

# Empathy and Loving Attention

CARISSA PHILLIPS-GARRETT

## Abstract

The failure to understand the needs, beliefs, and values of others is widely blamed on a lack of empathy, which has been touted in recent years as the necessary ingredient for bringing us together and ultimately for tackling issues of social justice and harmony. In this essay, I explore whether empathy really can serve the role it has been tasked with. To answer this question, I will first identify what empathy is and why its champions believe it plays such an essential role in social life. With this in mind, I contend that promoting empathy on its own may make solidarity among diverse populations more difficult to achieve and undermine social reconciliation. Instead, I argue for a different approach that begins with acknowledging our self-oriented perspective and how it shapes what we see, appreciate, and interpret, before turning to others with a kind of loving attention. Unlike empathy, loving attention allows us to see others as they really are, not as we imagine we would be in their shoes, and is that kind of perception that is necessary for bridging divides and building solidarity in our contemporary world.

The escalating social and political tensions of the last few years in many democracies force us to reckon with the fact that even in diverse nation-states, many live segregated lives, surrounded by those who think, believe, and look like them. Though democracies were designed to foster productive disagreement and to allow people of varied values, creeds, and identities to live together, they instead now encourage echo chambers that produce increased self-sorting, shutting down conversations and the possibility of tolerating disagreement. Bitter social and political divides forestall the possibility of productive communication about goals that should be shared, including rectifying the failures of political and social institutions to live up to the ideals of justice, while ensuring that all are able to secure their own flourishing.

Moreover, as climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic have most recently forced us to grapple with, the problems that we face now are also increasingly globalized; they cannot be solved by any one nation-state on their own, and what happens in one part of the globe inevitably affects everyone. Given the complexity of the problems and the diversity of those affected, this makes it even more challenging to solve problems exacerbated by deep differences in power, values, and interests.

Philosophers have long championed the power of reason and argument to test our own ideas and challenge those of others, allowing us to find the right practices and solutions to promote flourishing for all. This approach to promoting healthy civic life and global justice, however, has been increasingly criticized for failing to recognize the power of emotion in shaping our beliefs and allegiances. We do not make decisions based on reason alone, and research has shown that even when presented with evidence, our decision-making is based not on the evidence but on what reinforces our existing beliefs and identities or we wish were true (Kunda, 1990).

The failure to understand the needs, beliefs, and values of others is widely blamed on a lack of empathy, which has frequently been touted as the necessary ingredient for bringing us together and tackling issues of social justice and harmony. For example, U.S. President Joe Biden argued that ‘empathy is the fuel of democracy’: since empathy is what enables those with different perspectives to understand others, even when they disagree, the preservation of democracy itself requires empathy (Biden, 2021). We use our own feelings as a starting place to extend empathy to others; since we know what it feels like to suffer, experiencing the suffering of others moves us to act in response. Through empathizing with those very different than us, we can come to understand how to respond in ways that meet the needs of particular individuals and build solidarity to promote the common good.

In this essay, I explore whether empathy really can serve the role it has been tasked with. To answer this question, I will first identify what empathy is and why its champions believe it plays such an essential role in social life. With this in mind, I examine why it will be difficult for empathy to effectively bridge the epistemic divides we face and how empathy may make solidarity among diverse populations more difficult to achieve. Instead, I argue for a different approach that begins with acknowledging how our self-oriented perspective shapes what we see, appreciate, and interpret and then focuses on lovingly attending to others. Unlike empathy, loving attention allows us to see others as they really are, not as we imagine we would be in their shoes, and it is that kind of seeing that is necessary for building solidarity in our contemporary world.

