

Research Network:

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

Workshop: Empathy, Understanding, and Appreciation

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Feeling and Being Understood

Feeling understood by others is a great feeling: with some people we have it due to a long shared history, with others we have it when a conversation is going really well, and with still others we never have it. In my talk I want to explore the concept of understanding people by looking at what it means to feel understood. Undoubtedly it is possible to feel understood even though the other does not understand us at all – either because he is good at faking understanding or because we are so needy that we interpret even the smallest sign as a sign of understanding. It is also possible not to feel understood while believing the other person knows how we tick – e.g. when we think that he disapproves of us. Under what conditions do feeling understood and being understood correlate?

One point that emerges is that the counterpart of feeling understood is not sufficiently characterised as the other's understanding my actions, i.e. why I do what I do. I do not feel understood by just anyone who happens to understand why I'm taking my umbrella with me to work, why I'm cycling rather than walking or why I'm buying a falafel rather than a kebab. When I feel understood, I feel that the other can see, and is accepting of, the ways in which I think, what I happen to like and dislike, why I react emotionally the way I do, and so on.

I think it might help to try to distinguish clearly how a psychologist understands me from how a friend understands me. While I feel understood by the latter, I might worry about how the former understands me. What is the difference? While the psychologist aims at a scientific understanding the structure of my mind, possibly with the aim of "sorting me out", the friend aims at an empathetic understanding of why I do some of the things I do, he refrains from judging me, he wants to be "with me". I believe that it is not necessary for this kind of understanding that my friend is able potentially to make the same choices I do. Instead, I take it that it is a manifestation of recognising me as equal, as a legitimate other, and of accepting my evaluate outlook, whether or not he can share it, as prima facie warranted. I will try to draw on Iris Murdoch in order to illustrate this last point.