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Empathic Understanding

Historical and Recent Perspectives on Empathy's Role in Social Cognition and Aesthetics

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This volume follows a long tradition of philosophical research on empathy, reaching back to the Scottish sentimentalism debate in the eighteenth century and to the German debate on "Einfühlung" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The latter debate marked one of the high points of interest in the topic – Theodor Lipps, the most prominent specialist among philosophers at the time, considered empathy as vital for quite literally *all* areas of philosophy, including not only ethics and epistemology, but also aesthetics, philosophy of mind, and even philosophy of language (Lipps 2018 [1913]).[1] And although the Einfühlung-debate was responsible for the term "empathy" becoming part of the English language (see our introduction to the *History of Empathy* chapter in this volume), the debate in itself failed to gain any real traction in the English-speaking world at the time. After it had also petered out in German-speaking countries around 1930, philosophical interest in empathy steadily declined for several decades. Recently, however, this trend has reversed. Since the late twentieth century a renewed interest in empathy can be observed (among the most important philosophical publications are Stueber 2006; Goldman 2006; Coplan and Goldie 2011; Matravers 2017; Roughley and Schramme 2018; Maibom 2017a; 2020; 2022; Matravers and Waldow 2021). Empathy has been at the very centre of many academic fields across different disciplines such as philosophy of mind, ethics, psychology and aesthetics, and the humanities. And at least since Barack Obama (2006) famously advised Northwestern graduates to concern themselves more with society's "empathy deficit" than with society's "federal deficit", empathy has also had a remarkable career in political discourses and debates within the general public.

This volume presents the latest developments in research on empathy in three areas: empathy and understanding other people, empathy and understanding literature and arts, and the history of empathy. In our brief introduction, we want to raise questions and point out problems that we consider relevant for each of these three areas and sketch out the focus of current research. At the end of each of the following sections, we will

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briefly introduce the associated contributions to this volume and summarize their main ideas.

0.1 Empathy and Understanding Other People

An interesting feature of the well-known speech just mentioned is that Obama felt compelled to explain what exactly he meant by "empathy" immediately after he used the word for the first time. He went on to characterize it as "the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us" (Obama 2006).

Obama, it seems, is a simulation theorist. His understanding of empathy, to which we will return in a moment, is by no means the only one. In fact, the term "empathy" has no agreed-upon meaning in all of the different areas of debate in which it appears. As has been repeatedly noted (for example Coplan and Goldie 2011; Matravers 2017; Roelofs 2021), it does not even have an agreed-upon meaning among philosophers and psychologists.

In the philosophy of mind, empathy is mostly seen as an epistemic tool which enables human beings to understand their fellows and is often described as a process of "mental state recognition" or "mindreading". Many philosophers who understand empathy in this way have proposed a distinction between high-level and low-level processes of empathy (Goldman 2006) or basic empathy and re-enactive empathy (Stueber 2006). Basic or low-level empathy is a process of mental state recognition or mindreading which typically takes place only in situations where the empathizer and the target person are face-to-face.

Let us focus first on this low-level process. There are three main accounts that describe low-level empathy in different ways: the theory theory, the simulation theory, and the perception theory (for an overview see Read 2019).

According to the so-called theory theory, human beings have a theory of human psychology which is either innate or developed over the course of their life. On this basis, they can *interpret* their fellow humans' behaviour and come to conclusions about their mental states in a specific situation (Spaulding 2015). Low-level empathy in terms of theory theory therefore amounts to basic inference-making.

Simulation theorists claim that low-level empathy is a process of (unconscious) *simulation* which enables the empathizer to recognize the target's mental state (Stueber 2006). This claim can already be found in the work of Theodor Lipps. It has recently gained more support by the discovery of so-called mirror neurons (see Gallese et al. 1996; Gallese and Goldman 1998; Stueber 2006; for a discussion of the role of mirror neurons in mindreading see Spaulding 2013).

