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## **Empathy as a Common Ground Between Moral Development and Active Citizenship: An Aristotelian Approach**

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**Abstract:** This article explores the role of empathy as a common ground for the moral development and active citizenship of the individual, addressing a critical gap in the existing literature by exploring the connecting link between moral development and active citizenship through the lens of Aristotelian philosophy, emphasising the specific role of empathy as a unifying force between these two concepts. References to the history of the concept of empathy and its descriptive definition are presented in a way that facilitates its examination as a human skill—one that can function both as a moral virtue and as a driving force for conscious participation in public life, particularly in the modern era. Aristotelian thought serves as the primary theoretical framework under which empathy, its moral dimension, and its relationship

to active citizenship are analysed. Through the Aristotelian approach, empathy can be understood as the fundamental internal quality of the individual, enabling the development of the necessary sensitivity and appropriate criteria that contribute to their formation as an active citizen. At this juncture, the role of education is deemed crucial, as it can serve both to foster moral development and shape active citizenship through the cultivation of empathy. Ultimately, this article highlights the interconnection between empathy, moral development, citizenship, and education as a central issue, providing valuable insights to foster responsible and engaged citizens, especially in the context of the rapid socio-political changes occurring on a global scale.

**Keywords:** Empathy, moral development, Aristotle, active citizenship, role of education.

## Introduction

David Thunder (2017) poses the question at the outset of his volume, *The Ethics of Citizenship in the 21st Century*, whether reflecting on the relationship between ethics and citizenship has anything meaningful to offer to the study of this concept. In the same volume, William English (2017) voices his reservations about exploring the concept of citizenship, mainly through the lens of moral theory, arguing that such an endeavour might generate more confusion than clarity. The potential for confusion arises from the dual nature of citizenship—a term that, on the one hand, includes the technical characteristics of modern political systems and, on the other, references the more profound moral significance of politics.

Given that citizenship fundamentally involves the citizen as an individual who is politically and socially engaged, the characteristics of this engagement are intrinsically linked to the individual's entire personality and, above all, the value system they adhere to—that is, their ethics. A key anthropological parameter for both the internalisation and externalisation of ethical values, as well as for active citizenship, is the concept of empathy. The question of whether empathy can serve as a common ground where ethics and active citizenship intersect introduces a fertile line of inquiry—one that merits reflective exploration.

This article primarily focuses on reflective approaches to the relationship between empathy, moral development, and active citizenship in individuals, particularly in the context of education. While research frequently examines these concepts in isolation, this work uniquely integrates them through an Aristotelian lens, arguing that empathy is not simply a desirable characteristic but a necessary component for transforming moral understanding into civic action through education by nurturing individuals who are not only morally sound but also motivated to contribute to the common good. For this reason, the investigation into these concepts will focus on their practical application and objectives without delving further into issues that previous studies have extensively addressed.

This article will proceed as follows. First, the concept of empathy is clarified, and its various interpretations are presented, concluding that empathy is connected to understanding others, as well as to compassion, sympathy, and mercy—concepts that inherently carry a moral dimension and illustrate the relationship between empathy and ethics. Subsequently, based on an Aristotelian ethical framework, it is demonstrated that empathy fulfils the characteristics of

moral virtue and can serve as a key element in promoting an individual's moral development. From an Aristotelian perspective, empathy can be viewed as a fundamental internal quality of the individual, enabling the cultivation of the necessary sensitivity and criteria that support their development into an active citizen. Since empathy can be cultivated through education, relevant examples of its application in educational contexts are provided. All in all, the article explores the relationship between empathy, moral development, citizenship, and education, offering a perspective with the potential to significantly impact how we understand and promote both individual moral growth and active participation in a just and thriving society.

## **The Notion of Empathy**

Few concepts have exerted as profound and lasting an influence on humanities as the concept of empathy. Its extensive and interdisciplinary use, along with its centrality across various fields of science and social life, underscores its significance. At the same time, few concepts have been subjected to as diverse interpretations and receptions, or have sparked as much debate concerning their meaning, application, and potential for misunderstanding and misuse, as empathy. Nearly all scholarly studies that explore this concept converge on its historical origins and evolution (Hoffman, 2020).

