

Wisdom-Directed Empathy in Politics and Everyday Life

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In [earlier works](#) I have identified empathy as an important value and written about wise people like Dorothy Day who have amply demonstrated it. Other scholars who have focused on the meaning of wisdom such as Tom Lombardo, Copthorne Macdonald, and Richard Trowbridge have also included empathy as one of wisdom's attributes. In this essay, we will examine empathy in much more detail, explore the multiple ways it relates to wisdom, trace its historical development, and indicate the many areas of human life, including politics, where it is important, now and in the future.

Empathy: What It Is and How It Relates to Wisdom and Other Values

Since [empathy has many definitions](#), we first need to clarify its usage here. The following [description](#) is most apt: “[It] is a tool for understanding the way another person thinks, feels or perceives. It enables us to comprehend another’s mindset, driving emotions or outlook, without requiring us to share the other’s thoughts, feelings and perceptions, or, indeed, approve of them. An empathic approach involves the assimilation of diverse information, including social, historical and psychological details, and a conscious effort to see the world through that person’s eyes.”

Note, what we are talking about here is not just attempting to *feel* as others do, but also to experience how they *think*. As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [suggests](#), empathy is a holistic concept encompassing not just the affective region but also the cognitive one.

In a [previous essay](#), I maintained that love was the greatest of the wisdom values or virtues. Here I will argue that empathy is necessary for us fully to exercise love toward others. When we love someone we must seek his/her wellbeing. But we cannot know what is best for another unless we first empathize with him/her. The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard realized this when he [wrote](#) that the “secret of the art of helping others” was to “find HIM where he is and begin there. . . . I must understand what he understands.”

Philosopher Milton Mayeroff, in his book [On Caring](#) (1990), stated: “To care for someone, I must *know* many things. I must know for example, who the other is, what his powers and limitations are, what his needs are, and what is conducive to his growth; I must know how to respond to his needs, and what my own powers and limitations are.”

Empathy is an existential, not an abstract, skill. It necessitates not a fuzzy, pious, do-gooder mentality, but a honing in on another’s unique personality. As novelist George Eliot [wrote in an 1856 essay](#) which contained important insights on the arts and empathy, “The thing for mankind

to know is, not what are the motives and influences which the moralist thinks *ought* to act on the laborer or the artisan, but what are the motives and influences which *do* act on him.

Although the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber did not use the term empathy as we do here, he basically described it when he [wrote](#), “I imagine to myself what another man is at this very moment wishing, feeling, perceiving, thinking, and not as a detached content but in his very reality, that is, as a living process in this man.” In emphasizing the importance of treating another person as a “thou” and not as an it, he also suggested an empathetic approach to others.

The French philosopher Simone Weil’s concept of “attention,” is also linked to empathy. It [meant](#) trying to empty our soul “of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.” She also [wrote](#) that fully loving one’s neighbor is simply being capable of asking him, “What torments you?”

But the other person may not completely communicate with us because words are sometimes inadequate to express fully one’s feelings. Thus, a gifted empathizer must pay attention to non-verbal, as well as verbal, signals. In a marital relationship, for example, spouses can often learn as much from a spouse’s actions, including facial and other gestures, as from words.

Among others, Kierkegaard realized that love implies a certain degree of humility. In the same paragraphs as his quote above, he wrote, “all true effort to help begins with self-humiliation.” In [a previous essay](#), I have also linked empathy with humility and humility with wisdom. We cannot be truly receptive to another’s thoughts and feelings, nor can we be wise, if we are too egocentric. Wisdom scholar Robert Sternberg [writes](#) of four hindrances that prevent “smart and well-educated people” from being wise, and they are all linked to a lack of humility.

In addition, empathy requires imagination. In her [*Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*](#) Martha Nussbaum defines empathy as “the ability to imagine the situation of the other.” In a *New York Times* (NYT) piece, [“Cultivating the Imagination,”](#) she [opined](#) that the “cultivation of the imagination . . . is essential to fostering creativity and innovation. . . . We need the imaginative ability to put ourselves in the positions of people different from ourselves, whether by class or race or religion or gender.”

