

Research Network:

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

## Workshop: Empathy, Understanding, and Appreciation

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### **“What’s so funny about (Peace, Love and) Understanding”**

The term “understanding” is generally used to refer to an epistemic process or state. This is also the case in discussions of interpersonal understanding. Understanding another person (“interpersonal understanding”) is on one hand often taken to be a matter of understanding the other person’s actions, which in turn is usually thought to involve understanding *why* a person acted the way she did (“explanatory understanding”). In social cognition debates, the term “understanding” is on the other hand frequently used for mere recognition of another person’s mental state at a certain time. There is, however, a use of “understanding” that seems to involve more than recognizing a person’s psychological states and understanding, either why she is in these states or how they explain why she acted the way she did. It seems that this further aspect or component of understanding is not epistemic.

In a first step this paper will look at linguistic examples which indicate such an additional component of understanding. Negative utterances like “I really can’t understand her” or “I really can’t understand why she did that” express a lack of understanding even though the speaker is perfectly able to give an explanation of the action in question. It seems that, at least in some cases, knowing a person’s reasons for her actions is not sufficient for understanding those actions. Positive utterances, particularly in German (for example, “Ich kann dich so gut verstehen”), seem to express a better understanding, even in cases in which the speaker does not know more about the person’s reasons than in the negative case. Further, the German expression “Verständnis” (“Ich habe (wirklich kein) Verständnis dafür, dass er das getan hat”) seems to pick out an additional.

What is this additional component of interpersonal understanding? It seems that in the positive cases the understander “appreciates” or “accepts” the target’s action or reasons for her action. It is, however, far from clear what this means. I will consider two hypotheses:

(a) an understander needs to evaluate another person’s reasons in a positive way. This hypothesis seems to be particularly supported by the negative cases. A lack of understanding is often expressed with reference to morally, aesthetically or prudentially relevant scenarios. It seems that a lack of understanding entails that the understander takes an action of the target to be of particularly low moral, aesthetic or prudential quality.

(b) An understander needs to judge that she would act in the same or quite similar way if she were in the same situation than the other person. Such a judgement does not need to go along with a positive evaluation of the action or reasons for this action. Here it seems that in particular the positive cases support this hypothesis.

I will argue that it is not because of an evaluation of the particular bad or good moral (aesthetic or prudential) quality of an action that we express (a lack of) understanding, but because of the understander’s impression of concord in the positive, and discord in the

negative cases. This “impression”, the additional component of understanding, is however, not a proper judgement, as suggested in hypothesis (b), but an emotion of a particular type. Just as emotional evaluations may be thought of as situation-specific and relative to their bearer, such relativity has to be thought to characterise the sub-judgemental evaluations that are at the core of non-epistemic understanding.