in emergency situations are more likely to occur when the costs of helping are low and the potential benefits are high. Notable exceptions to this rule are the aforementioned cases of extreme altruism, which involve high costs and no rewards for the benefactor. Concerning the question of who helps others, prosocial behavior, like empathy, is biased toward in-group members. In consequence, people are more inclined to help relatives than unrelated individuals.

In summary, the concept of prosocial behavior covers a wide range of actions intended to promote the welfare of others. These actions may stem from different motivations and are determined by a variety of factors, such as cost-reward analysis and relationship closeness.

Having introduced the concepts of empathy and prosocial behavior, it is now time to consider the nature of relations between the two. Recent years have seen significant progress in our understanding of the relationship between empathy and prosocial behavior. For example, after reviewing a number of empirical studies, Eisenberg and Miller (1987) concluded that empathy and sympathy are positively related to some forms of prosocial and altruistic behavior. Later studies have confirmed this conclusion (Eisenberg, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2013).

Likewise, over thirty experiments conducted in the past decades support Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis, according to which empathy, sympathy, and similar other-oriented feelings for a person in need produce altruistic motivation to help that person (Batson et al., 2008; Batson, 2011; Batson et al., 2014). As suggested by this theory, empathic emotions generate a genuine motivation to increase the welfare of others. In turn, this altruistic motivation may lead to altruistic behavior.[2] Empathy-induced altruism involves a better, more sensitive helping, inhibits aggression, increases cooperation and care, and improves attitudes toward stigmatized groups.

In conclusion, empathy plays a critical role in promoting a wide range of prosocial and altruistic behaviors. However, it is important to stress that the relationship between empathy and prosocial behavior is not absolute. On the one hand, empathy does not necessarily lead to prosocial behavior. On the other hand, and as we will see, not all prosocial behaviors are motivated by empathy.

Throughout the stories of *The Plain in Flames*, characters consistently act to promote the welfare of others. In three of them—"Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," and "Talpa"—these acts comprise the noblest form of prosocial behavior: the desperate attempt to save a father, a son, or a brother

[2] The model proposed by Decety et al. (2016) describes a similar path from empathy to prosocial behavior.

from certain death. However, in all three stories the rescue effort results in failure, and the family member dies. The common threads that run through these works allow to bind them together as a trilogy entitled "The Stories of Failed Rescue."

What are the possible meanings of these three stories? What could be the cause of failed prosociality in Juan Rulfo's work? And what role does empathy or the lack thereof play in all of this? The following analysis aims to answer these questions by examining the stories of failed rescue through the prism of empathy, prosocial behavior, and the interrelationship of these two topics. To this end, the analysis will address a set of guiding questions based on Schroeder and Graziano's (2014) set of W questions: What is the nature and circumstances of the prosocial behavior undertaken in each story? Who are the benefactors and recipients of that behavior? What are its associated costs and benefits? What are the motivations behind it? What is the consequence of the prosocial action? And lastly, what is the role of empathy in these stories?

The cry for prosocial action appears both in the title and at the beginning of the first of the three stories, "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" (Rulfo, 2012: 60). The cry is uttered by Juvencio Nava, an elderly farmer who is about to be executed for murder and is begging his son Justino to intercede with the colonel on his behalf. Justino has already tried to convince the colonel to spare his father's life but has failed, and now he is asked to try again.

Juvencio repeats his plea for help several times, yet Justino refuses to act. Juvencio first asks his son to plead with the colonel for pity's sake (*caridad*), an altruistic motivation to show solidarity with the suffering of others which can be associated with empathy and sympathy. Next, he asks Justino to intercede for God's sake (*caridad de Dios*).[3] Subsequently, he asks him to plead only for a little pity (*tantita lástima*), but the son remains unconvinced. Eventually, Juvencio finds a reason that motivates Justino to get up and intercede for him:

> Tell the *sargento* to let you see the *coronel*. And tell him how old I am. How I'm not worth very much. What will he gain by killing me? Nothing. After all, he must have a soul. Tell him to do it for the salvation of his blessed soul (Rulfo, 2012: 61).

According to Batson et al.,

> Humans are clearly capable of benefiting others as a means of benefiting themselves. When the ultimate goal is self-benefit, the motivation is egoistic. This is true no matter how beneficial to others or how noble the helping behavior may be (2008: 137).

[3] The definition of *caridad* in the *Diccionario de la lengua española* includes both of these meanings.

Seeing that neither altruistic motivations nor empathic emotions are convincing enough reasons to spare his life, the father asks his son to plead for the salvation of the colonel's soul. This is an egoistically motivated action, because even though such a pardon may prove highly beneficial to the father, its ultimate goal is the self-benefit of the colonel. If the colonel is convinced, he will spare Juvencio's life in order to redeem his own soul. To paraphrase Batson, the colonel will benefit another person as a means of benefiting himself. However, if an egoistically motivated pardon is what it takes to cheat death, then it is a viable option for the distressed farmer. On the one hand, Juvencio downplays the benefits of his demise, and on the other hand, he stresses the rewards of his saving. Consequently, Justino agrees to help and once again goes to reason with the colonel.