## **1. What Empathy Is**

Empathy, as commonly understood in the psychological and philosophical literature, includes both a cognitive and an affective response to the experience of others, so I experience what another feels when I

engage empathetically – or at least what I imagine that the other feels (Slote, 2007, p. 14). The simplest form of empathy is a biologically-based response to the emotional state of others that involves deep feeling but is not intentional and does not involve effort, so the empathizing person may simply feel sad herself when she senses another's sadness (Hoffman, 2014, p. 73). However, empathy may also be developed actively through verbally-mediated association and perspective-taking practices that develop explicit connections between one's own empathetic feelings and the suffering of others, and it is the development of this capacity that empathy's proponents champion. In this more complex form of empathy, the empathizer connects her own experience of sadness with the target's, utilizing the power of imagination to take up the perspective of someone who suffers by projecting herself into the experience of the target (ibid, p. 74). For instance, in empathizing with a friend upon the death of his spouse, the empathizer uses her own experience of loss to imagine how the friend must feel before experiencing his feelings of loss in herself. In imagining how she would feel, were she in his position, she aims to feel as her friend does though they occupy different positions.

What is distinctive about empathetic feeling, in contrast to other feelings such as sympathy and compassion, is that the empathizer does not merely feel concern or sadness *for* her friend, but *as* him (Cuff et al., 2016, p. 145). If she feels sympathy for her friend, the object of feeling is the friend's state (e.g., the friend's sadness), while empathy responds to the same object of the friend's feeling (e.g., the death of the friend's spouse) (Stueber, 2019). Sympathy is felt as concern for the friend's well-being, but what is distinctive about empathy is that the sympathizer vicariously shares the other's feeling of loss and sadness as her own. She does not simply feel bad *for* him, but she is sad *with* him. This, however, is not merely a form of emotional contagion; she recognizes that though she is sad with him for the same reason that he is sad, her sadness is separate from his, and she is not simply 'catching' sadness.

These aspects of empathy are critical for the benefits that empathy's proponents claim for it. It is the ability to cognitively understand the experience of another and respond affectively to it that has led public figures as diverse as former U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama and conservative pundit Glenn Beck to champion empathy as the solution to political and social ills. Empathy leads to understanding, and understanding is ultimately the basis for reconciliation and reconstruction of social community. Both Obama and Beck emphasized trying to understand the experience of other

people, and in particular, the necessity of empathy for truly reckoning with the reality of racial inequality (Beck, 2016; Obama, 2020). They are not alone; newspaper editorials, political speeches, and academic papers all frequently decry a lack of empathy as the cause of social and political discord, tracing the discontents that the U.S., the U.K., and many other democracies have faced in recent years to a lack of understanding and concern for the other that can be remedied through empathy.

## **2. Empathy's Value**

A key feature that proponents of empathy point out in its favor is that empathy requires us to understand and take up the perspective of others, which involves knowledge of the target. This does not simply involve intellectual acknowledgement of how others think and feel, but feeling as the target does creates an emotional connection between different people. By facilitating understanding between those who are very different from one another, empathy promotes an openness to others that allows for productive, not defensive, interaction.

The ability to project is precisely what many champions of empathy have focused on as most useful since it is perspective-taking that is said to develop openness. As the philosopher Adam Smith wrote, when we imagine what it is like to be someone else, 'we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him' (Smith, 2002, p. 12). It is by empathy that we can come to know what this is like, and it is when we imagine our own suffering that we can respond to the suffering of others appropriately.

Sentimentalist philosophers such as Smith, David Hume, and Michael Slote argue that when it comes to determining what we ought to do, relying on reason alone will not get us far, since reason cannot explain why we are morally obliged to act in one way rather than another, unless we care about the reason for action first (e.g., Hume, 2000, p. 301). For example, if I care about fighting climate change, I can determine via reason alone that donating a large portion of my income to combat climate change is good for me to do, since that is a way I can realize my goal. Reason alone will not tell me to combat climate change simply because it is the right thing to do, however, even if I do not care about it.<sup>1</sup> If I do not

<sup>1</sup> Of course, we could appeal to the fact that climate change will likely undermine my long-term interests, and therefore, reason might suggest

have this goal, then reason may tell me to spend my money on things I care about more. So, if reason is what we must derive morality from, we are unable to explain why I ought to follow the demands of morality. Instead, since it is empathy that interests us in the common good of all, not just in our own good, morality is derived from our passions and thus empathy is the ‘chief source of moral distinctions’ (ibid, pp. 393-94).<sup>2</sup> On this view, moral approbation identifies what is morally right, so what we naturally empathize with reveals what we should or should not do (ibid, p. 321). Thus, empathy provides a normative foundation for right action.