Empathy is commonly defined as the skill, capability, or virtue that enables us to understand the emotions of others and to perceive their perspective within a specific spatial and temporal context by figuratively placing ourselves in their position. This skill allows individuals to transcend their egocentrism and self-referential tendencies, meeting the "other" in their authentic condition. This essential movement toward the "other" constitutes the foundation of human sociability, and its value appears to have been recognised as early as antiquity, long before the term "empathy" was coined and employed. Such references and conceptions are found in Homer (Demetriou, 1988) and later in Aristotle (Boal, 1993), whose thought will be of particular interest in this discussion due to the foundations he laid in ethics and politics.

As a formalised concept, empathy first appeared in the realm of aesthetics in the German term *Einfühlung*, introduced and analysed by psychologist Theodor Lipps (1923). The development of the concept was later advanced by the American psychologist Titchener (1909), who replaced it with the term "empathy." At this juncture, it is beneficial to provide a conceptual clarification through etymology. The term "empathy" derives from the Greek language, combining the prefix "εν-" (en, meaning "in") with "πάθος" (pathos, meaning "emotion" or "suffering"). Titchener (1909), within the scientific framework and objectives of psychology, chose this term to signify the ability of a subject to enter into (εν-) the emotion (πάθος) of another person as an object.

The concept of pathos in Greek is multi-dimensional. In its earlier conceptualisations, it denotes the realm of human emotions, whether positive or negative. However, it is often used to signify the negative aspects, tendencies, and fluctuations of the soul. The term "empathia," which appears in the Hellenistic period, signifies an individual's ability to participate in the emotions of others, whether positive or negative. In modern Greek, however, it exclusively conveys a negative connotation, referring to the totality of negative emotions such as malice, hostility, hatred, and envy directed toward an individual or a social group. The original

proponent of the concept, Lipps (1923), appears to have adopted the term in its ancient Hellenistic version, emphasising only its positive semantic dimension. Since a direct translation of the term into modern Greek could not adequately capture the meaning attributed to it by Titchener (1909), the term "ενσυναίσθηση" (ensynaisthisi) was chosen, which aligns more closely conceptually with the German concept of *Einfühlung*.

These linguistic observations highlight the many dimensions and semantic variants of the concept of empathy, evident from its very introduction into systematic scientific and philosophical thought. This indicates that any researcher examining the concept—whether evolutionarily and practically or reflectively and critically—encounters a particularly dynamic phenomenon with multiple facets related to human psychology and sociability.

Modernity and postmodernity constitute the historical framework within which empathy is born, evolves, and is critically re-evaluated. Its contemporary reception is primarily shaped in the late 20th and early 21st centuries within the field of psychology, particularly in counselling (Mayer, 2004; Rogers, 1975), and extends into child psychology (Gottman & Declaire, 1997). The discipline of psychology primarily establishes its scientific foundations through figures such as Carl Rogers, Jerome Mayer, and John Gottman, among others. Nevertheless, other fields, including philosophy, history, pedagogy, bioethics, management, and theology, also claim a significant role in the application and reception of this concept. In the literature, the following terms are frequently encountered:

1. Emotional empathy
2. Cognitive empathy
3. Multidimensional empathy
4. Historical empathy
5. Strategic Empathy

Each of these terms refers to either the functional dimensions of empathy within the human subject or its contribution to achieving a specific purpose. The first two terms, emotional and cognitive empathy, dominate the literature and attract the most interest concerning the concept under examination. The third term represents an effort by contemporary researchers to functionally integrate the cognitive and emotional aspects of empathy (Mark, 1983). Most definitions of empathy derive from the combination of these two aspects (Decety & Jackson, 2004). One might even argue that there are as many definitions of empathy as scholars are studying it. However, a review of the literature reveals that nearly all definitions explicitly or implicitly include both functions: emotional and cognitive.