It is important to note that Justino's own motivation for trying to save Juvencio from execution is not explicitly stated in the text. However, the fact that his father's final argument—the salvation of the colonel's soul—is the one that ultimately prompts him to intercede is telling of the possible motives underlying his behavior. In my opinion, it is possible that Justino eventually decides to get up and help Juvencio not only because he finds the soul saving motivation convincing enough for the colonel, but more important, because he finds it convincing enough for himself. In other words, the motivation he deems worthy of presenting to the colonel functions simultaneously as his own new-found motivation. According to this interpretation, the motivation behind Justino's prosocial action is primarily egoistic: he strives to save his father's life as a means of saving his own soul.[4]

However egoistic Justino's motivation may be, his prosocial action is still quite dangerous and may come with a great cost: by attempting to save his father's life he risks losing his own, because if the colonel discovers that he is related by blood to the culprit, he might want to execute him as well. To make matters even worse, if Justino dies there will be no one to look after his wife and eight children. Thus, the son's behavior stands out for its unusual combination of egoistic motivation and altruistic action: on the one hand, the ultimate goal of his action is self-benefit; on the other hand, he might have to bear tremendous costs for that action—a key feature of altruistic behavior.

In the end, the rescue attempt results in failure. As it turns out, the colonel is none other than the son of Guadalupe Terreros, the man that Juvencio Nava murdered thirty-five years ago. Despite the time that has passed, the colonel has not forgotten or forgiven his father's killer. He gives the order and Juvencio is executed shortly after, despite Justino's intercession.

[4] According to González Arenas and Morales Moreno (2007), Justino eventually agrees to reason with the colonel out of obedience to his father. However, this explanation seems incompatible with the fact that Justino already refused three times to act on his father's request.

Throughout "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" Justino's interiority is never exposed to the reader. However, it is possible to infer from the text that he lacks empathy and sympathy for his father. Nowhere in the story does Justino visibly share Juvencio's distress, nor does he express any concern for his father's well-being in such a perilous situation. Instead, as Juvencio, tied to a post, helplessly awaits execution, all Justino has to say is: "Better to leave things as they are" (Rulfo, 2012: 60). Strangely enough, if sympathy for Juvencio is to be found anywhere in the story, it may be expressed in the colonel's behavior. Upon revealing his identity, the colonel orders his men to tie Juvencio up, let him suffer, and then shoot him. However, after Juvencio begs for mercy, the colonel's death sentence slightly changes: "Tie him up and give him something to drink until he gets so drunk that the shots won't hurt" (Rulfo, 2012: 66). This is an expression of sympathy, albeit a grim one.[5]

The second story in the failed rescue trilogy, "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," is set somewhere in the hills surrounding the village of Tonaya. In the dead of night, pushing through treacherous terrain, an unnamed father strives to save his son Ignacio by getting him to the only doctor in the area, who is stationed in said village. The rescue effort is very costly to the father: not only must he trek for hours in an unfamiliar environment, but he must do so while carrying his son on his back, since the latter is gravely wounded and cannot walk on his own. In these particular circumstances, the two men seem to merge into one: "The men's long, dark shadow continued moving up and down, climbing over the rocks, getting smaller and larger as it went along the edge of the arroyo. It was a single shadow, reeling" (Rulfo, 2012: 91).

The fact that the father must carry his son has far-reaching implications that extend beyond the costliness of the prosocial act. First, since the two are physically bound to each other, the father can sense his son's every movement and thus gain insight into his interiority. For instance, at one point he feels Ignacio's tremors and deduces that he is cold and in pain. The son's trembles make the father shake as well, as if these sensations were his own. Consequently, their two bodies and perhaps even their mental states become as one. Second, the father's vision and hearing are obstructed by this awkward position, with Ignacio's legs and hands wrapped tightly around his neck, and he must therefore rely on his son's senses to find his way to Tonaya. Accordingly, throughout the story the father repeatedly asks his son if he hears dogs barking or sees the village lights in the distance. This confusion or merging between father and son, which is also reflected

[5] Chanady (1998) highlights the contrast between the cruel assassination of Guadalupe Terreros and the relatively humane execution of Juvencio Nava.

at the level of the text,[6] can be considered "oneness," a phenomenon closely related to empathy and prosocial behavior.

Coomber and Harré define oneness broadly as "a psychologically salient sense of connection between the self and an entity that transcends the self" (2022: 49). According to the authors' typology, oneness can take on three basic forms: expansion, interdependence, and essential. Expansion refers to the act of expanding the self by incorporating the resources, perspectives, and characteristics of another. This form of oneness is related to the cognitive dimension of empathy, or perspective taking, which is the ability to adopt the other's point of view (Decety, 2005). Interdependence, in turn, describes the perception of the self as a part of a greater symbiotic whole. It is associated with prosocial behavior in general and in particular with its fourth category, cooperation: "Cooperation involves two or more people coming together as partners to work interdependently toward a common goal that will benefit all involved" (Penner et al., 2005: 380–381).

