

Half-plenary Roundtable „Narrative Empathy“ on Thursday, 22 June, 11.00-13.00
University Main Building, first floor, room: 120

Roundtable description

While there is still some controversy in the philosophy of mind and emotions over whether empathy implies a kind of theoretical inference, of imaginative simulation or of direct perception, recently especially phenomenological accounts have gained attention. They argue – with reference to historical phenomenologists and current theories of embodiment – that we have a direct, unmediated and experiential access to the mental states, especially emotions, of other persons. We see „in“ the expressions of others what they experience. For this, face-to-face and intersubjective encounter is a necessary condition. However, this seems different regarding fictions such as narrative films or literature. Against that background several questions arise: 1. Is empathy with fictional characters an indirect, mediated process insofar as the characters do, in an important sense, not exist and are not present? 2. Is empathy with fictional characters therefore different from empathy with real persons? 3. Does imagination play a much more important role in such cases than in real life, or do these examples rather show that imagination is always an important part of the overall empathic experience? 4. Which function has imagination in the empathic process anyway? The roundtable discusses these and other questions with regard to different approaches of empathy and especially with regard to phenomenological accounts. Participants are: Robert Blanchet (Film Studies, Zurich), Fritz Breithaupt (Germanic Studies, Indiana University Bloomington), Marco Caracciolo (Comparative Literature, Freiburg), Jan Müller (Philosophy, Basel), Susanne Schmetkamp (Philosophy, Siegen/Basel), Thomas Szanto (Philosophy, Copenhagen), Christiana Werner (Philosophy, Göttingen).

Contributions:

Robert Blanchet: *"Empathy as the Opposite of Egocentrism: Why the Direct Perception Theory and the Replication Theory of Empathy Fail"*. Blanchet argues that it is sufficient for empathy to think about how an objective state of affairs, such as an earthquake in India, or the fact that my opponent in a football game has hurt his knee, affects the preferences of another as opposed to appraising this state of affairs from the point of view of how it affects my own preferences. Hence, according to my view, neither the direct perception of another person's expressions, nor my imagining of her experience in a first-person manner, are necessary for empathy.

Fritz Breithaupt: *"Sadistic Empathy: Character Exploitation and Narrative Empathy"*. In my contribution, I will focus on the narrative strategies that are well suited to evoke empathy. Narratives describe characters as having a specific purpose, specific emotions, and a clear direction of actions. Put differently, narratives make characters „readable“; narratives make the emotions by characters accessible since they reveal how their emotions are a response to their situation. This effect is especially true for negative situations that lead to especially strong emotions.

Marco Caracciolo: *„Empathy as Co-Creation“*. Caracciolo's starting point will be that empathy for fictional characters is not fundamentally different from empathy for real individuals. However, because of the nature of fictional communication, and because of the specific strategies adopted by literary writers, literary fiction fosters empathy to a degree that is unlikely or uncommon in real-life interactions. Readers of fiction "co-create" characters by drawing on their own past experiences.

Ingrid Vendrell Ferran: "*Is there a puzzle of fictional empathy?*". Empathy with a character differs from empathy with a real person in substantial aspects. These aspects concern the mode of givenness of the experience of the fictional character; the form in which we participate in his mental life; and the preservation of the ontological difference between the empathizer and the empathized. However, Vendrell Ferran will argue that we should not distinguish between real life empathy and empathy for fictional characters as two different phenomena.

Jan Müller: „*Imagining a Person*“. According to Müller, empathy with *fictional* persons is not radically different from empathy with other persons. Both involve imagination; but feeling with *fictional* persons more strongly *requires* imagination (as it requires an artistic medium: narration, depiction). In this, empathy with *fictional* persons a) shapes one's cognitive and emotive attitude to oneself and others; and b) it is, by way of exemplification, expressive (and revealing) of imagination's role in ordinary interpersonal conduct.

Susanne Schmetkamp: *Introduction* (cf. description above)

Thomas Szanto: "*Imaginative Resistance and Empathy*". How does the phenomenon of imaginative resistance modulate empathic understanding of fictional characters? Why are we seemingly better at empathising with fictional characters who are saliently not depicted in a way that resembles any realistic scenario than with those realistically represented ones who blatantly violate some moral or social norms? Szanto argues that this asymmetry is primarily due to the fact that (fictional) imagination is always heavily socio-culturally mediated and indeed a form of what I call 'collective imagination'.

Christiana Werner: "*How can we perceive something that does not exist? Direct Social Perception (DSP) and fictional characters*". Werner argues that fictionality or a supposed intimate relation between fiction and imagination are not the decisive features of literary fiction that are problematic for the DSP. What is problematic is the fact that we only learn about the target via linguistic representations. This, however, is also true whenever we empathize with a real target to which we only have access by means of written or spoken texts. Therefore, DSP has to deal with a lot more of problematic cases, namely all those cases of empathy where the empathizer only hears or reads about the target, whether the target is a fictional character or a real person.