

Empathy, Ethics, Emotional Labor, and the Ethos of Democracy

Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* (New York: Random House, 2009). 304 pp. \$25.99 (cloth), ISBN: 9780307407764.

Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (New York: Tarcher, 2009). 688 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN: 9781585427659.

J. D. Trout, *The Empathy Gap: Building Bridges to the Good Life and the Good Society* (New York: Viking, 2009). 320 pp. \$25.95 (cloth), ISBN: 9780670020443.

When I start to talk about ethics in class, I tell students about a nonprofit that is forever sending me letters to support their cause, "teach tolerance." I throw those letters away, I say. Tolerance is not enough for me. That is too little, not sufficient for treating a person ethically. Looking for help in the public administration literature, I find H. George Frederickson (1997) asking me, in *The Spirit of Public Administration*, to love my fellow citizens. C'mon, H. George, that's asking a little much. What I can do is, "I can feel your pain"

(as Jeremy Rifkin quotes Bill Clinton), that is, I can empathize.

Like the Golden Rule, the notion of empathy is pretty universal and has been around forever, but the term's career began with Robert Vischer's use of the German word *Einfühlung* (feeling oneself into another thing or person) in his 1872 dissertation on aesthetic philosophy; the slightly younger and better-known Theodor Lipps picked it up and introduced the Greek *empathia*. The British American psychologist E. B. Titchener brought it into English in 1909 as "empathy."

Primatologist-cum-philosopher Frans de Waal (2006) begins *The Age of Empathy* with a reference to Adam Smith's understanding of the pursuit of self-interest as tempered by a "sympathetic fellow feeling." But, like Smith's contemporary, Immanuel Kant, we have instead become, De Waal rightly complains, too obsessed with what is distinctive about us—abstract thought—that we forget the "gut" part, as he puts it.

The Industrial Revolution, among other things, changed status relations most palpably, De Waal

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reminds us, because it made universally obvious that one year's peasant could be another year's prince—or at least “industrial baron”—thus confirming Darwin's random selection. But then Herbert Spencer (and later Ayn Rand) slanted a “survival of the fittest” argument based entirely on the selfish, competitive side of the theory. Those who stressed the other side, such as prince and anarchist Petr Kropotkin ([1902] 2010), were left crying in the wilderness, to be brought in again only recently.

But, as Darwin well understood, natural selection has, in fact, designed our brains to be in tune with our fellow human beings, and we are both competitive and cooperative. Empathy, De Waal says, begins with the synchronization of bodies—running together, laughing with others. Synchrony is our oldest form of adjusting to one another; we start with music as the universal language of emotion (Mithen 2006; Patel 2008). We know that babies cry when they hear others cry, and when it is the mother who hears it, she knows there is a problem and she goes to quiet the cry—that is self-protective altruism.

The discovery of “mirror neurons” in 1992 provided the “hard” scientific support. As De Waal notes, “Neuroimaging shows that our brains are similarly activated as those of people we identify with” (124), and indeed, genetically, our first impulse is to help those like ourselves, our “in-group,” which gives us a “warm glow.” The in-group is the cradle of cooperation. It is when we extend this identification to others that we display trust and, as we know from game theory, build social capital. One of the easiest ways to be reminded of our sense of empathy is to recall how we felt (or observe how others react) as children when someone else got a bigger piece of the pizza—angry resentment (the “most recognizable emotion”); we know we have not been treated fairly (and, yes, we have a gene for that, too; see Tricomi et al. 2010). Like the other writers here, De Waal of course believes that we should apply this sense of fairness and expand our sense of fellow feeling. Self-interest and wealth do not suffice, he aptly reminds us, to make a society successful; surveys consistently show that the greatest happiness is found not in the wealthiest nations but in those with the highest levels of trust among citizens.

In *The Empathic Civilization*, the prolific ecologist Jeremy Rifkin presents no less than “a new interpretation of the history of civilization by looking at the empathic evolution of the human race” and how it has shaped our development and will decide our fate as a species (1). He traces this “economic history” “from the rise of the great theological civilizations to the ideological age that dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, across the psychological era that characterized much of the twentieth century, and finally on to the emerging dramaturgical period of the

twenty-first century” (1). More technological advances bring more people together, creating more empathy, but, as in the case of the previous revolutions, this occurs at enormous costs to the environment, which thus nears entropy (e.g., the “agricultural revolution” ultimately succumbed to an exhaustion of soil and water). At the end, he offers some suggestions for resolving this unfortunate paradox between empathy and entropy. But let us look at some highlights of his interpretation.