In light of these considerations, the special bond between the father and son in "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking" can be regarded—at least from the father's point of view—as a connection of oneness characterized by expansion, perspective taking, interdependence, and cooperation. Through expansion, the father is able to adopt the son's perspective and gain insight into his mental state and the way he feels; through interdependence and cooperation, he can benefit from Ignacio's hearing and vision to achieve the common goal of reaching Tonaya. As a result, father and son act as one mind and body in their quest to save Ignacio's life.

In spite of this extraordinary connection between father and son, their symbiosis is far from perfect: Although the father repeatedly asks Ignacio to lend him his senses, the son fails to hear dogs barking or see anything that could guide them toward Tonaya. To make matters worse, the father grows increasingly tired from carrying his son's wounded body. At first, the father reiterates his commitment to save Ignacio's life despite the adverse circumstances: "I'll get you to Tonaya no matter what […] I've carried you for hours and won't drop you here so whoever is after you can finish you off" (Rulfo, 2012: 93). However, immediately thereafter he utters words that bring the story to a turning point, casting serious doubts on the oneness and caring that characterized this relationship:

> Everything I'm doing, I'm not doing for you. I'm doing it for your late mother. Because you were her son. That's why I'm doing it. She would reproach me if I had left you lying there, where I found you, and had not picked you up and carried you to where they can take care of you, like I'm doing. It's she who gives me courage,

[6] During the story, the narrator often refers to both the father and the son as "he." This makes it difficult and sometimes even impossible to determine the characters' identities or differentiate between them.

> not you. Starting with the fact that I owe you nothing but difficulty, nothing but humiliation, nothing but shame (Rulfo, 2012: 93).

In this crucial moment, the father reveals that despite the huge sacrifice he has made by carrying Ignacio on his shoulders for hours, he has not been doing it for him but instead for the sake of his late mother, and has been carrying Ignacio without caring for him at all. Hence, the main motivation behind the father's rescue effort is not altruistic, insofar as his ultimate goal is not to benefit Ignacio, nor is it egoistic, insofar as his ultimate goal does not benefit himself. Perhaps the father is motivated by principlism, or the motivation to uphold a moral principle: he seeks to save his son in order to honor the memory of his late wife.[7]

This harsh disclosure is only the starting point of a much harsher denunciation of Ignacio and his criminal lifestyle, in which the father blames the son for robbing and murdering innocent people. Moreover, the father repeatedly states that Ignacio is no longer his son, and finishes by claiming that if Ignacio's mother had been alive today, he would have killed her again. At this point, the physical and mental oneness between father and son stands in stark contrast to the emotional distance that separates them: however in tune the father may be with the son's exteriority and interiority, he has nothing but negative feelings for him. As in the case of oneness, this emotional distance is likewise reflected at the level of the text: whereas throughout the story the father addresses Ignacio in the second person *tú*, here he chooses to use the formal and distanced *usted*.

Despite the father's efforts, the rescue attempt fails: when he finally reaches Tonaya, his son is already dead. Although Ignacio's death is not explicitly stated in the text, it can be inferred from several details. First, when the father lets go of Ignacio, his body falls limp to the ground. Second, the difficulty the father experiences in unclenching Ignacio's fingers from his neck implies the onset of rigor mortis. Third, upon freeing himself from Ignacio's grip, the father is suddenly able to hear all the dogs barking, and instead of looking for the doctor, he reproaches his son for not helping him even with that hope. These circumstances suggest that Ignacio has already been dead for some time and was therefore unable to hear the dogs of Tonaya as the father approached the village.

In the first pages of "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," the father seems to express concern for Ignacio's well-being: he regularly asks his son how he feels, if he is in pain, and if he feels bad (Rulfo, 2012: 92–93). In addition, there are two instances in the story where he adopts Ignacio's perspective and figures out how he feels and what he thinks. The first of these instances occurs when he senses the son's tremors and deduces that he is cold and in pain. According to Maayan Davidov et al.,

[7] This interpretation of the father's motivation clearly contradicts previous readings of the story. Katra (1990), for instance, claims that what guides the father's behavior is love for his son.

> Concern for others (also referred to as affective empathy, empathic concern, or sympathy) is an emotional response consisting of tender feeling on behalf of a distressed other. Concern is often accompanied by attempts to cognitively comprehend the other's state (i.e., cognitive empathy) and can motivate prosocial action to alleviate the other's distress (2013: 126).

Thus, it can be proposed that at least during the first part of the story, the father responds to Ignacio with a combination of sympathy (affective dimension) and perspective taking (cognitive dimension).