In her essay [“The Empathy Exams”](#) (2014), Leslie Jamison suggests some of the multifaceted dimensions of empathy when she writes: “Empathy isn’t just listening, it’s asking the questions whose answers need to be listened to. Empathy requires inquiry as much as imagination. Empathy requires knowing you know nothing. Empathy means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see.”

Nussbaum recognizes still another important truth about empathy. In her book mentioned above she notes that “a sadist may have considerable empathy with the situation of another person, and use it to harm that person.” Or as philosopher [Lou Agosta states](#), “Empathy can be used for good or harm.”

This fact distinguishes empathy from love and many other wisdom values that are only positive. The need for empathy in order to maximize one's wisdom does not mean that it cannot also be used for evil purposes. But to do so would be contrary to acting wisely, for as Sternberg [notes](#), "people are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good." Like many other values, empathy must be guided by wisdom if it is to achieve its maximum good. Wisdom then acting as a directing center employs empathy to work along with other values like love, intelligence, and fairness to insure the common good.

Political leaders and diplomats are two examples of groups that can use empathy for evil or good. In [*A Sense of the Enemy*](#) (2014), historian Zachary Shore writes of "strategic empathy," and defines it as "the skill of stepping out of our own heads and into the minds of others. It is what allows us to pinpoint what truly drives and constrains the other side. Unlike stereotypes, which lump people into simplistic categories, strategic empathy distinguishes what is unique about individuals and their situation." But once we use empathy to put ourselves in others' minds, we can then use this knowledge to do either good or evil towards them.

Shore suggests a negative use of empathy in treating North Vietnam's Le Duan, who was a chief strategist during his country's war with the United States. Although Shore writes that "Le Duan's strategic empathy for America was strong," he indicates that Le Duan made use of it to unite Vietnam under communist control and that he was willing to tolerate large numbers of Vietnamese deaths—they ultimately numbered almost 3 million. (Shore does not deny the U.S. responsibility for many of these deaths.)

Empathy: Past, Present, and Future

Historian [Rick Shenkman believes](#) that "our capacity for empathy comes naturally," that "evolution favored the development of empathy," and that "you can visit a hunter-gatherer community today and see empathy on display under all sorts of circumstances." Furthermore, he asserts that "the more empathetic we are, the more trusting we are. And trust is essential to our success as a species." He recognizes, however, that our empathy works better with small groups of people than large ones, especially if the people in a group are more like us. Thus, empathy is more common among family members and friends, and among people who speak our own language. For foreigners or those we perceive as "different," we have much less empathy.

Psychologist Steven Pinker, in his book [*The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*](#) agrees that empathy is hard to extend beyond a group we feel akin to, but that Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1452 gradually and significantly led to an expansion of readers—and empathy. In a section of his book entitled "The Rise of Empathy and the Regard for Human Life" he states that to explain the increase of empathy, "a good candidate is the expansion of literacy." He adds that

reading is a technology for perspective-taking. When someone else's thoughts are in your head, you are observing the world from that person's vantage point. Not only are you taking in sights and sounds that you could not experience firsthand, but you have stepped inside that person's mind and are temporarily sharing his or her attitudes and reactions. . . . Stepping into someone else's vantage point reminds you that the other fellow has a first-person, present-tense, ongoing stream of consciousness that is very much like your own but not the same as your own. It's not a big leap to suppose that the habit of reading other people's words could put one in the habit of entering other people's minds, including their pleasures and pains.

“The mass production of books, the expansion of literacy, and the popularity of the novel,” all helped lead to the “major humanitarian reforms of the 18th century.” At times, “a bestselling novel or memoir demonstrably exposed a wide range of readers to the suffering of a forgotten class of victims and led to a change in policy.” Fiction like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, notes Pinker, helped “expand readers' circle of empathy”—in this case both in the United States and abroad.

