Our working definition of empathy is the feeling of other people’s feelings. As we study the history of this idea from ancient Greece to the present, we will investigate and complicate that definition. From President Obama, who named empathy a valuable trait in a Supreme Court justice, to an audience at a pole vaulting contest who lean in their seats as the pole vaulter curves over the bar, empathy is a central concept in government, athletics, art, science, and the humanities. Empathy has a privileged seat at our human table, but how did it get there? What are its roots? What can the history of empathy tell us about the concept psychologically, socially, and physically? Why is empathy such a pervasive and important idea in diverse cultures and disciplines? This course is an interdisciplinary study of the history of empathy. We follow expressions of the concept in philosophy, medicine, literature, psychology, art and aesthetics, social and behavioral science, education, psychotherapy, and morality. Beginning with Greek theories of shared feeling as the basis of physical and social organization, we work our way to modern interpretations of empathy in aesthetic appreciation and criticism, attitude, cultural understanding, perspective-taking, human development, interpersonal relationship, and neuroscience. Students will write three 5-page papers, one on assigned topics, and two on topics of personal choice. All readings are primary documents, and include works of Hippocrates, Plato, Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne, Joshua Reynolds, Rousseau, David Hume, Adam Smith, Herder, Keats, Freud, Edith Stein, Charles Cooley, and Carl Rogers, among others.

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