However, after the father discloses the motivation behind his prosocial act and until the story's end, his sympathy and perhaps even affective empathy for his son disappear altogether and only the cognitive dimension of empathy remains. This situation is best illustrated in the second instance where the father adopts Ignacio's perspective. Upon being confronted with his terrible crimes and the fact that his father disowns him and that his mother would have died again if she had learned of his misdeeds, Ignacio starts crying, overwhelmed by remorse. The father, upon feeling the son's tears falling on his head, reacts as follows:

> Are you crying, Ignacio? The memory of your mother is making you cry, right? But you never did anything for her. You always repaid us badly. It seems as if, instead of affection, we had filled your body with malice. And now you see? They've wounded you. What happened to your friends? Did they kill them all? But they had no one. They might have been able to say: "We have no one to give our sorrows to." But you, Ignacio? (Rulfo, 2012: 94).

On the one hand, the father perceives Ignacio's distress signals and cognitively adopts his perspective. On the other hand, not only does he not share this distress emotionally and strive to comfort Ignacio, but he continues to reproach him for his past actions.[8] In his words to his son, possibly as the last thing he would say to him while he is still alive, the father insinuates that contrary to Ignacio's friends, who died without someone to save them or even feel sorry for them, Ignacio himself has someone who cares about him—his father. Ironically, these same words suggest the opposite. The lack of affective empathy or sympathy during those moments has meaningful implications that will be further discussed below.

In "Talpa," the third of the failed rescue stories, an unnamed man tries to save the life of his sick brother Tanilo by accompanying him on a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Talpa. Joined by Tanilo's wife Natalia, the three embark on a long and arduous journey, traveling on foot for more than a month, sleeping under the open

[8] This divide between cognitive and affective empathy is reflected in the text by an unusual combination of the second person *tú* and the formal *usted*.

sky, and enduring many hardships—all with the hope that once they reach Talpa the Virgin will cure Tanilo of his terrible disease. However, unlike "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" and "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," "Talpa" is a chronicle of a death foretold; the failure of the rescue attempt is revealed right at the beginning of the story, and so is the disturbing motivation behind the prosocial act:

> Because the thing is, Tanilo Santos? Between the two of us, Natalia and I, we killed him. We took him to Talpa so he could die. And he died. We knew he wouldn't be able to withstand that long a trip; but, just the same, we took him, between the two of us we pushed him all the way, thinking we'd be done with him for good. That's what we did (Rulfo, 2012: 33).

In his first-person narrative, the protagonist confesses that the idea of going to Talpa was conceived by Tanilo as a means of curing his illness, and yet he and Natalia went along with it for completely opposite reasons: they hoped the brother would die due to the difficult journey—which is exactly what happened. In this sense, the motivation behind the brother's prosocial action is not only egoistic but blatantly antisocial: although the declared aim of the pilgrimage was to save Tanilo's life, the actual aim was to get him killed sooner than later so that the protagonist and Natalia could be together. Accordingly, even though the costs of helping the sick brother were exceptionally high, so were the potential benefits: the difficult journey was the price the cheating couple had to pay to rid themselves of Tanilo.

In spite of achieving his ultimate goal of killing his brother and sleeping with his sister-in-law, it seems that in the end the protagonist of "Talpa" gains nothing. When Tanilo was still alive, he and Natalia used to sleep together regularly, cheating on him night after night during the long journey. However, after the brother's death Natalia forgets about the protagonist completely. Furthermore, both he and Natalia become consumed by guilt and remorse for literally pushing Tanilo to his death on the way to Talpa. The story in fact ends on this somber note:

> Now the two of us are here in Zenzontla. We've come back without him. And Natalia's mother hasn't asked me anything; not what I did with my brother Tanilo, or anything else […] And I'm beginning to feel as if we hadn't gotten anywhere, that we're here just for a short while, to rest, and that later we'll start walking again. I don't know where to; but we'll need to keep on going, because we're too close to remorse here and to Tanilo's memory […] That's what we may remember around here most often: the Tanilo we buried in the Talpa graveyard; the one Natalia and I threw earth and stones on so the animals from the hills wouldn't dig him up (Rulfo, 2012: 39–40).

According to Jiménez de Báez (1988) and Blancas Blancas (2018), this suggestive ending allows "Talpa" to be read as a rewriting of the story of Cain and Abel. Like Cain, the unnamed protagonist gets his brother killed and is

consequently condemned to wander the earth without ever finding peace. In the biblical story, after the murder has been committed, God asks Cain: "Where is your brother Abel?" To which Cain replies, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" But the all-knowing God retorts: "What have you done? Hark, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!" (Genesis 4:9–10). In "Talpa" God does not figure explicitly, nor does this dialogue. Nevertheless, the latter appears implicitly in the question that Natalia's mother does not ask but that the protagonist himself cannot avoid posing: "What have I done with my brother Tanilo?"