Historian Lynn Hunt [wrote](#) that the rise of empathy helped give rise to the U. S. Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789). “Before societies, nations, and peoples could recognize and defend the fundamental rights of others, individuals had to develop an internal empathy for the individuality and even the bodily integrity of others.” Even before Pinker, as he acknowledges, she recognized that “eighteenth-century French literature . . . opened up its readers to a new form of empathy. The rise of the epistolary novel (comprised of letters mailed between characters) encouraged a highly charged identification with the characters and, in so doing, enabled readers to empathize across class, sex, and national lines. Newspapers similarly proliferated, making the stories of ordinary lives accessible to a wide audience.”

While recognizing that such documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) reflect our continued expansion of who possesses such rights, she concludes that “our sense of who has rights and what those rights are ultimately is grounded in our informed empathy for others.”

In her 1856 essay mentioned above, Eliot declared that “art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.” Although not using the word “empathy,” which was not common until the twentieth century (introduced in 1909 as a translation of the German “*Einfühlung*,” i.e., “feeling into”), she championed “art,” including literature, as a major gateway to eliciting that fellow-feeling which we would later brand empathy.

In 1859, however, Darwin's *Origin of Species* appeared, with its emphasis on the “struggle for existence.” In the decades which followed, Social Darwinism, popularized by Herbert Spencer and others, was in vogue in the English speaking world and beyond to justify unfettered capitalism, racism, and imperialism, all of which were antithetical to empathy. There were some, however, who bucked the trend. France's Victor Hugo displayed much empathy in many of his writings such as *Les Misérables*, and the Russian émigré Peter Kropotkin suggested the need for it in works such as [Mutual Aid](#) (1902).

By the 1890s the Progressive movement was beginning to emerge. [One reliable historical source](#) describes it as starting in Europe and the United States as a diverse movement “to limit the socially destructive effects of morally unhindered capitalism, to extract from those [capitalist] markets the tasks they had demonstrably bungled, to counterbalance the markets’ atomizing social effects with a countercalculus of the public weal [well-being].” It did not attempt to overthrow or replace capitalism, but to have government bodies and laws constrain and supplement it in order to insure that it served the public good. Many of the Progressive writers like Jane Addams, who in 1889 established Chicago’s Hull House to aid the poor, [emphasized](#) the importance of empathy.

So too did some of the painters and photographers of the time like those of the Ashcan school and photographer [Jacob Riis](#). About the former group, who often depicted scenes of urban poverty, one scholar [has written](#), “Their animating impulse was an overwhelming empathy.” Riis’s photographs in such works as [How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York](#) paved the way for the [empathetic documentary photography depicting aspects of the Great Depression](#) by such photographers as [Dorothea Lange](#) and Walker Evans who “produced images enabling millions of Americans to understand what it might be like to experience rural poverty—the worn and desperate look of a migrant mother with her hungry children, the tragic gaze of an Alabama tenant farmer.”

Growing up in the late Progressive Era, Dorothy Day (1897-1980) was profoundly influenced by Kropotkin and Progressive writers like Upton Sinclair. About Kropotkin, she wrote that “the call to my youth was the call of Kropotkin, and the beauty of his prose, the nobility of his phrasing, appealed to my heart.” Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle* was set in Chicago, where Day lived for a while, and she visited some of the streets where she imagined his characters might have interacted. Like him, she decided at a young age, that she wanted to write books that would convince people of the injustices that existed and contribute toward creating a more just order.

About the poor people she came across in his works and others, she wrote that “from that time on my life was to be linked to theirs, their interests would be mine: I had received a call, a vocation, a direction in life.” In the midst of the Depression, she co-founded the Catholic Worker movement, which for the remaining decades of her life (and up to present) aided poor people in various ways. Her empathy has led one scholar examining her moral vision to write of her “remarkable empathetic manner,” her “intense and enduring feeling for others,” and that her “feeling of oneness with others . . . may be the key to understanding and assessing her contribution to our understanding of the moral life.” (See [here](#) for the sources of her quotes.)