Looking around, we can agree with Rifkin that empathy has by now caught on—emotional intelligence is education-speak for it, service learning is supposed to teach it, and it underlies such phenomena as truth and reconciliation commissions, in which the perps are supposed to learn what it feels like to be a victim, and similar programs in the legal system such as restorative justice—as he adeptly sites it in the larger landscape.

Citing lessons from apes and infant care, Rifkin stresses that we do not seek autonomy so much as companionship. (He is probably right that a “society of narcissists, sociopaths, or the autistically challenged” would be unlikely to thrive [42].) We began in small tribal groups with little sense of self, which only evolved as we were increasingly atomized when we moved out of these preliterate mythological societies into civilized theological ones with specialization and bureaucracy. These early agricultural or hydrological societies all developed forms of writing to bridge the communication gap created by the breakup of group life.

Such patriarchal societies led Sigmund Freud to depict civilization as an elaborate psychocultural prison set up to restrain man's aggressive sex drive. But much more important than this, as others have shown, is the sociable drive that is cultivated in the infant's connection with its mother—we seek a relationship, not the gratification of an impulse, and play is the most fundamental social activity because this is where we create companionship. Thus, survival of the fittest is “as much about pro-social behavior and cooperation as physical brawn and competition” (81) (Wright 2000). So while we are wired for empathy, its development requires cultivation; this occurs when children and many animals play and, in the process, learn of the other and ourselves and the borders in between (Bekoff and Pierce 2009; Hrdy 2009; Konner 2010).

One reason we have not looked in this direction, apart from the hegemony of patriarchalism, is that practically all of our religions “either disparage bodily existence or deny its importance” (141). But as we all know (because we feel it), all human activity is, as Antonio Damasio puts it in *Descartes' Error*, “embodied experience”: “thinking combines sensations, feelings, emotions, and abstract reasoning in an embodied way” (2000, 147). For Rifkin, then, the “meaning of

life is to enter into relationships with others in order to deeply experience, as much as one can, the reality of existence" (156). Thus, the purpose of freedom is not just to attain autonomy, but to fulfill life through companionship, affection, and belonging, and this freedom is based on trust—hence the French emphasis on fraternity that De Waal also highlights, in addition to the rather atomistic liberty (Americans have "the pursuit of happiness" instead, and one could read Trout's book as making the case that more empathic government and policies would facilitate that pursuit).

For Rifkin, the beginning of (recorded) self-consciousness is marked by the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Writing enables power to become more centralized in a king, and, in parallel, the king becomes associated with a single deity that is remote (unlike the animal and such gods that inhabited the landscape with us). It was a long time before people realized that they were all—not just these kings—created in the image of God (we understand, with Rifkin's bit of irony, that this creation really occurs the other way around); this was the advent of humanism, and subsequently Martin Luther and Protestantism combined with modern printing passed the news on to everyone, in Western Europe at least, and this notion of the self eventually burst into political fruition with the American and French revolutions.

The print revolution also allowed the newly independent Protestants to make their home a sanctuary in which to "get to know thyself" through the new form of the diary to maintain check-off lists of their actions. This notion of authorship, in addition to their independent religion, conjured up the idea of the individual as a creative force, which Max Weber (2002) would credit with the notion of personal achievement. Print also allowed the contract commercial culture to expand enormously, extending trust almost globally. As Rifkin nicely sums it up, "Humanism begins in earnest in the sixteenth century. This was the century that opened with the scientific and artistic genius of Leonardo da Vinci and ended with the literary genius of Shakespeare" (270). There was a skeptical openness in the air, and people asserted their private selves and demonstrated their cosmopolitanism by being able to play different roles (cf. Shakespeare's plays on this). The notions of "self" and "privacy" emerged in the following century, and we see a new image of conjugal relations as a contractual relationship regarding not just property but also common interest.

This is when the new class of capitalists emerged and created for itself the nation-state that would enable them to make money globally. The nation-state provides a collective identity for the growing number of autonomous free agents, which it mirrors in that it claims sovereignty over its territory just as the individual claimed sovereignty over his property, and, like its

citizens, the nation-state claimed autonomy as an equal among nations. The advance of the capitalist class spelled doom for autocratic rule. One can trace the rise in self-consciousness that would lead to revolutions in the increasingly popular autobiographies—think Jean-Jacques Rousseau—evolving over the eighteenth century and in the rise of the novel (Watt 1957), which helped shape individualism as we know it today by its rapid spread. Thomas Jefferson's formulation of "all men's" unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness added the notion that we are creatures in search of self-fulfillment—a new narrative that yokes together rationalism and romanticism. This gave rise to a new surge of empathy that corresponded to the takeoff of the Industrial Revolution (ca. 1780).