Furthermore, empathy not only explains what we ought to do, but it also enables us to recognize how we ought to respond, so it is a helpful tool for training us to respond rightly. Through the cultivation of empathetic feeling, we shape our responses, and hence develop the capacity to appreciate how to respond to the needs of others. We may be able to ascertain that inequality is unjust through reason alone, but it is not reason that allows us to appreciate the injustice inherent in particular situations. As illustration of empathy’s usefulness in this way, psychologist Martin Hoffman draws upon the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the nineteenth-century novel that galvanized the slavery abolition movement in both the U.S. and the U.K. Stowe began to viscerally appreciate what it was like for enslaved Black mothers to lose their children when she grieved the loss of her own son, and Stowe’s empathetic engagement motivated her to write the novel that, in turn, facilitated empathetic feeling for her many readers. Stowe’s portrayal of what it was like to be a slave in the American South humanized the situation of enslaved Blacks for many whites and led many of them to see that the abolition of slavery was morally required (Hoffman, 2014, pp. 86-87).<sup>3</sup>

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that I donate for those kinds of reasons. But that doesn’t seem to explain why, morally speaking, I ought to donate money to combat climate change, and so once again, the judgment of reason is simply prudential.

<sup>2</sup> While Hume uses the term ‘sympathy’ here, his use of the term corresponds to the contemporary English understanding of empathy, not to the contemporary notion of sympathy.

<sup>3</sup> Hoffman also argues that empathy helped to motivate Lyndon B. Johnson’s support for the civil rights movement a century later (2014, pp. 87-88). He is careful to qualify the role played by empathy, however, and though he argues it plays an important role, he does not claim that it was the only generating reason motivating white abolitionists and civil rights supporters (2014, p. 94).

Finally, beyond explaining what we ought to do and helping us to see what that is, sentimentalists argue that empathy is important for developing the capacity for sympathy and making altruism possible (Slote, 2007, pp. 23, 127-28). By causing us to imagine the suffering of others, our feelings of empathy lead us to take an interest in the good of others. Since we would fail to take such an altruistic interest in others without empathy, empathy is necessary for motivating us to respond to the needs of others (Hume, 2000, p. 394). Thus, empathy is not merely useful but is also essential for addressing the national and global issues we face that affect different populations in disparate ways.

### **3. Bridging the Epistemic Gap**

Proponents of empathy tout its ability to bring people who are different from one another together by reminding them of their similarities and thereby motivating them to act for one another's good. I contend, however, that we should be cautious about the extent to which empathy can do this. First, since empathy relies on recognition of similarity, empathy is more easily given for people like the empathizer, suggesting that while empathy may help us feel what we already understand, it will not help to close the epistemic gap with those who are least like one another.<sup>4</sup> Though Hoffman draws on the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe to illustrate how empathy can be an effective motivator, Stowe's case also demonstrates the limits of empathy. Though Stowe's experience as a middle-class white woman differed in important ways from the enslaved Black women she empathized with, it was her experience of a specific kind of loss that caused her to appreciate a similarity that she shared with many enslaved Black women. However, without that similarity in the first place, she might have felt compassion or sympathy but not empathy. To feel empathy, Stowe had to experience a loss similar to that of those she was empathetic toward and then she had to recognize its salience. Without such a loss, however, she would not have been moved to support abolition due to empathy, showing that deep similarities between people are necessary for empathy's effectiveness.

