



Empathy as a force for Peace

A short introduction to the Philosophy of Edith Stein

Educator: Good morning, everyone. As you all know, this week we will focus on the Second World War and learn about the Declaration of Human Rights which was signed after the atrocities that took place during that time. Before we embark on our History lesson, let me introduce you to an imaginative planet, called EMOTIONS, which is governed by an assembly of the representatives of each emotion. So, anger, happiness, sadness and many more emotions that govern the planet.

The students look puzzled and their teacher notices their confusion.

Teacher: I will explain everything, don't worry. Lucas, how do you feel now?

Lucas: I'm a bit confused.

Teacher: Well, there you go. On the EMOTIONS planet, there is a representative called "Confusion" who sits on the general assembly and plays an active part in the jurisdiction and the laws governing the planet. All emotions have one representative.

Lucas: But, how does this work? Can they monitor people's emotions?

Teacher: Very good question Harry. So, many many years ago, a war broke out in the EMOTIONS planet that brought anger, hate and sadness to the whole planet. People gathered on the streets, they cried about the people they lost, and they decided that they would never allow anything similar to happen to their planet again. After days of thinking and debating, they decided that the best way to live in harmony was to control their emotions. As a result, they divided the whole planet into small cities and invited each emotion to control and govern one city.

Louiza: That's so awful! Would people grow up knowing only one emotion? How is this possible?

Teacher: Well, keep in mind that it's an imaginative planet, but essentially yes! That was the plan. Many generations grew up knowing about the existence of other emotions, but were only able to experience one emotion – the emotion that was governing their city!

Louiza: That's unfair! Some people were always happy while others could only feel pain, anger or hate?

Teacher: Basically, yes! And this created various dynamics in each city. In the Happiness City, people were walking around smiling at each other, but they refrained from studying the rest of the emotions. Schools removed all references to negative emotions to "protect" the Happiness population. In the city of Hate, on the other hand, people spent countless hours studying other emotions and trying to find the roots behind the hate. As



a result, they learned how to control their hate and eventually managed to live in peace with each other.

Lucas: But did the people in the city of Hate, grow up hating each other?

Teacher: Not exactly. They can experience hate as an emotion, but they can also choose when to feel hate and when to simply feel 'nothing' as they couldn't experience any other emotion. However, this was the result of years of studying and trying to understand the emotion of hate.

Louiza: Okay, I am starting to like the people of the city of Hate more than those living in the city of Happiness. It seems like the people in the city of Happiness grew up without learning the proper history and attempting to understand those living in other cities.

Teacher: Yes, this is what happened in the end. So, in their attempt to protect their people, the government of the city of Happiness created people without reasoning, who could not learn from past mistakes and distinguish right from wrong.

Lucas: What happened in the end on the EMOTIONS planet?

Teacher: Would you like to guess what might have happened Lucas?

Lucas: Well, if I lived on that planet, I would try to go to other cities and experience other emotions! This planet just makes me sad, even though it's imaginative.

Teacher: You are very close to what actually took place. A young girl, known as EMPATHY, wanted to feel all the different emotions. Reading about them was not enough for her. She was born in the city of Hate and she was fascinated to read about happiness and kindness. She even wanted to explore the differences between hate and anger. EMPATHY wanted to experience what other people felt. This was the only way to really get to know them; that's what she shared with her friends.

Stein: No wonder then, as to why this girl was called EMPATHY. Empathy is a feeling-based experience that develops through understanding another person's feelings.

Louiza: Em, that sounds very interesting but who are you? When did you come to our class, and why haven't we seen you before?

Stein: I've been sitting here for a while, but everyone was so engrossed in the story of the EMOTIONS planet that they didn't notice my presence. My name is Edith Stein. I was born in 1891 in Breslau, Germany, which is known today as Wroclaw, a city in Poland. I am a Philosopher and a Spiritual Writer. I studied at the University of Göttingen and then moved to the University of Freiburg where I became a lecturer. My main area of interest as a Philosopher has been Phenomenology, the study of phenomena and how our experiences affect our understanding of different things. My parents were Jewish, and the rise of Nazism in Germany forced me to resign from my job. I tried to escape and continue writing about Philosophy and Empathy, but unfortunately, I was captured in 1942.



Teacher: Edith Stein! Welcome to our history class. We are talking about an imaginative planet called EMOTIONS, before starting our discussion about the Second World War, a period that has deeply affected you.

Stein: The Second World War stands as the greatest tragedy in human history. I'm here to share my own work on empathy, to help you all understand how important empathy is in promoting peace and preventing wars.

Louiza: Are you referring to your personal experience of the Second World War?

Stein: Well, I haven't thought about it actually. I was a Philosopher, very well known for writing about Empathy. I understand empathy as a feelings-based experience of another person's feelings that develops throughout three successive steps. Firstly, empathetic acts are experienced in a basic form. For example, if I feel embarrassed, you don't need to recall your own experience to understand what I'm feeling. You can discern this from my movements, gestures and facial expressions.

There is however a more complex form of empathetic understanding. This process involves a form of experiential re-enactment of the other person's experience. As I have previously stated in one of my papers "In empathically re-enacting another person's experiences, I am alongside the other, but never one with her". This is what distinguishes empathy from all other feelings. In its more complete sense, empathy allows you to understand how other people feel, undergoing the same experiences as them.

Now, coming back to what you have asked me, I think you are right; experiencing the Second World War truly helped me understand how hate and anger can turn people against each other and lead to terrible consequences. Empathy is indeed a way to overcome negative emotions and learn to control them by stepping into someone else's shoes, understanding their way of thinking and getting to know our main differences.

Teacher: Exactly. It is only through mutual understanding and respect that humanity can prosper.

Lucas: So, did EMPATHY succeed in experiencing all the different emotions on the EMOTIONS planet?

Teacher: She most certainly tried, and many of her friends followed her on this journey. There were many obstacles, but as this is an imaginative story, you can choose your own ending. Personally, I think we all try to empathise with each other every day - sometimes we succeed, sometimes we fall short; it's an ongoing journey.

Louiza: I will definitely read more about empathy and try to understand the opinion and viewpoints of my friends better now, instead of always arguing with them. Conflicts will not lead to anything good.

The teacher agreed and smiled at the students, as she thanked Edith Stein for joining them. All the students agreed with Louiza, and they all shared some emotional moments as they opened their books and started their history lesson on the Second World War.

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