Arthur Schopenhauer was the first to make explicit in moral philosophy what Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (and the Northern lights of Scotland) had intimated: compassion, not pure reason (à la Kant), was the basis of morality. Rifkin quotes in translation: "I suffer directly with him, I feel *his* woe just as I ordinarily feel only my own . . . we suffer *with* him and hence *in* him; we feel his pain as his, and do not imagine that it is ours" (350). As he judiciously sums up, "In this single statement, Schopenhauer becomes the first person in history to clearly define the empathic process," which he described as the "great mystery of ethics" (350). To this, he adds the apt observation that the notion of gender equality emerged from the Romantic view of marriage as an emotional enterprise that required equal participation in romantic courtship—and this prepared the way for the demand for equal participation in politics.

For Rifkin, a second Industrial Revolution had an equally large impact on our empathic consciousness: "The coming together of the electricity revolution with the oil-powered internal combustion engine would give birth to a new communications/energy regime and bring with it still another leap in human cognition" (366). Telephones and automobiles quickened the pace of life, allowing the average individual to become much more widely enmeshed in social networks. This led to a leveling of social hierarchies, a democratization of human experience, as we were increasingly exposed to others, and, while we looked more into ourselves, we also looked more at them. This new self-reflective psychological age "peaked in the 1960s and 1970s with the surge of the counter-culture and social activism among the baby-boom generation" (yes, Rifkin was there) (366).

Now we are in the "age of empathy," and by way of illustration, he cites the virtually global mourning of the death of Princess Diana. More concretely, today the majority of people live in urban areas, which increases cosmopolitanism, signifying an increasing appreciation of diversity (Appiah 2005).

Anthropologists contend that social exchange always precedes commercial exchange—that is, trust building precedes capital building. Tourism is practiced on an unprecedented scale, especially in the vastly extended European Union. Rifkin cites the “culture shift” from materialist to postmaterialist documented by Ronald Inglehart (1990), which mirrors this shift to more empathic consciousness.

All of this is, of course, billed to us entropically in the form of global warming and, given all the other crises (credit, energy, etc.), Rifkin sees us on the brink of collapse, with our only hope in a “Third Industrial Revolution” with “distributed energies” and “distributed capitalism.” All of us, in our houses and our offices, can produce energy in renewable forms (solar, wind, hydro, biomass, etc.), and by reconfiguring the power grid along the lines of the Internet, a “smart intergrid” made up of mini-grids that are connectible will allow us all to share—when power is not being used by you over there, it can be used by me over here. This will lead to “distributed capitalism,” which is also more about sharing and collaboration than about competition, as we already have seen in phenomena such as Linux and the whole new information and communication technology (think Wikipedia), which is cybernetic, not linear. There will still be money made, but by selling not a CD but access to a time segment of music, not by selling a set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* but access to it, not, to add an even more salient example I have seen, by buying or renting a car, but by “sharing” a Zipcar, putting it on your credit card as you are driving it off the corner lot.

This is the new dramaturgical consciousness—we are all doing *The Presentation of Self* that Erving Goffman (1959) wrote about now that technologies such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter enable it. Employees, as documented in Arlie Hochschild’s *The Managed Heart* (1983), are instructed in the proper emotional engagement with customers. All of us in public administration are administering (ministering to people) public service through our emotional labor (Guy, Newman, and Mastracci 2008). While the “Me Generation” may indeed have been the most narcissistic ever, the Millennials are much more connected with their families, much more community oriented, much more cosmopolitan. I hope he is right. To sustain this empathy level, we will also have to sustain our biosphere, the part of the globe that we share with the rest of the fauna and flora on it, by nurturing it—we are in a network relationship with it, too.

For J. D. Trout, *The Empathy Gap* that needs to be closed by *Building Bridges to the Good Life and the Good Society* is the chasm between what our empathy tells us we should do and what we are actually doing for our fellow citizens in the way of a welfare state. He asks, “How can people make decisions that enhance

their own well-being and craft durable policies that help others?” (14). To make that possible, we need to have a decent society, which means that no one’s basic needs are neglected and everyone has a real equal opportunity, given that people have all kinds of greater or lesser capabilities. To treat people equally, you will, as I tell my students, need to treat them differently (more of that emotional work, trying to size up people’s needs individually).

