

Friday, 23 June 2017, 9.00-10.30 in the Aula, Kollegienhaus (Petersplatz)

Keynote by Jesse Prinz

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On the Genealogy of Empathy

Nietzsche introduced the method of genealogy as a form of moral critique: by exposing the origins of our moral attitudes we might be unmasked as flawed or unpalatable. In a similar spirit, one might gain critical perspective on empathy by viewing it through a historical lens. There are many reasons to think that empathy has a dark side, leading to biases, oversights, and inadequate motivation. These concerns are briefly reviewed. Why, then, is empathy so popular? Here its origins are traced through a series of historical moments. The concept of empathy has roots in the earlier notion of sympathy, which once had a magical meaning associated with connections between things in nature. During the Reformation, however, it began play a role in the community-building rhetoric of Puritans and Presbyterians. This set the stage for sympathy's approbation by the Scottish moralists. In that context, its function relates to emerging ideas of the capitalist polis, directed primarily at middle-class fellow-citizens and potential trade partners (the poor and needy were mostly regarded with pity, not sympathy, and sometimes even contempt). Sympathy was recently transformed into an attitude that one can take towards those who are worse off. Reborn as empathy (a term with suspiciously aesthetic origins), the new construct has been put to work in the service of Liberalism at a moment when standard forms of social stratification are being challenged. Empathy is envisioned as a equalizer, but, with its ties to liberalism and capitalism, the equalization is asymmetric: those who are oppressed are seen as benefitting from the concern of the privileged, and those who are privileged gain moral credibility among their peers by claiming to empathize with denigrated out-groups. Like liberalism and capitalism, the logic of empathy is one that presents an egalitarian outlook while actually presupposing the superiority of the enlightened few.

JESSE PRINZ is a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York as well as a Research Professor in the Chapel Hill Philosophy Department. He is one of the most important philosophers of mind, having made a name for himself in the field of empirically informed philosophy. "Empirically informed philosophy" is one of the most significant developments of recent years and of great importance for our understanding of the area where philosophy and empirical sciences intersect.