In recent decades empathy has become, in the [words](#) of one writer, “hot in the academy—as a topic of inquiry, if not a professional practice.” Or as primatologist Franz de Waal writes in [The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society](#) (2009), “Greed is out, empathy is in.” Beside Martha Nussbaum, several other public philosophers like Richard Rorty have emphasized the importance of empathy. In his [The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis](#) (2009), economic thinker, author, and activist Jeremy Rifkin writes that

“discoveries in brain science and child development are forcing us to rethink the long-held belief that human beings are, by nature, aggressive, materialistic, utilitarian, and self-interested. The dawning realization that we are a fundamentally empathic species has profound and far-reaching consequences for society.”

Although Pinker thinks that Rifkin’s views on empathy are “based on a dodgy interpretation of the neuroscience” and warns of the dangers of overemphasizing it and not employing it in its proper context, he does include it as one of four “better angels of our nature” (self-control, the moral sense, and reason are the other three) that can help move us away from violence and “incline us toward cooperation and peace.” In his book mentioned above, Pinker indicates that “the kind of empathy we want” is “sympathetic concern for others’ well-being.” (See [here](#) for more on the relationship of empathy and sympathy.) And he provides numerous examples of how “the science of empathy has shown that sympathy can promote genuine altruism, and that it can be extended to new classes of people when a beholder takes the perspective of a member of that class, even a fictitious one.”

A wisdom-directed empathy is desirable not only in regard to approaching the past and present, but also the future. In [“Educating the Wise Cyborg of the Future,”](#) futurologist (and Wisdom Page editor) Tom Lombardo and R. T. Blackwood emphasize the need for a wisdom-centered education. It would include “facilitating the development of ecological consciousness within various courses . . . teaching to big picture and synthetic thinking,” and “seeing connections between one’s own behavior and the world at large, empathy and compassion for life in general, and even self-transformation in beliefs and values.”

Empathy in Politics and Everyday Life

Empathy is important in political life because seeking the common good should be the main goal of politics and political wisdom; and we cannot really know another’s “good” without being empathetic. Some of the writers mentioned above have stressed empathy’s political significance, both on the national and international levels.

In her NYT essay, Nussbaum [wrote](#): “We need the imaginative ability to put ourselves in the positions of people different from ourselves, whether by class or race or religion or gender. Democratic politics involves making decisions that affect other people and groups. We can only do this well if we try to imagine what their lives are like and how changes of various sorts affect them.” In discussing “strategic empathy” on the international scene, Shore praises the empathetic abilities of the 1920s German foreign minister Gustav Stresemann, quoting a contemporary who wrote about him, “The moment he sat down opposite a man, he was no longer confined within his own personality, he felt himself into the other man’s mind and feelings with . . . amazing accuracy.”

In [Political Animals](#) Shenkman regretfully observes, “We think we can count on our own empathy to provide us with the necessary warmth and humanity to address issues we face as

citizens in a democracy. But we can't. Our inability to do so skews public debates. It gives the advantage to the side wanting to take action to achieve a goal that inconveniences, harms, or kills people we don't know." He laments that "we cannot see the people on welfare as people. We see them as potential cheaters. . . . That swamps all of our other responses, including the strong impulse we possess for empathy."

In *The Age of Empathy*, written near the beginning of President Obama's years in office, de Waal states:

American politics seems poised for a new epoch that stresses cooperation and social responsibility. The emphasis is on what unites a society, what makes it worth living in, rather than what material wealth we can extract from it. Empathy is the grand theme of our time, as reflected in the speeches of Barack Obama, such as when he told graduates at Northwestern University, in Chicago: "I think we should talk more about Chicago: "I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit. . . . It's only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you will realize your true potential."