Schroeder and Graziano (2014) perceive the story of Cain and Abel as one of the earliest reflections on prosocial behavior, insofar as it encapsulates the question of whether we are or are not responsible for the welfare of our fellow human beings. Given Rulfo's concern with the topic, it is not surprising that he was interested in initiating a dialogue between the biblical story and his work. By composing "Talpa" as a variation on the account of Cain and Abel where God is absent from the plot, the Mexican author leaves it to the protagonist to act as his own judge, making him confront himself with the age-old question: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Thus, the problem of prosociality in Rulfo's work shifts from the religious realm to that of human nature and human relations.

Empathy and related phenomena occupy a prominent place in "Talpa." The story actually opens and closes with a homecoming scene in which Natalia throws herself crying into her mother's arms, sharing the distress she feels and seeking consolation. Upon witnessing this heartfelt reunion, the unnamed protagonist empathizes with Natalia as well: "I, too, felt her sobbing inside me, as if she were wringing out the dishrag of our sins" (Rulfo, 2012: 33). The metaphor of the crying of others as an internally experienced feeling effectively conveys the phenomenon of emotional matching, which is the defining feature of affective empathy; in turn, the imagery of the wrung-out dishrag highlights the remorse the protagonist and Natalia feel for the wrong they have done to Tanilo. However, whereas the protagonist feels sorry for Tanilo after he is already dead, he hardly had any warm feelings toward him when he was still alive.

In fact, even though the protagonist of "Talpa" can be quite empathic, throughout most of the story he experiences the opposite feelings for Tanilo: fear, disgust, aversion, and perhaps even horror. Simultaneously, the sick Tanilo undergoes a disturbing process of dehumanization in the eyes of his brother. This process begins on the road to Talpa, where at night the protagonist and Natalia seek shelter far from Tanilo. Whereas empathy—an other-oriented emotional response—implies a degree of closeness to a distressed other, the protagonist consciously distances himself from his brother. This physical and emotional distancing is further accompanied by fear and disgust at the sight of Tanilo's festering wounds. Both emotions are evident in the protagonist's description of his brother:

> That poisoned body filled with putrid water inside, which would come out of every rent on his legs or his arms. Sores this big, which would open slowly, very slowly,

> only to later emit bubbles of air that smelled of something gone bad, which had all of us scared (Rulfo, 2012: 35).

Thus, more than feeling empathy for Tanilo, the protagonist experiences personal distress: a self-focused, aversive emotional reaction to another's state.

As the journey progresses, Tanilo's condition grows increasingly worse: his skin bursts open, he starts bleeding, and like Ignacio in "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," he begs his brother and wife to leave him there and go on. Externally, the protagonist and Natalia tend to Tanilo's wounds and encourage him to press forward. Internally, however, they are far from sympathetic: "Something inside us didn't let us feel any pity for any Tanilo" (Rulfo, 2012: 37).

By the time he gets to Talpa, Tanilo has lost nearly all his human qualities. Bleeding and blindfolded with his feet tied, he crawls into town looking and smelling more like a putrid earthworm than a human being. Once the protagonist, his own brother, refers to him as a "thing," the dehumanization process is complete:

> A little later he blindfolded himself, and later on, in the last stretch of road, he knelt on the ground, and, like that, shuffling along on his kneecaps with his hands crossed behind him, that thing that was my brother Tanilo Santos arrived in Talpa; that thing so full of poultices and dark strings of blood he left on the air as he passed by, a sour smell like a dead animal (Rulfo, 2012: 38).

It is even possible to suggest that more than a dehumanized being, the frightening and disgusting Tanilo at this point constitutes a true monstrosity that provokes a visceral sense of horror.

The story reaches its climax when the three pilgrims enter Talpa's church and kneel before the golden figurine of the Virgin. Bathed in the light of so many candles, they listen to the sermon of the priest:

> From our hearts comes a plea for Her, wrapped in pain. Many lamentations mixed with hope. Her tenderness is not deaf to laments or tears, for She suffers with us. She knows how to erase that stain and let the heart become soft and pure to receive her mercy and charity (Rulfo, 2012: 38–39).

In the sermon, the Virgin is portrayed as the epitome of empathy and prosocial behavior: she is sensitive to the pain of others, she truly experiences and shares their distress, and these feelings lead her to altruistically promote the welfare of those who suffer. At the same time, she stands in sharp contrast to the story's protagonist and his relationship with his brother: Whereas the Virgin is not deaf to laments or tears, the protagonist remained apathetic before the crying and suffering of Tanilo; whereas the Virgin suffers with the distressed and matches

their pain, the protagonist suffered because of Tanilo but never *with* him; finally, whereas the Virgin's mercy and charity are empathy-induced acts of altruism, the protagonist's ultimate goal was self-benefit and his motivation was egoistic, antisocial, and utterly devoid of empathy.

