

Workshop: Empathy and Its Limits

Online, 30.09.2021-01.10.2021

Schedule

30.09.2021

10:00-11:15 Heidi L. Maibom (Cincinnati), A Feeling Understanding

11:25-12:25 Elizabeth Ventham (Liverpool), Affective Empathy, its Limits, and its Success Conditions

12:25-14:00 *Lunch break*

14:00-15:00 Tue Emil Öhler Søvstø (Freie Universität Berlin), Empathic Understanding and Emotional Bonds

15:10-16:10 Hannah Read (Wake Forest University), A Multi-Dimensional Model of Empathy, its Limits, and Potential

16:40-17:55 Thomas Fuchs (Heidelberg), Empathy, Group Identity, and the Mechanisms of Exclusion

01.10.2021

10:00-11:15 Jan Slaby (Freie Universität Berlin), The Empathy Conundrum: Why Critique Is Not Enough

11:25-12:25 Edward A. Lenzo (Muhlenberg College), Method and Madness: Limits of Empathy in Phenomenological Psychopathology

12:25-14:00 *Lunch break*

14:00-15:00 Julia Langkau (Flensburg), On Imagining Being Someone Else

15:10-16:10 Jessica Struchhold (TU Dortmund), A Call to Care

16:40-17:55 Monika Betzler (LMU), Shared Belief and the Limits of Empathy

The workshop will take place online via Zoom. To register and for further information, please contact us at paul.klur@tu-dortmund.de.

Organizers: Jessica Struchhold, Eva Schmidt, Paul Klur, and Simon Wimmer, Department of Philosophy and Political Science, TU Dortmund.

Invited Speakers: Abstracts and CVs

Monika Betzler (LMU Munich), co-author Simon Keller (Victoria University Wellington), Shared Belief and the Limits of Empathy

ABSTRACT

Most of the philosophical literature on empathy focuses on “affective empathy,” where to show affective empathy is to share in another person’s experiences, including her emotions. In the philosophical literature on emotions, most philosophers accept the broadly cognitivist view that emotions incorporate or depend upon beliefs. Against that background, we argue that affective empathy can make demands upon belief; in many central cases, you can only share in another’s emotions insofar as you share, or can come to share, certain of her beliefs. We outline the resulting rational connection between affective empathy and belief, and we argue that, once this rational connection is appreciated, affective empathy turns out to be a more complicated moral and epistemic phenomenon than is usually acknowledged. We argue, among other things, that affective empathy brings epistemic dangers along with epistemic benefits, that the ideal of universal empathy cannot be built upon affective empathy, and that affective empathy cannot plausibly be taken as the basis of morality.

CV

Monika Betzler holds the Chair for Practical Philosophy and Ethics at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich/Germany (LMU). Her work is situated in the fields of normative ethics, theories of normativity, and moral psychology. Much of her recent work centers on the normativity of relationships and relational ethics. Her most recent publications are “Collegial Relationships” (co-authored with Jörg Löschke), in: *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 24 (2021), 213-229; and “Shared Belief and the Limits of Empathy” (co-authored with Simon Keller), in: *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* [forthcoming]. She currently works on the ethics of divorce and separation, and co-edits a volume on “The Ethics of Relationships” with Jörg Löschke [under contract with Oxford University Press].

Thomas Fuchs (Heidelberg University), Empathy, Group Identity, and the Mechanisms of Exclusion

ABSTRACT

There is a conspicuous tendency of humans to experience empathy and sympathy preferentially towards members of their own group, whereas empathic feelings towards outgroup members or strangers are often reduced or even missing. A historical example are the cases of Nazi perpetrators who behaved as compassionate family men on the one hand, yet committed crimes of utter cruelty

against Jews on the other. The mere capacity of empathy is obviously not sufficient to be realized towards all members of the human species as a matter of course, but seems to require an additional identification with the other as one's equal or as being included in a shared group identity. Conversely, excluding, discriminatory or dehumanizing ideologies are particularly suited to neutralize or suspend empathic feelings. Does this mean that primary empathy is gradually extended from one's kin to outgroup members or, on the contrary, that a general empathic disposition can be restricted or deadened secondarily? Using historical examples, the lecture investigates the interrelations between empathy, identity and the mechanisms of exclusion.