<sup>4</sup> Numerous studies support the empirical claim that a lack of similarity between the would-be empathizer and the target impedes feelings of empathy. See, for example, Nelson, Klein, & Irvin (2003); Tarrant, Dazeley, & Cottom (2009); Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe (2011); Gutsell & Inzlicht (2012); and Stevens et al. (2021).

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The deepest problems that plague our contemporary world, however, often involve clashes between people who have little in common and whose interests are often in opposition. The tensions between members of those groups is complex, but is driven, at least in part, by huge differences in ways of life, values, and interests. Take, for instance, the divisions between rural and urban residents amidst an increasingly globalized economy in industrialized countries like the U.S. and the U.K. that gained prominence during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum. While overall economic measures in many wealthy nations have increased due to globalization, focusing primarily on the size of GDP does not capture the significant economic losses experienced by workers in manufacturing and agricultural sectors, nor why the loss of a way of life is so destabilizing for some, who have found their expected way of life shifting beneath their feet. Politicians and other urban, white-collar professionals directly benefitted from free trade policies, but local farmers and manufacturers who had benefited from previous protectionist policies often did not. When the policies that have directly benefitted urban white-collar professionals have, at the same time, undermined the livelihoods of rural, blue-collar workers, this direct conflict of interests is unlikely to be solved by empathy without addressing the real material differences at issue.<sup>5</sup>

Another example of how empathy is an ineffective motivator when it requires those who have power and resources to give them up is the fight for Black liberation. One popular narrative is that empathy is what led many white people to fight for the abolition of slavery in both the U.S. and the U.K. However, in spite of the common belief that empathy played an important role in motivating support for the end of slavery and the promotion of civil rights, this interpretation has long been questioned by scholars such as critical legal scholar Derrick Bell. Bell argued that many white Americans were not moved to action until they recognized the costs to their own interests through the disruption of social life due to civil unrest and

<sup>5</sup> I do not mean to imply that economic concerns are the only issues at stake, or the only reason why rural and urban voters diverged so strongly. Nor do I mean to imply that the issues in the U.K. Brexit referendum and U.S. presidential election were identical. Cultural loss (the feeling of many that their 'way of life' as a white-dominant majority) surely played a significant role, as well as resentment toward urban elites. Nevertheless, the failure to acknowledge the divergent impacts on the economic opportunities for different citizens surely played a substantial role in the increasingly hostile and polarized political climate.

continued protests, the reputation of American democracy, and their own self-image as 'good people'.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing these costs caused the self-interest of many white Americans to align with Black interests in the U.S., and it was when this changed that enough white Americans began to actively support Black civil rights, not because of altruistic empathy (Bell, 1976, p. 12).

Aside from direct conflicts of interests, however, deep disagreement about core values poses an even more difficult issue for empathy. A common strategy for developing empathy encourages the empathizer to imagine how she would feel in the other's shoes, so the empathizer brings her own values into her empathetic feeling. But if the values of the would-be empathizer and the target are deeply at odds, the same experiences will result in very different feelings for each. It is easy to see how similar experiences engender the same feelings when the loss is something we might expect everyone to suffer from (e.g., the death of a loved one), but when the very thing one person might mourn is what another would celebrate, empathy will struggle to bridge that gap. For example, consider a politically-charged Supreme Court decision that leaves one person stunned and angry at the injustice (as she sees it), while the other rejoices at (what he sees) as justice done. While the empathizer may be able to intellectually comprehend the target's feelings, unless the empathizer's deepest values change, they will be unable to feel as the target does in response to the same object. This kind of disagreement reveals a distinct limitation for empathy, since empathy uses shared values and similarities to build understanding. Deep conflicts over the best values, therefore, pose a challenge, since for the empathizer to take up the same feeling as the target toward the same experience, they must first share an understanding of which values are worth endorsing.<sup>7</sup>

As an example, consider that while some who voted for Brexit supported it on largely economic grounds, others did because they saw leaving the European Union as a way of preserving British identity,

<sup>6</sup> This dynamic also plays out in contemporary situations where 'good liberals' refuse to recognize their complicity in racial discrimination and structural injustice. Some of this is an unwillingness to give up material resources to support the costs of righting injustice, but some of the resistance surely also has to do with their image of themselves as non-racists and an unwillingness to accept that they, too, might be complicit.