Perception theorists claim that mental state recognition in face-to-face situations is a process of direct *perception*. Since affective states have (in most cases) bodily components which can be readily observed, low-level empathy amounts to perceiving these components (see Ratcliffe 2007; Gallagher 2008; Zahavi 2008).

Whichever way such low-level processes of empathy are conceptualized, their epistemic value for our understanding of other people is relatively clear: low-level empathy enables the empathizer to recognize the mental state of a target person in a specific face-to-face situation. The empathizer thus gains (propositional) knowledge about another person.

Let us now turn to the high-level process: what is "high-level" empathy? First of all, in contrast to the low-level process, it can also take place in situations where the empathizer and her target cannot directly perceive one another. While perception theory applies only to face-to-face encounters, theory theory and simulation theory can also offer explanations of high-level processes of empathy.

Theory theorists argue that high-level empathy has to be understood in terms of folk psychology and the empathizer's inferences (see Morton 1980; Dennett 1991; Carruthers and Smith 1996; Davies and Stone 1995a; Baron-Cohen 1999). The core claim is that we understand others and also ourselves because we *infer* the specific mental state or states which are responsible for the target's behaviour by means of applying a theory of mind. Theory theory, however, must explain how this theory of mind is acquired by the individual. This is not an easy task; in fact, it seems that theory theory is confronted with a dilemma here. If theory theory assumes that we acquire our theory of mind during our lifetime, it cannot explain how very young children (that do not yet possess the intellectual ability to acquire something like a theory of mind) are already able to understand, at least to a certain extent, mental states of other people. To solve this problem, theory theorists can argue that human beings are born with a rudimentary psychological theory of mind. This line of thought, however, might even introduce more problems than it solves since it is rather obscure what such an innate theory should look like.

Simulation theorists argue – very much in contrast to theory theorists – that high-level or reenactive empathy should be seen as a knowledge-poor process. The empathizer, they claim, does not need to rely on knowledge of any psychological theory and make inferences. Instead, the empathizer uses herself as a model for the target person's mental state. The empathizer simply simulates the state she would be in, were she in the target's position.

While simulationist accounts of empathy are well established in current philosophical debates (Heal 2003; Goldman 2006; Stueber 2006; Bailey 2021, 2022), our admittedly rough characterization of empathy as simulation leaves several questions unanswered. Current debates centre,

for example, on the nature of the simulation process. What exactly does it mean to "simulate" another person's mental state? It has been suggested that it means we *imagine* ourselves as being in the mental state in question. This imagination can either be conceptualized as a form of merely *propositional* imagination or as *experiential* in its nature. If the simulation of the target person's mental state is understood as a matter of propositional imagination, it seems relatively effortless since the empathizer does not need to re-create the experiential quality of the target's state. This merely propositional form of simulating the target person's perspective is often called cognitive empathy (Spaulding 2017). The assumed epistemic outcome of such an act of propositional imagination is propositional knowledge of the target person's mental state. Such an account is, however, in danger of collapsing into a theory theory account of social cognition, because simulating – when understood as merely propositional imagination – is hard to distinguish from the kind of inference-making assumed by theory theory. The difference is only that the simulator does not use her knowledge of *folk psychology*, but instead beliefs about her *own psychology* as a basis for her inferences about the target's mind.

There is a further reason for this "threat of collapse" (Davies and Stone 1995b): if an empathizer wants to know the mental state of a target who is, for example, having an oral exam in a few minutes, the empathizer can simulate different scenarios. She could imagine that the target is afraid of the exam or nervous, but also that the target is optimistic and confident. Her simulation might give her several different outcomes and the empathizer needs to decide which of these outcomes is most likely to be correct. How should she come to this decision? The simulation itself does not give her any criteria by which to decide which of these outcomes is correct. The empathizer needs to know more for a successful decision. Opponents of the simulation theory argue that this "more" that is needed here is exactly the kind of knowledge posited by theory theory (see Davies and Stone 1995b; Spaulding 2016).