CV

Thomas Fuchs, MD, PhD, is Karl Jaspers Professor of Philosophy and Psychiatry at Heidelberg University, Germany. His main areas of research include phenomenological philosophy and psychopathology, embodied and enactive cognitive science, and interactive concepts of social cognition. Professor Fuchs has authored over 350 journal articles, book chapters and several books. He is editor-in-chief of "Psychopathology" and president of the European Association of Phenomenology and Psychopathology. Recent and upcoming books: *Ecology of the Brain. The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind*. Oxford University Press, 2018. *In Defense of the Human Being. Foundational Questions of an Embodied Anthropology*. Oxford University Press, 2021

Heidi Maibom (University of Cincinnati/University of the Basque Country), A Feeling Understanding

ABSTRACT

We are told that there are at least two different kinds of empathy: cognitive and affective empathy. The former has to do with understanding others, the latter to do with feeling for them. This distinction gives rise to the mistaken idea that when we empathize with others, we *either* attempt to understand their specific thoughts, feelings, or motivations, *or* we feel what they feel. This is an artificial distinction. The kind of understanding we typically get when we put ourselves in others' situation is affect-laden and lacks the specificity that is typically associated with 'understanding other minds.' I explain what kind of understanding this is and why it matters.

CV

Heidi Maibom is Professor of Philosophy at University of Cincinnati, Distinguished Research Professor at the University of the Basque Country, and President of the European Philosophical Society for the Study of Emotions (EPSSE). She has written extensively about empathy, psychopathy, and moral emotions. She is the

editor of *Empathy and Morality* (Oxford 2014) and *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy* (Routledge 2017), and the author of *Empathy* (Routledge 2020) and *The Space Between: How Empathy Really Works* (Oxford, forthcoming).

Jan Slaby (Freie Universität Berlin), The Empathy Conundrum: Why Critique Is Not Enough

ABSTRACT

What I call the empathy conundrum is the following double bind: empathy, at least in its classical philosophical understanding as other-oriented perspective shifting, cannot fulfill the hopes of those who favor a robust role for empathy in ethical theory. But on the other hand, we cannot well do without empathy either if we want to construct an ethically conducive society. My talk has two parts. The first revisits and invigorates the critique of classical empathy, the second seeks an alternative that is ethically as well as politically viable.

In the first part, I discuss why some critics think that empathy is a problematic imposition on part of the empathizer that tends to distort and devalue the practical and experiential perspective of those empathized with (cf. Slaby 2014). This is so, I argue, not just in dyadic or micro-social interaction but also on a broader political and discursive plane, as the work of Saidiya Hartman (1997) on the afterlife of transatlantic chattel slavery has shown. This socio-political extension of the anti-empathy perspective is crucial also as a broadening of the discussion surrounding empathy.

But no empathy is no solution either. In the second part of my talk, I discuss forms of socially and politically imposed *empathy deficits* and the fabricated indifference or “coldness” that ensues. The widespread lack of concern for the fate of refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea in makeshift boats is a case in point. I discuss the role of institutions in engineering affective orientations, and make a suggestion for an alternative to classical empathy as what could be an ethically conducive yet non-invasive and sympathetic orientation, both individually and on a political scale.

REFERENCES

- Hartman, S. (1997). *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in 19th Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Slaby, J. (2014). Empathy's Blind Spot. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 17(2), 249-258.

CV

Jan Slaby is Professor of Philosophy of Mind and Philosophy of Emotion at Freie Universität Berlin. His expertise includes social and action-oriented approaches to the mind, philosophical emotion theory, affect studies and critical perspectives

on the human sciences and on their societal impact. He is a co-PI and member of the governing board in the Collaborative Research Center Affective Societies at Freie Universität. With Christian von Scheve, he co-edited *Affective Societies: Key Concepts* (Routledge 2019). Among his journal articles are the texts “Empathy’s Blind Spot” (*Medicine, Healthcare, and Philosophy* 2014) “More Than a Feeling: Affect as Radical Situatedness” (*Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 2017) and “Affective Arrangements” (*Emotion Review* 2019, with Rainer Mühlhoff and Philipp Wüschner).