<sup>7</sup> See also Nelson and Baumgarte (2004), which shows how cross-cultural value differences inhibit empathetic understanding.

autonomy, and sovereignty.<sup>8</sup> For someone with a cosmopolitan outlook who sees their identity as primarily European and prefers greater integration with the E.U., valuing British identity and control will seem insignificant, and it is hard to see how such a person could feel the same as a Brexiteer unless she was first convinced that British autonomy was worth valuing. Likewise, without first convincing the other party that their intellectual reasons for being saddened (or gladdened) are sound, someone who sees her British identity as being very important could not come to appreciate how it actually feels for the cosmopolitan, since the imaginative function of empathy connects the empathizer's own emotions to the target's feelings in response to the same object. Here, however, the same object (the results of the Brexit referendum) inspires very different responses.

This also applies to considerations of how we view our obligations beyond our nation as well. Someone who sees their identity first as a citizen of the world and secondly as a citizen of a particular nation-state might advocate for a drastic redistribution of resources from wealthy countries to poorer ones, arguing that need, not national identity, is what matters for moral obligations. However, to the person who deeply identifies as a member of her nation-state and sees the primary role of the government as promoting the good of that particular nation-state, this moral claim will seem deeply wrong, at least as long as some of their own fellow citizens are in need. At the deep level of values and identities, empathy will struggle to bridge the epistemic gap between people who are very different, so empathy can least do the work that is asked of it in the situations in which we need it most.

### 4. Addressing Inequality

A second concern with empathy is that it can dangerously entrench us in our preferences for some rather than others, undermining the pursuit of justice for all. Specifically, since empathy leads us to feel a greater connection with some over others, we will often be motivated by affective connection to promote the well-being of those we relate to over those we do not. For example, a study conducted on the impact of empathy on resource allocation found that when

<sup>8</sup> Multiple surveys found that for those who voted to leave, maintaining independence over U.K. policies was the most important reason (Carl, 2018).

participants were asked to empathize with a specific person, this often motivated participants to allocate resources to benefit that particular person, even when they also believed this allocation was unfair and knew that other people in the distribution pool had greater needs than the person they had been asked to empathize with.<sup>9</sup> This suggests the following worrying implication: not only will empathy be ineffective in the cases where we need it the most (as I argued in the previous section), but, in fact, it will often lead us to act in favor of those like us, furthering the gap between people who are already different from one another. In other words, in an increasingly polarized world, empathy serves to supercharge existing divides, not to bridge them. Given that we live in a world where power and access to resources is unequal, this also has the effect of perpetuating existing injustices since empathy encourages us to respond to the needs and desires of those we understand and connect with, rather than responding on the basis of objectively identified need.<sup>10</sup>

Even proponents of empathy recognize the concerns that empathy can interfere with fair treatment of all. In response to this concern, Hoffman proposed that the worries about bias could be tempered through explicit reflection on who else might be affected by this decision, as a way of attempting to extend empathy more broadly (Hoffman, 2000, p. 296). However, in a study designed to test whether Hoffman's suggestion would actually be effective at moderating bias in empathy, reflecting on who else might be affected by the decision did not change participants' decisions to benefit the particular person they empathized with (Oceja, 2008, pp. 181-182). Asking participants to explicitly reflect on principles of justice and fairness prior to making their decision *did* have an effect, which suggests that the problems with empathy cannot simply be fixed by extending its range more broadly. The problem is not with empathy's range, but the fact that when empathy is prioritized in decision-making, it may overrule what is fair or what promotes the good for all.

<sup>9</sup> Batson et al. (1995, pp. 1051-1052).