Thus, empathy can be described as the emotional and cognitive skill that enables understanding of the experiences, emotions, and internal state of another while simultaneously allowing one to comprehend and participate in the perspective through which the other perceives things at that moment. This dual emotional and cognitive function can lead to support, respect, or feelings of compassion (Barnett & Mann, 2013).

Historical empathy is a method of studying history that utilises the emotional and cognitive aspects of empathy to examine and interpret past events that are the subject of historical inquiry. In historical empathy, cognitive function is predominant, though emotional function is not excluded (Collingwood, 1946). Its value lies not only in the interpretation of historical events themselves but also in fostering a shared experiential understanding of how others perceive history. By "others," we mean other nations or social groups that hold different interpretative views on the same historical events.

Humanity has long relied on the conflicts between nations, peoples, and even social groups within the same nation, often utilising historical events that have undergone processes of ideological appropriation, leading to radicalisation. Historical empathy may serve as a pathway to de-radicalization by enabling cognitive and emotional engagement with how others—whether long past or contemporary—perceive history.

Strategic empathy involves utilising the emotional and cognitive aspects of empathy to achieve goals in leadership, resolve interpersonal crises, and build trust by understanding the emotions and perspectives of others in a workplace or hierarchically organised environment. Strategic empathy is critical in educational contexts, as it fosters moral development and promotes active citizenship (Zembylas, 2012).

Before proceeding to the next section of our analysis, it may be helpful to clarify what empathy is not based on insights from the literature. This discussion primarily concerns the field of psychology, focusing on the relationship between empathy and compassion. Some researchers argue that these two concepts are synonymous or at least indistinguishable, while others strongly delineate them as separate phenomena (Lishner et al., 2011).

The dominant view among researchers treats these concepts as distinct, with compassion being considered an emotion directed toward another. In contrast, empathy involves participatory and shared experience of another's emotions and state (Goetz et al., 2010). Compassion can operate within the context of empathy without presupposing it, and it encompasses elements of sympathy and pity, which are not necessarily integral to empathy. Discussions of empathy, which involve understanding the other alongside compassion, sympathy, and mercy, inherently incorporate moral dimensions, reflecting the relationship between empathy and ethics.

### **The Consideration of Empathy Through the Lens of Moral Development**

The examination of empathy through the lens of an individual's moral development highlights contemporary ethical perspectives that emphasise otherness, respect for differences, acceptance of the other, inclusion, human rights, and the avoidance of intolerance and racism. These are critical issues in modern social dynamics and the moral conceptions of contemporary humanity, which will be addressed further in this study. Previous research has explored empathy within the framework of various ethical theories, predominantly aligned with the moral currents of modernity and postmodernity (Oxley, 2011). However, we find it particularly intriguing to approach empathy from the perspective of Aristotelian ethics, which may shed light on alternative dimensions of the concept.

Aristotle was the thinker who systematised ethics and elevated it to the status of a science. He defined ethics as the product of habit, «ethos,» though he distinguished it from habit alone. A habit becomes ethical only when it is oriented toward the good—that is when it combines virtue with habit. Aristotle defined virtue as the means between two extremes: deficiency and excess. For instance, courage lies between cowardice and recklessness. Furthermore, for Aristotle, ethics is a teachable subject that can be cultivated through education and virtuous habits (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.1, 1103a32–34).

The question relevant to our discussion is whether empathy can be considered a virtue and included among the moral attributes of the human person or whether it will remain merely an intellectual or emotional skill. In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle critiques Socrates' position that virtue is equated with knowledge (Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* I.5, 1216b6–10), which led Socrates to conclude that no one commits evil willingly (Protagoras, 358C). For Aristotle, ethics is not solely a product of knowledge but also a result of free will, education, and the cultivation of virtuous habits (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V.1, 1025b23–4). Thus, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle proposes two categories of virtues: intellectual virtues and moral virtues. The former is cultivated through teaching, while the latter is developed through habit (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.2, 1139a 7–8). Moral virtues, which are never entirely separate from intellectual virtues—the two being linked by the virtue of prudence (*phronēsis*)—are the ones that give Aristotle's ethical framework its practical dimension. The exploration of empathy within this Aristotelian framework raises significant questions about its potential to be classified as a moral virtue, thereby expanding its relevance beyond its common characterisation as an emotional or cognitive capacity. This Aristotelian perspective may provide a deeper understanding of empathy's role in moral development, offering valuable insights into its broader ethical implications.

