

Do We Have Less Empathy? Or Aristotle on Upbringing

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If empathy is a biological trait, then how is it even remotely possible that folks are less empathetic nowadays than were the young of 20 years ago, as has been recently reported in the [Telegraph](#)? If the report that the young are less empathetic has any plausibility, then there is a rather profound respect in which Aristotle may have gotten it quite right, when he declared that human beings are not good or bad by nature, but as a result of the their upbringing.

The way in which evolution may operate with respect to acquiring empathy is rather interesting. There is a straightforward sense in which human beings can masterfully learn to have empathy, whereas in general other creatures cannot. The caveat, however, may be that human beings must first experience empathy and, above all, witness it. In this respect, acquiring empathy may be much more like learning to speak a language than most of us would ever have supposed.

Alas, a most interesting fact about life nowadays is that parents have gotten so very, very busy and technology has turned self-entertainment into something akin to a social fashion. Indeed, no doubt there are parents nowadays who are more willing to make sure that their children have the latest technological gadgets than they (the parents) are willing to spend time with their children. And if this is right, then we already have a consideration that sheds some light on why young people nowadays have less empathy than young people of 20 years ago. And the people of [Le Chambon](#), on the one hand, and [Nazi Germany](#), on the other, may lend further credence to the point.

The people of Le Chambon instinctively and rather naturally put their own lives on-the-line in order to save Jews from the onslaught of Hitler's armies; whereas the people of Nazi Germany were astoundingly indifferent to the harm that they inflicted upon Jews. With the people of Le Chambon, we have an environment in which empathy was nurtured. With the people of

Nazi Germany, we have an environment in which hostility towards numerous groups and, in particular, the Jews was nurtured.

When loving and morally upright parents spend an abundance of time with their children, then the children will commonly see empathy on the part of their parents towards others: helping an elderly person across the street in one instance; giving to the Salvation Army in another instance; stopping to give direction to a distraught stranger in town in another instance. And so on. Parents who thus behave in front of their children are configuring the lives of the children (at least in large measure) to display empathy towards others. This would seem to be Aristotle's point.

By contrast, we can all too easily imagine nowadays parents being so very, very busy and thus rather content with their children playing video games, visiting social networking sights, and so on than with actually spending significant quality time with their children. Children thus raised are far less configured by the behavior of their parents to display empathy towards others. This, too, would seem to be Aristotle's point.

Significantly, technology is more of a hindrance than a help with respect to underwriting empathy.

As we all know, technology can be masterfully pressed into the service of moral excellence. Groups of support can be formed on a social networking sight. Through mass text-messaging people can be alerted of a danger to their lives, be the danger natural or human. And so on. Thanks to technology, it has been possible for hundreds of thousands of people around the world to offer monetary support to those suffering from a major natural disaster such as a tsunami or a significant earthquake or a horrific hurricane.

Unfortunately, it turns out that on a daily basis most people do not use technology for achieving admirable ends. Quite the contrary, technology is typically used for manifestly self-serving ends. Indeed, on a rather daily basis most of us use technology in a way that renders us oblivious to others around us. Whilst walking, we are either talking on our cell-phone, text-messaging, or listening to music on our iPod (or whatever portable device) that we have. The very idea of just enjoying being aware of what is going on

around us is an increasingly vanishing way of being.

I have had the joy of teaching some students who are beautifully self-aware. They are indeed a moral beacon in terms of their sensibilities in this regard. By contrast, I have taught students who seem to be very nearly oblivious to my humanity as I energetically raise the topic du jour.

To return to the beginning of this blog-entry, human beings are not hard-wired to be empathetic or vicious. Rather, they are hard-wired to be marvelously adoptive. And this would indeed seem to be in keeping with Aristotle's point. For he held that it is none other than the capacity for moral training that marks the difference between human beings and (as [Peter Singer](#) would say) non-human animals.

No one doubts that dogs, for instance, can commit acts of rescue that deeply move us. Alas, the truth of the matter is that no one would dare argue that a dog is open to moral criticism for not being that sort of dog. [Police officers killed the ape that brutally mauled a Connecticut woman](#). But that was not owing to a moral assessment by the police that the ape had committed an egregious moral wrong. Rather, it is simply that the ape was behaving uncontrollably and this made it extremely difficult to assist the woman whom the ape had mauled.

Why are not human beings merely hard-wired to be empathetic? I do not have a complete answer to this question. But I would suspect that part of the answer has to do (a) with the fact that many mild forms of empathetic behavior are culturally anchored and (b) with the fact that the way in which we exhibit minor forms of empathetic behavior changes with the times. 30 years ago, I do not ever recall seeing an adult male on the news showing deep emotion to the point of shedding tears over the loss of a loved-one. Certainly, such behavior was extremely rare. Nowadays, by contrast, it is rather common to see a male moved to tears given such circumstances.

Just as human beings are better-off having the capacity to speak a language, but must be taught a given language in order to speak that language, I am suggesting that there is a parallel with empathy.

The substance of Aristotle's point can be put as follows: Human beings are easily the most malleable of earthly creatures; accordingly, how human

beings are raised in childhood makes all the difference in the world in terms of the moral excellence(s) that human beings naturally and spontaneously exhibit as adults.

For further reflections on Aristotle with respect to raising children, see Section III of my essay "[Friendship: Parental Love and Modernity](#)," to appear in *The Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, edited by Ruth Chadwick.