<sup>10</sup> Of course, even the identification of what counts as a need will be shaped by existing power relations and value systems, so I don't mean to suggest that this is a matter of simply seeing objectively what is necessary. As will become clear in the next section, I am not endorsing a straightforwardly objective way of ascertaining need. Nevertheless, the kind of attention I will propose seeks to call into question those beliefs, values, and expectations as given, whereas empathy often encourages us to take them as natural and unquestioned.

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It is not simply that we are more likely to empathize with those whose stories we appreciate vividly, however; it is also that even the capacity to develop empathy in the first place will be constrained by those we feel affinity for, and it is well-established in the psychological literature that we have greater affinity for those who are like us, including people of the same race and ethnicity, gender, team, political persuasion, and in-group.<sup>11</sup> This is not just a matter of who we tend to instinctively connect with or feel for, but also how seriously we take their suffering and what we will be willing to sacrifice to alleviate their suffering.<sup>12</sup> For example, as political science scholar Juliet Hooker has argued, white empathy evoked during the U.S. civil rights movement was a double-edged sword: while some white Americans clearly were empathetically moved to support civil rights, other white Americans were spurred by the possibility of equality to form angry and often violent mobs in opposition (Hooker, 2016). For those who fell into the latter category, they empathized with the experiences of other white Americans more than with the suffering of Black Americans, and this led not only to disproportionate empathy for those who were like them and indifference for those who were not, but to outright opposition and violence against Black Americans. The problem was not that these white Americans failed to empathize, but instead, that because the capacity for empathy itself is shaped, from the beginning, by prejudices, preferences, and affinities, their empathy was activated only for those like them.

Proponents of empathy are right to take the motivational question seriously. It is one thing to recognize that there is a difficult problem whose solution may require me to give something up and quite another to be willing to do so. But while empathy may well motivate me to sacrifice, it will not do so for those whose positions I do not understand or do not feel affinity for. Not only, then, might empathy not do anything to solve the motivational problem

<sup>11</sup> For research on affinity for those of the same race and ethnicity, see Xu et al. (2009); Avenanti, Sirigu, & Aglioti (2010); and Gutsell & Inzlicht (2010). For research on gender, see Feshbach & Roe (1968); for team, see Smith et al. (2009); for political persuasion, see Stevens et al. (2021); and for in-group, see Meindl & Lerner (1984); Gutsell & Inzlicht (2012); and Cikara et al. (2014).

<sup>12</sup> For particular studies that demonstrate how agents are less willing to benefit those unlike themselves and more willing to sacrifice themselves for those they have greater similarities with, see Batson et al. (1995); Batson et al. (1999); Stürmer, Snyder, & Omoto (2005); Tarrant, Dazeley, & Cottom (2009); and Cikara et al. (2010).

between very differently situated individuals, it may make it worse since I will be inclined to take the perspective of those who are like me more seriously, even when their suffering is less severe and doing so causes me to exacerbate the suffering of those with whom I do not readily empathize.

Together, these two problems highlight the danger of empathy's indifference to those we do not connect with emotionally, raising the question of whether emotion-based strategies really can play a transformative ethical role. Depending on the affective element to motivate us to promote justice encourages us to engage those we find easy to understand, but to bridge the gap, we must develop the capacity for both understanding and taking action even when we lack an emotional connection and do not recognize similarities.

## **5. Loving Attention**

I have argued so far there are two significant problems with viewing empathy as the solution to the globalized problems we face. First, since empathy depends on us finding similarity with people like us, it will be difficult to achieve in the cases where we need it the most: in engaging with those who have very different interests, situations, and values than our own. Second, not only is empathy often ineffective at bridging these gaps, but it also activates our tendency to promote the interests of those who are like us, thus further exacerbating the divides that exist. Both concerns about empathy arise from the idea that developing understanding of one another should begin with our own experiences and feelings and use those as the basis for connection with others. In contrast, I suggest that a more effective strategy for promoting social solidarity through understanding starts with the cultivation of loving attention.<sup>13</sup> While both loving attention and empathy aim at the same end of building understanding between diverse populations, loving attention more successfully targets the barriers that keep us from doing so.