In the end, the prayers to the Virgin of Talpa remain unanswered: just as God is not there to inflict punishment on the protagonist, the Virgin is not there to offer any salvation to his brother, and Tanilo dies in the middle of the sermon. When the protagonist sees the lively celebrations in honor of the Virgin, on the one hand, and the body of his dead brother, on the other, he is suddenly overcome with sorrow, but these sympathetic feelings come too late to make any difference to Tanilo.

It is now possible to synthesize the analysis of "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," and "Talpa" into a coherent whole according to the set of guiding questions: What is the nature and circumstances of the prosocial behavior undertaken in each story? Who are the benefactors and recipients of that behavior? What are its associated costs and benefits? What are the motivations behind it? What is the consequence of the prosocial action? And lastly, what is the role of empathy in these stories?

The nature and circumstances of the prosocial behavior. All three stories revolve around one of the noblest forms of prosocial behavior: the attempt to rescue a fellow human being from certain death. Hollis and Nowbahari (2010; 2013) describe rescue behavior as a special and perhaps even extreme form of helping behavior or altruism in which a rescuer strives to remove a distressed victim from physical harm at great cost and without reward. According to the authors, rescue behavior involves four components: (1) the victim is endangered and will suffer severe physical harm if not rescued; (2) the rescuer places him or herself at risk by engaging in the rescue attempt; (3) the behavior of the rescuer is suited to the circumstances of the victim's endangerment, or in other words, the rescuer acts in a way that is relevant to the dangerous situation; (4) the act of rescuing is not inherently rewarding or beneficial to the rescuer.

An examination of the stories in question reveals that they contain the four components of rescue behavior. First, in all cases the victim is highly endangered and will die if not rescued, whether it is the father who awaits execution in "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" the son who is about to die of his wounds in "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," or the brother who is dying of a terrible disease in "Talpa." Second, the rescuer always puts him or herself at risk by engaging in a rescue attempt that is suited to the circumstances of the victim's endangerment: in "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" Justino risks his life by interceding with the colonel on behalf of his father; in "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," the father puts his health at risk by carrying his wounded son for hours in search of a doctor; in "Talpa," the protagonist and Natalia risk a long and dangerous journey for the sake of Tanilo. Third, in most of these cases the rescue behavior is not especially rewarding or beneficial to the

rescuer, the only exception being "Talpa," whose protagonist could potentially benefit from the rescue attempt by getting rid of Tanilo and taking his wife.

The benefactors and recipients of the prosocial behavior. In all three stories, the rescue behavior takes place among close family members. In "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" the benefactor-recipient dyad is composed of a son and a father; in "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," it is a father and son, and in "Talpa" it is a trio of two brothers and the wife of one of them. The fact that this form of altruism in Rulfo's work consistently occurs between close others aligns with the literature on prosociality in general (Penner et al., 2005) and rescue behavior in particular (Hollis and Nowbahari, 2010).

The costs and benefits of the prosocial behavior. Although prosocial behavior in emergency situations is more likely to occur when the costs of helping are low and the potential benefits are high, the rescue behaviors in the examined stories are mostly characterized by exceptionally high costs and low to no benefits. This is precisely what makes these acts such an extreme form of altruism: they involve life-threatening risks and almost no rewards to the benefactors.

The motivations behind the prosocial behavior. Curiously, even though all the rescue behaviors depicted in the stories are forms of altruism, the motivations behind them are never altruistic: Justino in "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" is likely motivated by egoism, the father in "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking" is motivated by principlism, and the motivation behind the rescue attempt by the protagonist of "Talpa" is blatantly egoistic and antisocial. In this sense, all the examined behaviors entail an unusual combination of altruistic action and other-than-altruistic motivation.

The consequence of the prosocial behavior. In all three stories, the rescue attempt results in complete failure: Juvencio Nava dies by execution at the end of "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" Ignacio in "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking" is dead upon his arrival to Tonaya, and Tanilo perishes in the aftermath of the journey to Talpa.

The role of empathy in the stories. Empathy and related phenomena are not foreign to Rulfo's characters: in "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" sympathy for Juvencio Nava can be found in the most unlikely place—the colonel's heart; during the first part of "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," the father likewise responds to Ignacio with a combination of sympathy and perspective taking; and in "Talpa," the protagonist experiences full-blown empathy for Natalia, feeling her crying and sharing her pain.

However, a closer look at the interactions between the benefactors and recipients reveals that other-oriented responses in general and affective empathy in particular do not play any role in the production of the motivation behind the rescue behavior. In "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" Justino indeed acts to save Juvencio's life, but his behavior is egoistically motivated and he lacks any empathy or sympathy for his father. It is even possible to suggest that, paradoxically, Juvencio's executioner—the colonel—is more sympathetic to him than his

rescuer—his own son. In "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," although at first the father does seem to express concern for the well-being of Ignacio, neither sympathy nor perspective taking drive his rescue behavior. Furthermore, the father's lack of affective empathy for his son is especially evident near the story's end. Finally, the rescue behavior of the protagonist of "Talpa" is the complete antithesis of empathy-induced altruism: his heartless act is intended to kill the victim rather than to save him.

