

Research Network:

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

Workshop: Empathy, Understanding, and Appreciation

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How empathizing with real people differs from empathizing with fictional characters

This paper considers the differences between empathy with real people and empathy with fictional characters. It is sometimes assumed that these differences are neglectable, or that empathy with fictional characters helps us to become better real life-empathizers. Why is this so? Aren't there considerable differences between the two cases?

At least some differences seem to be obvious: When we empathize with a real person, we "match" his or her affective state. Fictional characters, however, do not exist (at least not in the same sense that real people exist), so there is no affective state to be matched in the first place.

Ontological questions aside: Is it not true that literature usually depicts characters in situations that are vastly different from our everyday lives? Of course we can empathize with our family, our friends, and our colleagues at work – they are more or less like us, therefore it is possible to achieve the "affective match" that philosophers often consider as central for cases of empathy. But how can we even begin to grasp what someone stranded on a tropical island like Robinson Crusoe feels? And although life at universities can be pretty harsh sometimes: How are we supposed to "match" the fear and desperation of Wilhelm Tell when he is forced to shoot a crossbow bolt at an apple balanced on the head of his young son?

Yet another difference might be our ability to control or even "switch off" empathy in the case of fictions. It has been argued that precisely this ability is the reason why we enjoy tragedies on stage, but not in real life. Does this ability not mark a decisive difference between empathy with real people and empathy with fictional characters?

In my paper I will address these and some other potential differences between the two cases of empathy and I will try to evaluate how substantial they are.