In this point, we will attempt to examine empathy through the framework of Aristotelian ethics, as briefly outlined above:

Can empathy become an object of virtuous habit worthy of cultivation? Pedagogical studies that focus on empathy assert that empathy can indeed be cultivated from an early age. It can be enhanced through educational processes within the school environment and subsequently utilised by individuals in their maturity as a means of prosocial behaviour and harmonious social coexistence (Silke et al., 2018).

If virtue is defined as the means between two extremes, what would these extremes be in the case of empathy? If the left extreme signifies deficiency, in the case of empathy, this could be defined as indifference; conversely, its excess on the right could be described as unbridled sentimentalism. Here, the term sentimentalism is not used in its epistemological sense - as a trend in moral philosophy where emotion plays an active role in ethical decision-making. Instead, it refers to the excessive and limitless appeal to emotion when engaging with another's emotional condition. This unrestrained form of empathy may lead to problems, particularly when the subject's emotional involvement becomes overwhelming or undermines rationality. Critiques of empathy, particularly regarding its potential pitfalls, are significant in this context. When empathy is not exercised within controlled boundaries by the subject, it can create numerous challenges (Kwon, 2016).

Aristotelian *phronesis* (practical wisdom), as the quintessential activity of the intellect, is what can safeguard the balance of empathy, allowing it to function as a true virtue. Thus, as a moral quality, empathy can operate as the means between two extremes: deficiency and excess. Neuroscientific research has now enabled the identification of brain regions that become activated when an individual faces moral dilemmas. Furthermore, studies by neuroscientists confirm the involvement of emotions in moral decision-making, as well as the role of empathy, which is linked to the function of mirror neurons.

Similar functions are also observed in animals (Dolby, 2013). These observations indicate that there is a biological basis for the development of empathy. However, this finding does not lead inexorably to the conclusion that empathy cannot be taught or cultivated, nor that it operates as an automatic mechanism of the human psyche. On the contrary, Aristotle's view that virtue is cultivated through good habits seems to be complemented by a biological foundation in the case of empathy. Numerous well-substantiated studies have highlighted the value of education in fostering empathy, leaving little room for doubt on this matter (Phillips, 2003; Sanna, 2018; Schonert-Reichl & Oberle, 2011).

The practical nature of Aristotelian ethics (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.2, 1103b 26–30) is also evident in the case of empathy, particularly in light of the distinctive features and demands of modern societies. Solidarity, a cooperative spirit, the avoidance and management of conflicts, the support of weaker individuals or groups, sensitivity toward others in moral decision-making, and the creation of conditions for social cohesion are credited as positive outcomes of empathy's operation.

Thus, empathy is not merely a psychological or intellectual characteristic, nor is it simply a skill. Instead, it constitutes a moral action and choice that, through its rational cultivation, produces significant ethical outcomes on a practical level with a measurable social impact. Based on the above evaluations of empathy through the lens of Aristotelian ethics, we can confidently assert that empathy indeed embodies the characteristics of moral virtue and can serve as a factor in promoting an individual's moral development. For this reason, we are occupied with this concept, which is the cornerstone of moral development, acting as the engine that propels moral reasoning into action.

## **Empathy and Citizenship**

It appears that the concept of citizenship, both in terms of its impact and the diversity of approaches and perspectives offered by researchers, follows a trajectory similar to that of empathy. Moreover, as evidenced by the literature, these concepts are organically and functionally interconnected, something we will explore further in the following discussion.

Suppose we attempt to distil a common denominator from the various approaches and descriptive definitions of citizenship. In that case, we arrive at the following: Citizenship is understood as the active engagement of an individual as a citizen, which is expressed across various levels of perception and action. Its primary aim is the promotion of democratic values, social justice, social cohesion, and the common good.

