

Research Network:

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

Workshop: Empathy, Understanding, and Appreciation

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Appreciating Otherness: Empathic Understanding and the Sensus Communis

In recent decades, philosophers have discussed the nature of empathy and empathic perspective taking by focusing almost exclusively either on its epistemic or its moral role. They have thus debated of how empathy contributes to our knowledge of other minds or questioned whether and how empathy contributes to moral agency and moral knowledge. Less attention has been paid however to its quasi-aesthetic function that original empathy proponents were still aware of it.

In my talk I will suggest that we are well advised to remind ourselves that empathy allows us not merely to know and to morally evaluate other minds, but also to appreciate the otherness of another person's perspective in its "vitality" and "life-potentiality" (Lipps). It is only in this manner that we become sensitive to the whole range of human exemplifications of rational agency and properly extend our own horizon. Such sensitivity to the principles of humanity is what Kant in my opinion referred to as the *sensus communis* and he already suggested that empathic perspective taking is one of its constitutive maxims. Most importantly, I will suggest that we can understand the normative significance of what Adam Smith calls the impartial spectator perspective and the moral contribution of empathy only in light of such quasi-aesthetic human sensitivity.