Further Abstracts and CVs

Julia Langkau (University of Flensburg), On Imagining Being Someone Else

ABSTRACT

Throughout his work, Peter Goldie expresses doubts concerning the role perspective taking or empathy should play in understanding the other and predicting their actions. In his paper “Anti-Empathy” (2011), Goldie claims to finally be able to identify the problem with perspective taking as a *conceptual* one: we can never fully grasp what another person is feeling, thinking, or deciding to do from their perspective. I argue that two plausible assumptions about simulation allow us to question Goldie’s conclusions: first, that what matters is the outcome of the empathic process, and second, that the outcome does not have to be identical to the target of the simulation. I conclude that the challenges we face when aiming to understand another person from their own perspective are either epistemic or psychological in nature.

CV

Julia Langkau is a lecturer at the University of Flensburg. She has been a research fellow of the Swiss National Science Foundation at the University of Fribourg, a visiting research fellow at the University of Miami, a ZIF Marie Curie fellow at the University of Konstanz, and a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Zurich. Her areas of research are epistemology, philosophy of mind, and aesthetics.

Edward A. Lenzo (Muhlenberg College, PA), Method and Madness: Limits of Empathy in Phenomenological Psychopathology

ABSTRACT

Since at least as early as Karl Jaspers’ *General Psychopathology*, the concept of empathy has enjoyed a privileged place in philosophy and psychology. Within those disciplines, the concept has many senses: from matching another person’s

mental state, to mind-reading, to simply feeling-for (or into) another; it can convey a concrete mental process to be examined scientifically but at the same time has methodological implications for such scientific attempts. Most versions of the concept have clear limits which have been rehearsed in the literature. In this essay, I focus on versions of empathy employed by Jaspers and the broadly Husserlian phenomenological tradition. There, empathy is the basic act through which I understand others. I explore this act's foundations and methodological implications in order to clarify the concept and demonstrate its limitations. Broadly speaking, phenomenological empathy presupposes that certain experiential or bodily similarities hold between the empathizer and the person to be understood. When these similarities do not hold, interpersonal understanding is undermined. This is easy enough to demonstrate for Jaspers, since he recognized the problem himself and accordingly developed his (in-)famous "incomprehensibility thesis"; demonstrating the claim for phenomenology more broadly, however, quickly leads us into considerations of the transcendental conditions of consciousness more generally, including embodiment. It is my contention that the presupposition of similarity by the phenomenological concept of empathy is especially problematic for psychopathology: in a science about understanding experience seemingly distinct from the norm, similarity cannot simply be presupposed. Empathy, as a method of understanding, is limited by its similarity condition, and this has implications for understanding in psychology and psychopathology more generally. I conclude by suggesting some ways we might approach this limitation, including the possibilities of 'empathy-augmentation' and fundamentally re-understanding interpersonal understanding as such.

CV

Edward A. Lenzo completed his PhD at the University of Memphis in May 2021 and is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania. He works in phenomenology and phenomenological psychopathology, with special interests in Husserl and Levinas. His dissertation is titled "Difference and Demand: Toward a Levinasian Psychopathology," and his most recent publication, co-authored with Shaun Gallagher, is titled "Intrinsic Temporality in Depression."

Hannah Read (Wake Forest University, NC), A Multi-Dimensional Model of Empathy, its Limits, and Potential

ABSTRACT

Debates about empathy are notoriously complex. Not only is there much disagreement about what empathy might be good for, but there is also little consensus about what empathy is in the first place. As a result, critics and proponents of empathy often wind up talking past each other. Against this

backdrop, I propose a multi-dimensional model of empathy according to which it consists of affective, cognitive, and motivational dimensions. On this view, empathy can take different forms depending on the nature and degree of prominence of these three dimensions. I argue that this view of empathy allows us to make sense of both the benefits that different forms of empathy can have across various moral, social, and political domains, as well as the limitations to which it is often subject.

CV

Hannah Read is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow in Character Education at Wake Forest University. Before coming to Wake Forest, she completed a PhD in Philosophy at Duke University, an MA in Philosophy at Tufts University, and a BA in Philosophy and Literary Studies at the New School University. During 2020-2021 Hannah was also a Visiting Scholar in the Philosophy Department at the University of Pennsylvania with Dr. Lisa Miracchi, and during Spring 2020 she was a Visitor and Part-Time Lecturer in the Philosophy Department at Rutgers University.