Drawing inspiration from the reasoning of Westheimer and Kahne (2004), we could distinguish three levels of the manifestation of citizenship as active participation in shaping the political sphere:

- *Participation and non-abstention* from "classical" or traditional democratic processes such as voting and standing for election, as well as compliance with the laws and principles of the rule of law. Here, we emphasise the aspect of non-abstention, as statistical data from recent political elections in European countries reveal worrying trends of voter abstention.
- *Engagement in activities* such as volunteering, conscious activism, community initiatives, advocacy, and signature collection campaigns (e.g., European School Education Platform). This category could also include participation and behaviour on social media platforms, which have played a highly significant role in shaping the awareness and profile of active citizenship. Public discussions between politicians and policy network providers about the management and ethics of online content highlight the enormous ethical, social, and political implications of social media's role in shaping future active citizenship. This is a topic that merits dedicated research and analysis.
- *Citizen education* through awareness of social, political, and environmental issues, fostering empathy and compassion, concern for the well-being of others—particularly vulnerable social groups—and the development of critical thinking skills through participation in dialogue and the analysis of pressing social issues. This third level primarily relates to the internalisation of essential elements for cultivating citizenship within the individual. It could perhaps be described as the construction of a civic-minded personality — a personality imbued with citizenship values.

Since we have already explored this topic in the earlier part of our study, it is exciting to examine the relationship between Aristotle's political philosophy and the concept of citizenship. It is well known that the positions developed by the Greek philosopher regarding politics in his work *Politics* remain a subject of study to this day and significantly influence the development of political thought, particularly in the Western world. Aristotle initially attributes an anthropological dimension to politics, considering humans to be "by nature political animals" (Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a1). He defines a citizen as someone who participates both in the governance of their city and the preservation and administration of justice (Aristotle, *Politics* 1275a22). Justice, which he regards as a universal virtue in ethics—encompassing the entirety of virtues—he evaluates politics as the fundamental good in politics (Aristotle, *Politics* 1283a40).

Particularly relevant to our discussion is the connection Aristotle makes between moral and political virtue, where the former serves as a fundamental prerequisite for the latter (Aristotle, *Politics* 1332a38). It is worth noting that Aristotle's *Politics* chronologically precedes the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In other words, the ancient philosopher first established the ethics of the human person in his foundational work before advancing to political theory. This observation holds epistemological value on one hand. On the other, the concept of empathy and its relationship with citizenship underscores the moral—internal—dimension of empathy as a prerequisite for civic participation. From an Aristotelian perspective, empathy can be viewed

as the fundamental internal quality that enables an individual to develop the sensitivity and criteria necessary to become an active citizen. This view is further supported by Aristotle's position on the value of education, which he argues must be familiar to all future citizens and aimed at cultivating virtue (Aristotle, Politics 1337a10).

At this point, we observe the bond between education, ethics, and citizenship. In contemporary reality, the relationship between citizenship, empathy, and education has become a central focus of pedagogical research in recent years, driven by the rapid sociopolitical upheavals unfolding on the global stage (Tsiumis, 2020). There are specific areas of education that, through specialised study and application, can serve to promote moral development and the shaping of active citizenship by fostering empathy.

### **Empathy in the School Environment**

Research has demonstrated that empathy can be cultivated in individuals from early childhood, particularly within the school environment (Lee & Park, 2021; Liu et al., 2024; Morizio et al., 2024; Spinrad & Liew, 2022; Tsatsou-Nikolouli & Mavrogeni, 2021; Venegas, 2024). Gottman et al. (1997) propose five stages as crucial for emotion coaching, which includes fostering empathy in children. These stages are:

1. Awareness of the child's emotions.
2. Viewing emotional expression as an opportunity for closeness and guidance.
3. Empathetic listening and recognition of the child's emotions.
4. Assisting the child in verbally expressing their emotions.
5. Setting boundaries and helping the child resolve problems.