In his earlier [*The Audacity of Hope*](#), Obama was even more detailed about empathy. He writes there of his admiration of former Illinois senator Paul Simon and his "sense of empathy." It is a quality, says Obama, "that I find myself appreciating more and more as I get older. It is at the heart of my moral code, and it is how I understand the Golden Rule—not simply as a call to sympathy or charity, but as something more demanding, a call to stand in somebody else's shoes and see through their eyes." He says that he had learned empathy from his mother and grandfather, and that he found himself "returning again and again to my mother's simple principle—'How would that make you feel?'—as a guidepost" for his politics. And he believes that "a stronger sense of empathy would tilt the balance of our current politics in favor of those people who are struggling in this society. After all, if they are like us, then their struggles are our own. If we fail to help, we diminish ourselves."

In a 2012 [essay on Obama and political wisdom](#), I quoted extensively Obama's comments in 2009 regarding the need for empathy among Supreme Court judges and referred to the debate that ensued about his words. (The comments were occasioned by the retirement of Supreme Court Justice David Souter and the need to replace him, as Sonia Sotomayor soon did.) Now, in February 2016, with Obama getting ready to nominate still another justice, his thinking about empathy and justice is as pertinent as it was in 2009.

In 2009, television commentator and former adviser to President Lyndon Johnson, Bill Moyers also [expressed](#) the need for more empathy for those "losing their jobs. Their stomachs are knotted with fear as the life they had come to expect is fading fast. Not because of their own failures but because our political and financial elites rigged the economy for their own advantage." He recalled that he once "had a history professor . . . who believed the most remarkable quality of Abraham Lincoln was his empathy for people he didn't personally know. The working man. The soldier in battle. His widow and orphans."

In Senator (Dem, NJ) Cory Booker's just released book [United: Thoughts on Finding Common Ground and Advancing the Common Good](#) he writes, "I've learned that we must be more courageous in the empathy we extend to one another; we must shoulder a deeper responsibility for one another, and we must act in greater concert with one another. This is the wisdom that has been imparted to me"

Although Obama, Moyers, and Booker have called for more empathy, many politicians who have opposed President Obama's policies do not regard it as significant. And after experiencing the bitter dysfunctional partisan conflict of the Obama presidency, de Waal's words—"American politics seems poised for a new epoch that stresses cooperation and social responsibility—seem like the bitterest of ironies.

On the international stage, various types of empathy are also important. Shore's "strategic empathy" is one. (In [Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin](#), Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy write that Shore's approach to such empathy "is the essence of our approach in this book.")

But a more compassionate and wisdom-directed empathy is necessary if world leaders are adequately to address major international problems like war and climate change. In a [1991 essay](#), writer and poet Wendell Berry addressed an empathetic failure without calling it such.

The Gulf War, our latest failure to be peaceable, was thus linked to a much larger failure: the failure of those who most profit from the world to be able to imagine the world except in terms of abstract quantities. They cannot imagine any part of the world or any human community in any part of the world as separate in any way from issues of monetary profit. . . . Modern war and modern industry are much alike, not just in their technology and methodology but also in this failure of imagination. It is no accident that they cause similar devastations. . . . One thing worth defending, I suggest, is the imperative to imagine the lives of beings who are not ourselves . . . animals, plants, gods, spirits, people of other countries and other races, people of the other sex, places-and enemies.

In his *Empathetic Civilization* Rifkin stresses the need for empathy in dealing with global warming. He ends his work with these words: "But our rush to universal empathic connectivity is running up against a rapidly accelerating entropic juggernaut in the form of climate change Can we reach biosphere consciousness and global empathy in time to avert planetary collapse?" In praising the book, Arianna Huffington (of the Huffington Post) [writes](#), "In this time of economic hardship, political instability, and rapid technological change, empathy is the one quality we most need if we're going to survive and flourish in the 21st century."

The need for positive empathy, one coupled with love and caring, is not just evident in political life. Spouses, other family members, friends, and workmates need our empathy. Our culture needs it. When we look to learning from the past or how to help shape the future, we need it.

Having been married for more than a half century, I realize now, more than ever, the importance of trying to empathize with my wife, Nancy. I regret that over the years I did not read more books like *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1992) that deal with male-female differences. [We consider our marriage a good one](#), but there were many times when I did not try

hard enough to understand exactly how she *felt* and *thought*. I also suspect that in many failed marriages insufficient empathy has been one of the causes.