Tue Emil Öhler Søvstø (Freie Universität Berlin), Empathic Understanding and Emotional Bonds

ABSTRACT

My paper challenges the widespread assumption that empathy is primarily an epistemic phenomenon and instead focuses on the affective and motivational aspects of empathy. In order to analyse these aspects I draw on a theory of action proposed by the ancient Stoics which posits awareness, attachment and concern as the basic prerequisite for purposive action. This theoretical framework, I argue, can fruitfully be transferred to the study of empathy in order to bring out how empathy is centrally involved in developing close interpersonal relationships by helping us express and deepen our feelings of attachment and concern towards others. The aim of my talk is thus to propose a modular account of empathy as comprising elements of other-comprehension, -attachment and -concern, which interact and mutually enhance each other in order to produce the complex emotional state known as empathy.

CV

Tue Emil Öhler Søvstø (born 1986) studied Latin and Greek at the University of Copenhagen and is currently finishing his doctoral thesis on Stoic ethics in Cicero's philosophical works at the Free University Berlin. He is a DFG-funded fellow of the RTG 'Philosophy, Science and the Sciences'. His main interests are in ethics, moral psychology, epistemology, and philosophy of mind, and he specialises in ancient, Hellenistic and Roman philosophy.

Jessica Struchhold (TU Dortmund), A Call to Care

ABSTRACT

In 2006, Barack Obama gave the commencement speech at Northwestern University and talked about the *lack of empathy* as being a primary cause for social and political disparities. As this suggests, empathy is attributed a very significant political, social, and educational role. At the same time, it has been subject to enormous criticism in recent years. According to Prinz (2011) and Bloom (2016), empathy is biased, inaccurate and may be distorted by prejudices. For this reason, these authors argue that empathy is a necessary ingredient for helping others, but it seems to be not sufficient. In the philosophical literature, empathy and caring are defined as two distinct *sui generis* capacities that have different moral implications. The idea is that *empathy* is a *morally neutral concept* that in itself does not guarantee prosocial behavior but enables us to understand what others think or feel. In contrast, caring is often associated with a feeling of concern or moral motivation or obligation towards other people. My aim is to challenge this view and argue for two points: First, the call for empathy is actually a call for care. The idea of care ethics is that we are feeling, caring, and relational beings and thus, living a good life means caring for others. The ethics of care is a 20th century development, and it is largely a response to the perceived historical and philosophical neglect of the feminine perspective in ethics. I argue that the perspective of care ethics on empathy can help us to illuminate the role empathy plays in morality. Following Slote (2007), I secondly argue that caring is rooted in empathy by referring to developmental psychology.

REFERENCES

- Bloom, P. (2016). *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. Penguin.
- Prinz, J. (2011). Against Empathy. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 49, 214–233. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2011.00069.x>
- Slote, M. (2007). *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203945735>

CV

Jessica Struchhold is a PhD student and Research Assistant at the Technical University Dortmund. Prior to that, she studied philosophy, German literature and psychology at the universities of Düsseldorf, Duisburg-Essen and Salzburg. Her fields of research and interests are empathy, emotions and moral psychology.

Elizabeth Ventham (University of Liverpool), Affective Empathy, its Limits, and its Success Conditions

ABSTRACT

Empathising seems to be something that agents can do to greater or lesser extents. Indeed, we might never share someone's experience in the *exact* same way that they experience it – we are limited by factors like time, difficulties in communication, and our own closed-mindedness. Similarly, we can often empathise with someone at least *to some extent*, as long as some part of what they're going through seems familiar to us. It's clear, then, that an important part of understanding empathy will be in understanding what its success conditions are – what makes the difference between a more or less successful instance of empathy. This paper is interested in determining those success conditions. The paper begins by explaining a number of difficulties in understanding what makes instances of affective empathy more or less successful. Firstly it looks at sceptical worries, and secondly at the complexities of our affective experiences. Next, I will suggest a number of ways that such a measurement might go, and argue in favour of one that gives the strongest weight to one particular aspect of our affective experiences – what I call their *practical normative* quality.

CV

Lizzy Ventham is a postdoctoral research associate at The University of Liverpool, where she is working on a project called 'How Does It Feel? Affective Empathy and Interpersonal Understanding'. Before this she was a teaching fellow at Trinity College Dublin, and she got her PhD from The University of Southampton where she wrote her thesis defending desire-based theories of normativity.