To cultivate and encourage the development of empathy within the school environment, educators need to have internalised empathy and be able to practice it—not just as a teaching method but as a core element of their personality. An educator with high functional empathy can achieve a much deeper and more meaningful understanding of children's psychology, accomplishments, motivations, and challenges than any method of measurement can provide. Educational practices grounded in empathy create a supportive environment, foster a collaborative atmosphere, and nurture a sense of care and concern (Cooper, 2011). At this point, it is essential to highlight specific areas where empathy can be cultivated within school settings, thereby enhancing social sensitivity and fostering a commitment to the community. This can be implemented primarily through interactive educational methods, such as discussing moral dilemmas, participating in group activities, and utilising art (Hoffman, 2000; Montero, 2023; Pitsou & Theocharidi, 2024; Zins et al., 2004).

Before we present specific areas where empathy can be cultivated within educational contexts, we should acknowledge that empathy-based approaches are not without limitations. Mental fatigue and impaired judgment can arise as a result of emotional depletion and the difficulty of sustaining empathetic engagement (Waytz, 2016). Furthermore, empathy can unintentionally favour specific individuals, leading to biased perspectives and decisions

(Jeffrey, 2020). Maintaining empathy in deliberative settings is also challenging, making long-term engagement more difficult (Scudder, 2016). To mitigate these limitations, strategies such as focused empathy, where individuals direct their attention to specific stakeholders to conserve emotional resources, and self-care practices like "empathy breaks" to allow for emotional recovery are crucial (Waytz, 2016). Recognising these limitations, strategies that promote a balanced approach to emotional engagement are essential for fostering more effective interactions and decision-making. Having outlined some key limitations, we can now explore how empathy can be cultivated in school contexts.

## **Empathy and Religious Education**

One area where empathy plays a crucial role in the moral development of individuals is in religious education (Davis, 2021; Kimanen, 2022; Musnandar, 2020). The Council of Europe has issued specific guidelines emphasising the central importance of religious education in cultivating openness toward diversity, tolerance, respect for the right of others to practice their chosen faith, human dignity, and freedom. From this perspective, religious pluralism can be seen as an opportunity to enrich knowledge, experiences, and positive interactions through the exchange of views with individuals from other religious traditions.

A particularly suitable method suggested involves training students to reflect on moral dilemmas, teaching them to listen to the perspectives of students from other religions and critically and comparatively evaluate these perspectives alongside their own. This approach enables students to seek or even construct shared moral values (DeAngelis, 2022; Mathur & Corley, 2014). This cognitive and reflective process incorporates elements of self-awareness and respect for diversity, evokes the skill of empathy, and creates conditions for greater activation through the cultivation of moral reasoning.

Regarding the cultivation and practice of active citizenship, Bickmore (2005) views religious education as a key tool for strengthening participation in what is described as "difficult citizenship". This term refers to the process of peacebuilding and resolving conflicts while avoiding violence. Religious education, according to Banks (1993), also enhances "cultural intelligence" (cultural cognitiveness).

The necessity of religious education, fostered through empathy, for the development of active citizenship is vital not only in shaping attitudes toward diversity but also in encouraging religious citizens themselves to participate in social action and public life. Another dimension, often overlooked but further highlighting the importance of fostering empathy for active citizenship, is the phenomenon that Habermas describes as "welfare chauvinism" (*Wohlstandschauvinismus*). This refers to the fear of perceived threats to prosperity posed by the influx of refugees and migrants into advanced Western states (Eick, 2024).

The cultivation of empathy through an open model of religious education, free from one-dimensional characteristics, could significantly contribute to the development of active citizenship. By promoting understanding, tolerance, and a more profound moral awareness, such an educational approach can play a vital role in creating a society founded on justice and inclusivity.

## ***Empathy and School Bullying***

The critical issue of school bullying is another significant area where the adverse effects of an empathy deficit are evident. In this case, empathy, combined with the "no blame approach," can serve as the most appropriate foundation for addressing both the victim and the perpetrator. Through dialogue with both parties, the aim is to enhance students' capacity for empathy (Maines & Robinson, 1992). This approach emphasises understanding and fostering emotional connection rather than placing blame. Encouraging both victims and perpetrators to reflect on their actions and the emotions of others helps create a more supportive and compassionate school environment.