Some philosophers suggest that we should understand simulation as imagination in a richer sense (Coplan 2011; Spaulding 2016; Bailey 2021; 2022; Stueber in this volume). They suppose that simulation not only is propositional, but has *experiential qualities* as well. This form of experientially simulating or imagining the target's mental state is often called affective empathy (Maibom 2017b). In re-enacting the target's state, the empathizer herself experiences affective states as part of the empathic process. Understanding simulation as experiential imagination has the advantage that it does not – or at least not as easily as in the case of propositional imagination – collapse into forms of counterfactual assumptions or inferences.

The empathic emotions or affects that come into play here are an interesting mental phenomenon and topic of extensive philosophical debates. It is an open question whether they are proper emotions or merely quasi-emotions or in some way distinguishable from non-empathic emotions (Scheler 1923; Kauppinen 2013; Müller in this volume). Sometimes empathic emotions have also been characterized as emotions the empathizer has *on behalf of* the target person (Roughley forthcoming). This claim leaves open the question whether the target person has the same (or any) emotional state when the empathizer feels the empathic emotions. This characterization has the advantage that it includes many important cases, such as where we empathize with people who cannot experience an emotion at the time or who are, for example, not yet aware of their misery. Others have stricter conditions for *empathic* emotions or affects. Martin Hoffman (2000), for instance, argues that an empathic emotion must be congruent with the target's emotion, in the sense that there must be a qualitative similarity or identical valence. Amy Coplan (2011) has also formulated a relatively strict condition for an emotion to count as empathic: in cases of successful empathy there has to be what Coplan calls "affective matching" in the sense that the empathizer's empathic emotion has to be of an identical type to the target's emotional state. If, for example, the target is in a state of jealousy, the empathizer has to experience jealousy as well – only perhaps less intensely.

However, the condition of affective matching provides a problem for accounts which spell out empathy in terms of imagination or simulation. Many people believe that we can learn what it is like to be in a specific conscious mental state only by means of experience (Lewis 1988, Paul 2014). If this is true, only those empathizers who previously had an emotional experience of the same type as the target's emotion can fulfil the condition of affective matching and can thus successfully empathize. It would not be possible to successfully empathize with people who experience something the empathizer has not yet experienced (for discussion see Kind 2021; Wiltsher 2021; Fendrell Verran 2023).

Such a sceptical view of empathy's epistemic benefit is supported by the fact that we can much more easily empathize with and understand people who are relatively similar to us, which in turn means that empathy is not a helpful epistemic tool when we need it most: in our endeavour to understand people who are different to ourselves or who have a different experiential background.

Let us momentarily put aside these difficulties and suppose the empathizer can successfully recreate the target's mental state in the sense of Coplan's affective matching condition. She then experiences what the target experiences – or at least something very similar. Because of this *experiential character* of empathy, philosophers have assumed that the epistemic

outcome of empathy is not merely propositional knowledge. Amy Coplan (2011, 17–18) calls this epistemic outcome "experiential understanding". Others have suggested that empathy, understood as a process of experientially simulating the target's state, is a source of *knowledge of what it is like* to be in the target's state (Steinbeck 2014; Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo 2019; Wiltsher 2021; Berninger in this volume; Werner in this volume). If this is correct, the epistemic benefit of experientially simulating the target's state is an additional *type* of knowledge about the target. However, advocates of this idea still need to explain the epistemic benefit of knowledge of what it is like in the first place. It is not easy to see how exactly knowledge of what it is like can contribute to the explanatory understanding of a person, i.e. the attempt to understand *why* a person behaves in a certain way or *why* she is in a particular mental state: when it comes to answering these questions, it is not obvious why an empathizer with knowledge of what it is like should be in an epistemically better situation than an empathizer with only propositional knowledge about the target person (see Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo 2019; Stueber in this volume).

