

[The empathy that John Donne and Adam Smith had in common](#) [1]

Written by [Dr Madsen Pirie](#) [2] | Monday 23 September 2013

Both John Donne and Adam Smith expressed the view that we empathize with our fellow men and women. Donne said that "any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind." A century and a half later in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith wrote, "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it."

Smith referred to this as a 'sympathy' for others, though in modern parlance we might call it an 'empathy' with our fellow human beings. I share that feeling that Donne and Smith expressed. I am not saying it is how people *do* feel, or how they *should* feel, although it may be either or both of those. I am simply saying that it is how *I* feel. I identify with other people in some respect simply because they are human. I feel a kinship with them and an awareness that they are in some degree like myself. It is not an empathy felt equally with all of them because its force declines with distance. It is experienced most strongly with friends and family, then with those in my community, and it diminishes like the slope of a hill as it recedes from the summit towards those farther away. But it never reaches zero, and I am with Donne and Smith in recognizing it for every human being.

We were all born in the same way. We all cried, soiled our nappies and took warm comfort in our mother's milk. We all learned by example and experiment how to make sense of the world, and to make our way in it. We all seek to better our lot and to care for those who command a special place in our affections. These experiences and impulses are common to humanity.

These feelings of a common lot with others of our kind can be erased and overcome, alas with ease, by the fanaticism of a religion or an ideology, and we can be conditioned to regard others as less than human and unworthy of our respect and consideration. But I think the default condition, expressed by both Donne and Smith, is that of a sense of fellow-feeling with others of our species, and a recognition that they share much in common with ourselves.

News of a distant tragedy moves us, not because we know or will ever meet those involved and affected by it, but because we feel a common sense of identity with them, an identity that derives only from our common humanity. Donne spoke for himself, as I do, whereas Smith expressed the view that this general ability to project ourselves into the experiences of others "is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it." I believe, like Smith, that this feeling is the basis for the decent treatment of other people and lies at the bedrock of our relationships with others.

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