Integrating empathy as a key component in anti-bullying strategies not only addresses immediate conflict but also promotes long-term emotional intelligence and respectful interpersonal relationships. Empathy programs in schools can help perpetrators to understand the negative experiences of their victims (Zulkarnain et al., 2019), aid victims in feeling more supported, potentially alleviating anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Wolfe, 2017) and contribute to a positive school climate, leading to a reduction in bullying incidents (Rock et al., 2002). The benefits of such programs can be long-lasting if there is sustained engagement (Connolly et al., 2018).

## ***Empathy and Environmental Ethical Awareness***

In recent times, scientific and public discourse on environmental ethics has reached a peak (Koios, 2022). The need to develop moral reflection regarding humanity's attitude toward major ecological issues is deemed urgent, as is the introduction and cultivation of such reflection within educational frameworks. Empathy has already been proposed as an effective lens for understanding and responding to nature, ecological challenges, and environmental disasters. The question that arises is how it can be implemented. This can be achieved by adopting a community of practice approach (Ernst et al., 2024), integrating human and more-than-human empathy through sensory experiences, relational connections, and attentiveness to absences and placemaking (Wren, 2024), and by implementing programs that experimentally test psychological mechanisms promoting conservation-related motivation and behaviour toward a flagship species, such as wild Tamanend's bottlenose dolphins (Smith et al., 2024).

Through empathy, children—and later adolescents, young adults, and eventually mature individuals—can cultivate a dual perspective. On the one hand, they can develop empathy toward other living organisms, recognising their rightful place in the environment and their right to life. On the other hand, they can develop empathy toward future generations, acknowledging their right to inherit a healthy and sustainable environment rather than a degraded one (Wren, 2024).

By fostering this empathetic mindset, educational systems can play a vital role in shaping environmentally conscious citizens who are not only aware of ecological issues but also motivated to act responsibly and ethically in their interactions with the natural world.

## ***Empathy and the Ethics of Sports***

Sports hold a unique appeal for individuals from an early age, both as a spectacle and as a participatory activity. The ethical dimensions of all sports-related activities are governed by moral principles that concern athletes, coaches, officials, and fans. The ethical issues frequently brought to public attention further underscore the need for a framework of ethical rules, which is a fundamental component of sportsmanship.

Research has demonstrated that empathy is a crucial component of ethical quality in the sports realm (Behm & Carter, 2021; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). Both the strategic empathy required of a coach and the empathy of athletes toward their teammates foster the appropriate conditions for fair competition (fair play) (Loland, 2002; Sezen-Balcikanli, 2009).

At this point, it is worth emphasising the gap in educational programs regarding the inclusion of empathy cultivation as a means of developing sports ethics. This is particularly important in efforts to prevent sports-related violence from an early age in schools. Promoting empathy through targeted educational programs and initiatives can contribute significantly to creating a culture of respect, collaboration, and fair play, thereby enhancing the moral character of sports and reducing instances of unethical behaviour and violence. The following programs and initiatives are examples that demonstrate the positive impact of empathy training on ethical behaviour in sports. The Coaching Corps Initiative, for instance, trains coaches to work with children in under-resourced communities, emphasising social and emotional learning skills, including empathy (Positive Coaching Alliance, n.d.). The "Play Like a Champion Today" program at the University of Notre Dame focuses on character development in young athletes, including workshops and training sessions that emphasise empathy, respect, and sportsmanship. This specific program has been demonstrated to enhance athletes' ethical decision-making and decrease instances of cheating and unsportsmanlike conduct (Play Like a Champion Today, n.d.). The "Teammates for Kids"<sup>1</sup> foundation and the "Positive Coaching Alliance" organisation run programs that focus on teaching empathy, compassion, and respect for others, leading to improved sportsmanship and a reduction in bullying and aggression among young athletes, as well as negative behaviours such as using harsh or abusive language and taunting.

