

Research Network:

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

Workshop: Empathy, Understanding, and Appreciation

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Humane Understanding

In this talk I will defend the idea that "a sense of possibility" is at the heart of all forms of understanding--our understanding of the natural world as well as our understanding of other people. Understanding the natural world involves grasping how the various items of the world are related, and in particular how various changes would lead (or fail to lead) to other changes. Understanding the world is thus inextricably linked to our sense of how what is possible or impossible for various items in the world, and how those possibilities might be realized (or not). Understanding people, by contrast, involves "occupying" their possibility space, and thus appreciating what is possible or not possible for them, and perhaps what is forbidden for them or permissible. I will also indicate how literature and history help us to occupy the possibility space of others, and hence to understand them.