

Research Network:

Feeling and Understanding. The Role of Empathic Emotions in Understanding Persons and Literature

## **Workshop: Empathy, Understanding, and Appreciation**

Georg-August-University Göttingen, February 21<sup>st</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019

Anja Berninger (Universität Stuttgart):

### **Empathizing with the Evil? Exploring the Reasons for Empathic Resistance**

Empathy is often assumed to be a means to understand another person (her motives, her actions etc.). In this sense, we can conceive of empathy as a sort of epistemic tool. Empathizing with someone in this sense does not mean that we approve of what that person does or thinks. It is, *prima facie*, evaluatively neutral.

There are cases where readers of literary fictions want to resist empathizing with certain literary characters. This is e.g. the case when those characters are morally deviant. Here, these readers resist imaginatively putting themselves in the shoes of these characters. If empathy with literary fiction were exclusively an epistemic enterprise in the sense described above this empathic resistance would be puzzling.

In the paper, I want to take a closer look at two potential explanations for empathic resistance: First, I want to discuss the claim that the ease with which we empathize with some character is informative not only of those we empathize with, but also of our own traits and attitudes. Secondly, I want to discuss the idea that there is a sort of hidden evaluation that is nested in the empathic act itself.