Based on the above analysis and synthesis, I would like to offer a unifying interpretation of the failed rescue trilogy through the prism of empathy, prosocial behavior, and the relationship between the two. In his stories, Juan Rulfo repeatedly stages a paradoxical scenario: on the one hand, a family member tries to save the life of a close other by engaging in the most extreme form of altruism—a heroic rescue behavior that involves life-threatening risks and low to no benefits; on the other hand, the motivation behind this rescue endeavor is not altruistic nor is it generated by other-oriented emotions such as empathy and sympathy. Put simply, Rulfo's characters do the right thing for the wrong reasons: their altruistic deeds stand in stark contradiction to their other-than-altruistic motivations. In the end, their rescue attempts always result in failure, and the close other dies. It is possible to argue that the reason for this failure resides precisely in the lack of empathy and sympathy for the victims, and the consequent absence of altruistic motivation.

Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis states that one's perception of a person in need may elicit other-oriented emotions like empathy and sympathy toward that person. These emotions can, in turn, generate a genuine altruistic motivation to improve the welfare of the person in need as well as a corresponding altruistic behavior. Empathy-induced altruism has significant benefits: it involves a more sensitive and less fickle help; it inhibits aggression toward the person in need and counteracts victim blaming; it can increase cooperation and care in conflict situations, and it is capable of improving attitudes toward members of stigmatized groups, such as convicted murderers and drug dealers. That being said, it appears that the characters in Rulfo's stories follow a path different from the one charted by the empathy-altruism hypothesis: the perception of their close ones in distress does not provoke levels of empathy or sympathy sufficient to produce an altruistic motivation; instead, their altruistic behavior is driven by other-than-altruistic motives. Consequently, even though the family members actively try to save their close others from death, their rescue behavior is neither induced by empathy nor altruistically motivated, and therefore does not enjoy the benefits mentioned above. The fact that the rescue behaviors depicted in Rulfo's stories entail an unempathetic and therefore a rather fickle, less sensitive, and less effective form of helping may be the cause of failed prosociality in the works.

This observation elicits the following question: Could the existence of empathy-induced altruism have changed the tragic outcome of the failed rescue stories? The various benefits of the phenomenon suggest that perhaps it could.

Starting with "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" the scenes where Justino intercedes with the colonel on behalf of Juvencio do not appear in the story, and yet the son's lack of both empathy and altruistic motivation allows us to infer that his pleading efforts were not as effective as they could have been. If, however, Justino's rescue behavior had been induced by empathy, his help could have been far more sensitive and effective, and he might have been able to convince the colonel to spare his father's life. This hypothesis seems especially plausible given that Juvencio's own plea for mercy actually manages to spark sympathy in the colonel's heart and slightly change the death sentence.

Empathy-induced altruism is not only more effective than unempathetic prosociality but it can also inhibit aggression, counteract victim blaming, increase cooperation, and improve attitudes toward members of stigmatized groups. Arguably, these benefits could have made a real difference to the outcome of "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking." First, if the father had experienced genuine empathy for Ignacio, it could have significantly improved the cooperation between the two, optimizing their symbiosis and imbuing their oneness with an important emotional dimension. As a result, they could have reached Tonaya much faster, and Ignacio's life would have been saved. Second, empathy could have potentially improved the father's attitude toward Ignacio's criminal lifestyle. Certainly, expressing sympathy for murderers can be considered illegitimate and even immoral. Nevertheless, precisely this kind of attitude could have helped the father to reconcile with his son at that low point in their relationship. Third and most important, since empathy-induced altruism is capable of inhibiting aggression and counteracting victim blaming, it could have changed the course of the final conversation between the father and Ignacio. At this crucial point in the story, Ignacio expresses remorse for his terrible crimes and the wrong he has done to his parents by crying inconsolably. The father reacts to the son's distress in an aggressive manner, blaming him for his own misfortunes. Shortly thereafter, Ignacio arrives dead to Tonaya. It is unknown how much time elapses between that final conversation and the arrival to Tonaya. Nevertheless, if during those critical moments the father had responded more empathically and less aggressively to his son's crying, perhaps Ignacio could have found the hope and will to survive long enough to see the doctor in Tonaya. This perspective adds another layer of meaning to the story's end: the father, who reproaches the dead Ignacio for not giving him hope, fails to realize that it was he himself who denied his son the hope he needed so badly.

Finally, if the protagonist of "Talpa" had experienced empathy for Tanilo—the same visceral empathy he felt for Natalia—the story might have taken a very different turn. The protagonist knew for certain that Tanilo would not be able to endure the difficult journey to Talpa. Therefore, it is possible to hypothesize that if he had been motivated by a genuinely altruistic desire to benefit his brother, the pilgrimage would not have happened in the first place. Since Tanilo was mortally ill, avoiding the journey would not have prevented his death, and yet it could have prolonged his life and reduced his suffering. Accompanied by a brother and a wife who truly cared for him, he could have spent his last days at home and in peace

rather than being pushed by his close ones to an agonizing death on the winding road to Talpa.