The way that we come to see when we attend to the other is similar to how we develop the capacity to appreciate a particular example of art. This task involves creativity and generosity as I seek to

<sup>13</sup> The sense of 'loving attention', as I develop here, draws on Iris Murdoch's development of the philosophical conception, particularly as she discusses it in her essay 'The Idea of Perfection' in Murdoch (2014). Murdoch's own work on this was most significantly influenced by Simone Weil's essays on attention (Weil, 2002).

understand and appreciate the work of art. I do not merely passively soak it in or reflect on how I feel in response to it; rather, I make a conscious effort to appreciate and interpret its meaning and beauty. When I first encounter an unfamiliar painting, I notice only the most obvious elements: the bright colors, the unknown faces depicted, the strangeness of the tableau. In the first few moments, nothing much may change, but if I stop and focus my attention, I will start to notice details that give me insight. I observe the way the eyes of the two central figures express longing, how they are physically separated, the disapproval that is manifest in the face of an onlooker to the side. These figures that, minutes ago, seemed so distant take on a new familiarity in this light, and I begin to appreciate the story that is unfolding before me. The painting itself has not altered; instead, my capacity to *see* the painting has changed.

This approach to ethical development is exemplified in Iris Murdoch's narrative of the relationship between a mother-in-law, M, and her daughter-in-law, D. In the beginning, M judges that D is 'a silly vulgar girl', but over time, M acknowledges the role that her own prejudices and motivations play in interpreting D, and she begins to engage in a process of paying careful attention to D (Murdoch, 2014, p. 17). In doing so, M seeks 'not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly' (ibid, p. 22). In seeking to see D lovingly, M engages in a process that first acknowledges how M's own self-focused desires shape how she sees D, and then aims to see D anew by attending to D in this light. M comes to recognize that her own perspective obscures and shapes her interpretation of D, and so M's effort is aimed at expanding her own capacity for moral imagination so that she might come to 'see D as she really is', not as M currently understands D (ibid, p. 36). In time, this reshapes M's perspective of D, though not because D has changed; what has transformed is not D's behavior, but M's interpretation of it.

While the process of lovingly attending to the other begins by acknowledging that the observer's perceptual capacity is shaped by self-interest and attempting to appreciate the other as she is, empathetic identification tries to connect the empathizer's own feelings, values, and ways of seeing the world to the other. Were M to attempt to empathize with D, she might use what they have in common to imagine how she would feel if she were in D's position. However, since M's own values, personality, and interests are quite different from D's, this may not help M receive any more insight into D. Empathy invites us to extend the scope of who we attempt to understand, but understanding is still limited by our own point

of view. Conversely, loving attention challenges us to expand our moral imagination itself, not just the scope it applies to.

Since the starting point for empathy is the empathizer's own emotions, the beliefs and values about what is important that give rise to those emotions are often taken to be natural and unquestioned. In contrast, since loving attention starts with the other, our own beliefs and values are necessarily interrogated. This is an advantage in the case of divergent values, since knowing how I would feel, were I in the other's shoes, is no help if we value very different goods. In lovingly attending to the other, the attender questions his own biases to concentrate on sharpening what he is able to see, rather than relying on similarity and emotional connection to motivate his understanding. Of course, there will still be disagreement about what values he ought to prefer and how to best achieve shared ends, but these discussions can be more productive once he acknowledges the limits of his own perspective. Additionally, since loving attention is not based on understanding through emotional connection but on coming to understand others through engaging our attention, this approach explicitly combats the biases that lead us to favor those who are like us. By shifting the focus away from our feelings and emotive responses to the needs and desires of those we are engaging with, this will also make it less likely that we will react to the suffering of others by simply emoting or engaging in Facebook-solidarity.<sup>14</sup>

