



Why We Need Empathy

Professor Jane Shaw, Provost

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Summary of the Lecture

What is empathy?

Entry of the word empathy into English, early 20th century, in psychology and aesthetics.

Vernon Lee, early user of the word empathy in British English, worked on emotional and physical responses to art objects (*Beauty and Ugliness*, 1912).

Empathy, *noun* [after German *Einfühlung*]

1. Psychology and Aesthetics

The quality of mentally identifying oneself with an object of contemplation, and so fully understanding or appreciating it.

2. The ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings and experience

Psychology: Importance of mimicry (later developed in biology and neuroscience – mirror neurons); sometimes referred to as emotional contagion. Psychologists also posited two aspects to empathy: cognitive empathy (perspective taking) and affective empathy (shared emotional response).

My working definition of empathy for this lecture: "The art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions." (Krznaric, 2012)

Why do we need empathy?

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum in *Not for Profit* (2016) argues that the humanities and arts are essential for democracy to work. "Citizens cannot relate well to the world around them by factual knowledge and logic alone." We need to develop a "narrative imagination" to be an intelligent reader of another person's story, a person different from ourselves - i.e. we need empathy.

Enlightenment – beginnings of democracy entwined with the development of moral philosophy based on sympathy (Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759), and with the rise of the novel; the novel is described as the "humanitarian narrative" by historian Thomas Laqueur (1989).

Empathy does not imply agreement with another's perspective and experiences but rather understanding of them.

Democracy, to function healthily, requires the participation of its members in civic life. It requires us to understand a range of points of view and to evaluate them using our reason. It does not mean we have to accept unquestioningly another's point of view, but rather to try and understand it.

Stepping into someone else's shoes

Exercising empathy through the arts enables us to enlarge our communities beyond those immediately known to us. Importance of imagination.

Marilynne Robinson (2012) "Community, at least community larger than the immediate family, consists very largely of imaginative love for people we do not know or whom we know very slightly....

The more generous the scale at which imagination is exerted, the healthier and more humane the community will be."

Empathy and the Arts

James Baldwin (1962): The role of the artist as disrupter, showing us what we can't or don't want to see. "Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, to make freedom real."

Our role as viewers/listeners/readers, exercising empathy, paying attention.

Examples from the visual arts:

Daniel Goldstein, "Invisible Man" (2010)

Il Sodoma, "St Sebastian" (1525)

Jacob Epstein, "Lazarus" (1947)

"Dervish" – 16th-century portrait from Uzbekistan, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The notion of the "faraway nearby" (Rebecca Solnit, 2013) – empathy as a journey; emotional resonances with those who are different from us.

Zadie Smith (2025) "I am fascinated to presume, as a reader, that many types of people, strange to me in life, might be revealed through the intimate space of fiction, to have griefs not unlike my own. And so I read."

What is the Role of Beauty?

Vernon Lee – art not for art's sake but for life's sake.

Beauty is not a luxury, but it takes us out of ourselves so that our minds are cleared of "selfish care." Iris Murdoch's notion of "unselfing," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970).

Theatre and the Immersive Experience

The play *Punch* (2024) by James Graham.

Empathy and Society

How do we try to understand those with whom we radically disagree on political or other grounds?

Arlie Hochschild's notion of the "deep story." (*Strangers in their Own Land* 2016)

"Such a story permits those on both sides of the political spectrum to stand back and explore the subjective prism through which the party on the other side sees the world. And I don't believe we understand anyone's politics, right or left, without it. For we all have a deep story."

Is There a Case to be Made Against Empathy?

Elon Musk, February 2025, "The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy." Musk and others argue (Gad Saad, 2026) that empathy has gone too far and that it jettisons logic in decision-making.

Others argue against empathy for different reasons – because they think it is not the best way to be good and do good. Yale psychologist Paul Bloom in *Against Empathy* (2016) says:

(1) Empathy is biased (2) empathy is narrow and (3) empathy can cause burnout (empathic distress). He and Buddhist monk/cellular geneticist Matthieu Richard (2013) argue that compassion is a 'cooler' emotion as it does not require one to feel the other's suffering.

The problem with this argument is that it assumes that empathy is only about feeling another's suffering.

Does the fine distinction between empathy and compassion really matter when the hope is to develop our understandings of one another so that we may create vibrant social and political communities working for the common good? This brings us full circle back to democracy.

A vital democracy requires literate citizens. James Marriott (2026) argues that this is endangered as we potentially enter a post-literate age.

What makes empathy work?

The exercise of empathy is a choice. We have to be willing to give it a go, choose to show up, listen, pay attention, learn, look, read.

But we also need the a-ha moment when we suddenly understand something previously unknown or opaque to us, and we cannot force that moment of insight.

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