### ***Historical Empathy***

Historical empathy, which we briefly mentioned at the beginning of this article, is an area that can be evaluated as particularly significant for the development of democratic consciousness and active citizenship. Historical empathy relies more on cognitive functions than on the emotional aspects of empathy. It employs images and experiences derived from research on various sources of evidence, aiming to examine the past through a contemporary perspective (Bryant & Clark, 2006). It is now considered one of the principles of historical epistemology and is regarded as feasible from a pedagogical standpoint. This can be achieved through various effective classroom techniques that emphasise experiential learning, such as battlefield study tours (Karn, 2024), involvement in local history research (Perrotta et al.,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.teammatesforkids.com/index.php>

2024), arts integration (Endacott et al., 2024) and use of eyewitness accounts through guest speakers or documentaries (Bartelds et al., 2023).

From an educational perspective, the development of empathy through the study of history can contribute to the acceptance of diversity, respect for human rights, the mitigation of nationalist mentalities, harmonious coexistence, an anti-racist climate, and social peace. In active citizenship, these values can also be expressed through the undertaking of initiatives and volunteerism. Ethnocentric approaches to education are deemed insufficient or even problematic for the development of citizenship, which must operate within a framework of cosmopolitanism and openness (Banks, 2009; Kymlicka, 2003; McCowan, 2009; Osler & Vincent, 2002).

## **Conclusions**

The relationship between empathy, moral development, citizenship, and education was the focus of this article. For this reason, we attempted to explore specific fundamental characteristics that contribute to the development of the value system and the sociality of the individual citizen, examining the function of empathy as a "meeting point" between moral development and citizenship, with particular emphasis on their pedagogical (or educational) dimension, aided by the Aristotelian perspective.

Our reflective approach to the subject under study demonstrated that empathy could serve as a dynamic factor linking moral development and citizenship. Furthermore, it revealed a multidimensional dynamic that shapes the value structure of the individual citizen. This is because empathy can act as a bridge between individual morality and social responsibility. This "meeting point" underscores the importance of education in cultivating empathy, making it an integral part of citizenship.

Empathy, as the ability to understand and engage with the emotions of others, is closely tied to moral development, as it enables individuals to recognise the worth and dignity of others. As highlighted, empathy is not merely an emotional skill but a conscious practice capable of enhancing social justice and cohesion. After all, as Aristotle argued, morality is not merely a set of rules but a habit cultivated through action and practice (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a).

On the other hand, citizenship presupposes a moral foundation supported by empathy, as it necessitates a shift from "I" to "we," from individual good to public good. A citizen who understands and acknowledges the needs and perspectives of others is more likely to contribute to collective well-being, making decisions and taking actions that promote the common good. The pedagogical dimension of empathy becomes particularly significant in this context. Through the educational process, individuals ought to develop skills and cultivate virtues essential for harmonious coexistence and effective participation in a democratic society. Noddings (2013) echoes this sentiment, proposing a restructuring of education to promote not only rational thinking and cultivated intelligence but also to place more excellent value on heightened sensitivity to ethical issues.

The perception of empathy as a virtue with moral and social characteristics enables it to be "fortified" with Aristotelian parameters, such as moderation, practicality, its educational and teaching dimensions, and free will. Perhaps this is one way to preserve this highly influential and dynamic concept as a living moral and educational value, avoiding extremes of overestimation or excessive critical deconstruction. In this way, empathy can continue to serve the human person in their relationships with others.

### ***Suggestions for Future Research***

Empathy stands as a critical area of inquiry across numerous disciplines. As it is impossible to focus on each discipline, we suggest some areas for further research. We propose exploring how empathy influences policy outcomes, particularly to marginalised voices, understanding the interplay between empathy and political polarisation, and examining the cross-cultural dimensions of empathy and citizenship, along with their connection to civic engagement and social justice. Moreover, further studies could examine the influence of empathy on leadership, digital misinformation, conflict resolution, and moral development in fostering a more compassionate and understanding individual. Last but not least, research should focus on the impact of technology on empathy, considering both its potential to hinder and cultivate this essential human quality.

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