Just as I was not always as empathetic with Nancy as I might have been, so too I sometimes failed to try hard enough to put myself in the shoes of our three children. As with differences between men and women, those between adults and kids are significant. Thus, it takes a special effort for us adults to try to see the world as children do. We may have been children once, but as technology has continued rapidly changing so too has the world children grow up in. Their social world is often very different than the one we experienced in our youth.

Our friends and acquaintance also need our empathy. As Kierkegaard, Mayeroff, Buber, and Weil all suggest, we need to start with listening, really listening, to others and then figuring out what their true needs are. Only then can we be of much help to them.

Some professions encourage empathy more than others. Healthcare and education are two that come readily to mind. The empathetic doctor, nurse, or teacher is especially to be valued. In some cases, empathy is absolutely essential if a caregiver or teacher is to succeed. In reading works of both fiction and non-fiction about Alzheimer's, I became convinced (as indicated [here](#) and [here](#)) that proper caregiving required maximizing empathy. Bob DeMarco, whose mother suffered from Alzheimer's, finally [concluded](#) that to help her the most he had to enter her world—her “Alzheimer's World,” as he came to call it. He then listed “some of the tips” he wished he had discovered earlier: “Use the local transportation. . . . Speak the local language. . . . Follow the local pace. . . . Never forget you're in a new place.”

Even in the business world, where cutthroat competition is sometimes stressed, empathy can be important. Simon Sinek, who sometimes lectures to CEOs and other leaders, has [written](#): “There is a pattern that exists in the organizations that achieve the greatest success, the ones that outmaneuver and outinnovate their competitors, the ones that command the greatest respect from inside and outside their organizations, the ones with the highest loyalty and lowest churn and the ability to weather nearly every above and the people on the ground look out for each other. This is the reason they are willing to push hard and take the kinds of risks they do. And the way any organization can achieve this is with empathy.” (See also [here](#) for more on business and empathy.)

We have already looked at what George Eliot said about how the arts can encourage fellow-feeling. We have also seen how fiction like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has helped “expand readers' circle of empathy” or how the photographs of Riis, Lange, or Evans can also expand that circle.

In 1955 poet Carl Sandburg, who had written many empathetic poems, aided his brother-in-law photographer Edward Steichen in putting together an exhibit of over 500 photographs from almost 70 countries for New York's Museum of Modern Art. The exhibit subsequently was displayed in various parts of the world, becoming the most viewed display of photographs in history. Sandburg also wrote the Prologue for the extremely popular book, [The Family of Man](#),

which reproduced the photographs. One reviewer of the exhibit [believed](#) that it “would lead to a diverse but unified condition of interpersonal and international empathy.” In more current times, modern artists like the [Witkin brothers continue to demonstrate](#) how art can arouse empathy.

In 1968, Sandburg’s fellow poet Wendell Berry (see above), after looking at pictures in a magazine, wrote [“To a Siberian Woodsman,”](#) which expressed similar empathetic sentiments towards a man who was part of a country that was considered the U.S.’s most powerful enemy.

In her NYT imagination essay, Nussbaum stresses that the imagination needed for empathy “is an innate gift, but it needs refinement and cultivation; this is what the humanities provide.” In a recent essay I have argued that [“Historians Need to Write and Teach with Empathy.”](#)

In regard to culture more generally, Nussbaum had written in her *Political Emotions* that one of the most important things nations can do is “build cultures of empathy, encouraging the ability to see the world through the eyes of others and to recognize their individuality”—just the sort of efforts that poets Sandburg and Berry have aided. In an essay two years ago, I [indicated](#) what such a more empathetic culture might look like.

As Rifkin, Nussbaum, Lombardo, and others realize, any wise social, political, and cultural future must exhibit more empathy than our world is presently demonstrating. More empathy would help reduce a whole host of problems including a deepening U. S. political divide, racial and rich-poor tensions, climate-change conflict, and international clashes. If we do not become more empathetic, we may continue to survive, but not wisely or well.

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