Too many Americans find themselves in circumstances not of their making and hence beyond their control that keep them from making such good decisions. Trout says that we tell obese children to eat well and exercise, but for the children most afflicted, poor African Americans, the grocery store that has “real” food is too far away and the streets are dangerous—never mind that there are no parks or playgrounds. Then, too, Americans tend to make much of free will, but countless behavioral social science and neuroscience experiments—from the marketing psychology at work on your grocer’s shelves to the obedience to authority inclination we have—have shown what a chimera that is. How judicious our judgment, hence our decision-making ability, as he amusingly illustrates with the “Lake Wobegon Factor”: 70 percent of all high school seniors deemed themselves above average in their leadership ability, and *all* thought themselves above average in getting along with others. Such high self-esteem does not obtain just among callow high-schoolers; 94 percent of university professors deemed themselves better than their average colleague.

Given this fallibility and our many built-in biases (status quo, availability, hindsight, etc.), we need to set better defaults. If we wanted, for example, to get more organs donated, which Americans generally favor, we could simply reset the default. Now it requires an action on our part to ensure that our organs are available; if the default were set on “organs automatically donated” unless otherwise requested, this shortage would be eliminated. This is the underlying principle of *Nudge* (Thaler and Sunstein 2009).

Trout contends that because we run social policy experiments all the time, we might as well conduct some that are based on well-informed science—the unscientific “trickle-down” experiment we have been subjected to since the 1980s has demonstrably failed, and it would be difficult to disagree with him when one looks at how enormously income inequality has grown over that period. He cites the ratio of CEO pay to that of the average worker—42:1 in 1960 and well over 400:1 in 2005; I would add the more general data that in 1980, the ratio of the top income quintile to the bottom was pretty close to 10:1 (44.2:4.1), but in 2005, it was closer to 15:1 (50.4:3.4) (U.S. Census figures, 2007). In support of this view, Trout cites a number of policies that have been successful,

despite arguments against them (e.g., the “displacement” notion that if we make people wear seat belts, they will just speed up and hence the fatality rate will not decrease—these notions have been proven false). He makes a very good point to those who decry this sort of policy making as paternalism and as inhibiting libertarian principles: those who really believe this should simply be given the option of signing a form to, say, relieve them of having to wear a motorcycle helmet, that states what the risks are (and the costs to themselves and everyone concerned) and then they can do whatever they want—a great “reset” of the default and perhaps even a viable one.

Less viably, he sees the best solution to poverty in a constitutional amendment that guarantees above-poverty incomes to all citizens and suggests that an easy way to support this is to tether it to the extra money the rich are making. Sounds too good to be true. Perhaps somewhat more realistically, he urges that Congress add a committee on social science research to the one on science and technology. Policies that depend on scientific expertise could require peer review, which would strengthen the relationship between science and legislation. One way to make this politically acceptable may be through “mini-publics” or citizens’ panels that are selected at random in given communities to get truly representative groups. This certainly sounds appealing, but one wonders whether we have enough sufficiently engaged citizens to fill such panels in any representative way—the difficulty with “deliberative democracy” (Fox and Miller 2006).

More salient for public administration, however, is the everyday import of empathy as our street-level bureaucrats carry out the emotional labor that is required of them and that, like so much else in public service, remains undervalued and underpaid (because it is unrecognized or at least unacknowledged). We may hope that this attention to empathy will alter that, as it is out of empathy, as I would argue along with Rifkin, that our whole ethos and ethics arise. It is empathy that enables us to recognize the other as our equal, and hence it is, as Rifkin at least implies, also the basis of our democratic ideals and thus for us in public service truly foundational.

These three treatments of empathy expand our conception of ethics and give it a scientific grounding that now subsumes the “ethics of care” that came out of feminist moral philosophy, which, without rejecting obligations of rights and justice, added an “ethic of love and trust, including an account of human bonding and friendship” (Slote 2007). It seems, too, somewhat analogous to what the likes of Michael Sandel (2009) and Amartya Sen (2009) are pursuing in their theories of justice, something that goes beyond the Kantian abstract, detached “fairness”

of John Rawls (1971) coming merely out of pure ratiocination.

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