It might seem odd that Murdoch uses 'justly' and 'lovingly' interchangeably to describe the way in which M attempts to see D. We often speak of love's gaze as distorting reality, so to look at someone in the clear-eyed, objective way that we might think justice demands is quite different than seeing him through the subjective gaze of love. The loving attention here, however, is not the gaze of the lover who thinks that her beloved is the most perfect creature in existence; that is mere infatuation. Rather, the attention here is loving because love motivates us to know and appreciate the other as he truly is, not simply for who we wish him to be. Love orients us outward, away from the self and towards what is good. As we attend to the other on his own terms, we come to recognize that what we can see in the other is itself shaped and distorted by our

<sup>14</sup> Take, for example, the many white liberals and progressives who consider themselves Black allies but responded to the death of George Floyd and others by mainly posting about their sadness and anger on social media without taking more substantive action.

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own prejudices and preferences. This kind of attending to the other is thus, at its root, necessarily relational.

That loving attention is relational, however, does not mean that it is only appropriate for intimate relationships. Manifestations of love are in the concrete and the particular, but the love that motivates attention toward particular individuals may be broader, such as love for fellow compatriots or for humanity. While the urban cosmopolitan may not encounter any rural compatriots in her day-to-day life, she nevertheless assumes certain values and motivations on their part, and committing to engaging in loving attention requires that she recognize the ways in which her assumptions should be open to revision. Listening to people's stories – what they value, what they fear, what they hope for the future – is a way in, since it helps the attender to see others and their context better. She may not be able to feel what her rural compatriot does (connection to this particular area of land, fear of the collapse of economic livelihood, anxiety about changes in social status), but when she lovingly attends to him, she attempts to appreciate why her compatriot feels these things by seeing him in context. She does not merely engage him to convince him of what she takes the correct view to be or to make sense of beliefs that she finds baffling. In lovingly attending, her aim is to come to appreciate him, which involves not merely recognizing why he acts or believes as he does, but coming to see him in the light of love, as a whole person whose flaws and strengths are contextualized. As she attends to him, she hopes for his good and looks for what is best in him. She replaces easy caricatures with more complex pictures that acknowledge the ways in which the current economic system benefits her, along with the very real losses to community and economic livelihood that globalization brings. This recognition allows her to see her rural compatriot in a different light, and to understand the reasons why he values what he does, allowing her to engage meaningfully and imagine better solutions. Similarly, the white individual who commits to lovingly attending to his Black compatriot will begin to see the ways in which he has been unable (or unwilling) to see racial inequality. His recognition that his interpretation of Black experience is distorted by his own blind spots forces him to confront the distance between how things are and how they should be. Through acknowledging that his own self-interest might prevent him from appreciating the ways in which he has benefitted from injustice, he better develops the capacity to perceive the world and those around him as they are. The humility that this recognition produces then reorients his response to injustice to better reflect what those who experience injustice say they need, not what he assumes is best from the outside.

When we come to see in this way, it is also not just a matter of opening our eyes or emptying ourselves; rather, to attend in this way is a creative act of moral imagination that does not occur purely through either rational argument or emotional connection. What we can see will be shaped by both, but loving attention differs by acknowledging that what is needed is not a purely objective position to neutrally evaluate arguments from nor a purely subjective emotional connection. Rather, in taking seriously that the capacity to see is misshapen by self-focus, this approach takes an intersubjective and relational perspective that facilitates appreciation of those we are engaging. None of us has full access to the world as it is, so we need an approach that expands what we can see to address conflicting interests and competing values. Since the aim is to see one another and the problems we face as they really are, an intersubjective approach is not only necessary for understanding those who are quite different from us but also for ultimately understanding which values we ought to hold. Through reorienting what we pay attention to, we expand what we can see and question how we interpret one another, and it is this reshaping of our moral imagination that is necessary to create the conditions for the flourishing of all in our diverse and changing world.

*Loyola Marymount University*  
*carissa.phillips-garrett@lmu.edu*

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