Had Juan Rulfo's characters followed the path charted by the empathy-altruism hypothesis, they might have been successful in rescuing their close others from death. However, they were all designed to fail. By purposely creating a series of stories where unempathetic and unaltruistically motivated rescue behaviors always result in failure, the Mexican author seeks to make a general statement about human nature: Whenever we strive to promote the welfare of others, it is not only our deeds that matter, but also the emotions and motivations behind them. The passions that drive us to act exert a significant influence on the resulting actions and may determine their success or failure. Specifically, even though empathy is an internal experience, it inexorably shapes the decisions we make and the actions we take in the world. This is even truer in emergency situations, where the ability to share the distress of a person in need can make the difference between life and death. Conversely, without other-oriented emotions in general and affective empathy in particular, we will never succeed in saving the lives of our close ones, no matter how hard we try.

The stories of failed rescue carry a powerful message: successful altruism cannot exist without empathy. In order to decode this message, one should be able to detect the lack of empathy in the emotional interactions between the characters and establish a causal link between this lack and failed prosociality. In this sense, it seems that Rulfo's stories require empathic yet critical readers: more than simply feeling for different characters, they must harness their empathic capabilities to identify points in the texts where other-oriented responses should exist but do not, and critically reflect on these absences. Why does a son respond so apathetically to his father's cry for help? How come a father carries his wounded son for hours but does not care for him at all? What would be the implications of having no compassion for a dying brother? By asking themselves these questions, readers of Rulfo could work toward understanding the failed rescue trilogy in light of its emotional ellipses.

Written against the backdrop of post-revolutionary Mexico, Juan Rulfo's works often address issues and problems in Mexican society of that time. For this reason, various critics have proposed to read the stories of failed rescue with a focus on their social, historical, and cultural context: according to Chanady (1998), "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" should be interpreted in the context of the complex socioeconomic situation depicted in the story, which is characterized by inequality and social conflict; Muñoz (2002), in turn, proposes to see "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking" as a metaphor of Mexico, a country that carries the burden of its history; lastly, Schmidt (1998) and Gates (2023) read "Talpa" as a critique of the institutional Church in Mexico and its predominant religious discourse. However, whereas all these stories certainly refer to issues in Mexican society, their central drama revolves around emotional interactions between close kin. Paradoxically, Rulfo's decision to shift the focus from general social trends to particular human

interaction is precisely what endows the failed rescue trilogy with a strong universality: lack of empathy and failed prosociality could happen to anyone, in any place, and at any time—even between close others, such as fathers, sons, and brothers.[9]

Far from being confined to their local setting, the stories of failed rescue paint a universal portrait of human relations in which the noblest acts of self-sacrifice are emptied of their emotional content and become a hollow shell within the basic and most intimate social environment—the family. Furthermore, not only do the stories' characters fail to feel empathy for their close others, but they even refuse to acknowledge them as such: In "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" Justino tries to conceal the fact that he is his father's son; in "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," the father directly disowns Ignacio; and in "Talpa," the protagonist eventually does not recognize the dehumanized Tanilo as his brother. In my opinion, Rulfo depicted failed prosociality strictly between family members because he sensed that rescue behavior has more chances to occur and succeed when individuals are highly related to one another (Penner et al., 2005; Hollis and Nowbahari, 2010). By destining prosocial behavior to fail even under the best of conditions, the Mexican author further stresses his point about the importance of empathy for successful altruism. At the same time, he critically reflects on the shortcomings of family ties in the context of helping and caring for others.

Conclusion

This article has delved into the interplay between empathy and prosocial behavior in three stories by Juan Rulfo, grouped together as a trilogy I have referred to as "The Stories of Failed Rescue:" "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking," and "Talpa." By examining the emotional relationships and interpersonal interactions between the main characters, the analysis has revealed that the lack of empathy and altruistic motivation leads to the failure of the rescue behaviors in these stories. This insight was then used to propose a unifying interpretation of the failed rescue trilogy, according to which Rulfo repeatedly depicts the paradoxical combination of altruistic action and unaltruistic motivation in order to convey a fundamental truth about human relations: we cannot successfully help others if we lack empathy for them. Rulfo's characters are ordinary people, capable of feeling other-oriented emotions in general and empathy in particular. However, unlike Macario, who shares Felipa's distress and strives to alleviate it simultaneously, they all fail to experience empathy for the object of their prosocial behavior. Why is empathy so crucial for successful prosociality? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the fact that affective empathy gives us information about the other's distress in the form of mental, emotional, and sometimes even

[9] The anonymity of characters like the father in "You Don't Hear Dogs Barking" and the brother in "Talpa" serves to underscore this universal significance.

physical pain. Coupled with emotional regulation, this vicarious pain experience may provide the strongest motivation for prosocial behavior.

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