As we have seen, at least two groups of questions arise with respect to high-level or re-enactive simulation. Let us briefly sum them up. The first group of questions concerns the epistemic value of simulation and imagination in general: how can we gain *knowledge* by means of simulation? Even if we form true beliefs as a result of simulation, how can these beliefs be justified? Can simulation alone justify beliefs, and if so, how? If not, can true beliefs as a result of simulation be justified by any other means? And if not: what does this mean for the epistemic value of simulation? In what sense can simulation be of epistemic value if it does not lead to knowledge?

The second group of questions aims at the *nature* of the assumed knowledge and its relation to simulation: is propositional knowledge the only result of simulating the target's state? If so, why is it important to experientially imagine the target's state? What exactly is meant by "knowledge what it is like" and how can this knowledge help us to understand people better?

Before we go on to think about empathy's role in understanding literature and art, let us once more return to Barack Obama. For him, the core idea of empathy – and we suggest this is quite representative of the wider public's understanding of empathy – is what is usually called "perspective taking": the "ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes", as Obama (2006) had phrased it. Philosophers often distinguish between two forms of perspective-taking – independently of whether the process of simulation is regarded as merely propositional or experiential in its nature.

First, an empathizer can take over the perspective of a target by means of *imagining* that she herself is in the target's situation. As a result the

empathizer knows how she herself would react, were she in this situation. As we have already discussed above, this form of perspective-taking seems to be at the very core of simulation theory. It faces the following problems: if empathy is a process of simulating the state the empathizer herself would be in were she in the target's position, empathizers run the risk of *projecting* their possible states onto the target, instead of recognizing the target's own states. If the empathizer projects her own reactions onto the target person, she may (if she is lucky) gain true beliefs about the target's state. But these true beliefs are not justified. And since they are not justified, these true beliefs can barely count as knowledge. Another problem with this view of perspective-taking, highlighted clearly by Heidi Maibom, is that empirical data suggests that people are, in general, relatively poor in predicting their own psychological, especially emotional, future reactions (Maibom 2016, 2018). If indeed we do not do well in this regard, the simulation of future psychological states is not a very reliable way of gaining knowledge about future reactions. A simulationist account of empathy thus needs to produce further evidence that (and how) a simulation based on the simulator's own psychology can be counted as a reliable epistemic tool – or even that it has epistemic value at all.

Second, instead of imagining oneself to be in the target's situation, it is sometimes claimed that empathizers simulate *being* the target. While it has been argued that this is not possible for conceptual reasons (Goldie 2011), others, like Langkau (2021), advocate a less ambitious version of the idea of imagining oneself to be the other person. Her idea is that it is not necessary to imagine being an entirely different person in order to comprehend how a target, whose psychological profile differs from the empathizer's, would feel. The aim of the simulation is not to *be* the target in the literal sense, but only to simulate what the target feels or thinks in a specific moment.

It seems, however, that the success of this imaginative endeavour will ultimately depend on knowledge about the target person: the more the empathizer knows about the target the better she can simulate the target's state. It follows that even if the simulation theorist does not need to rely on folk psychology, simulation is not as knowledge-poor as claimed by simulation theorists.

The contributions to the first part of our volume take up some of the issues we have raised here. Yet unlike us – who have only pointed out problems and asked questions – they will also give illuminating answers.

Shannon Spaulding starts off the volume by focussing on a problematic aspect of empathy, namely that empathy is biased in favour of one's in-group and exacerbates rather than relieves underlying inequalities. This raises the question of whether we can improve empathy. Spaulding argues that empathy comprises both skills and habits. Theoretical and empirical

considerations support the idea that we can improve both the skills and habits that underlie empathy. If this is correct, Spaulding argues, it shows that it is possible to harness the positive outcomes of empathy while avoiding some of its darker sides.

The goal of **Stefano Vincini**'s chapter is to argue for an interactionist approach as an alternative to standard views in social cognition, namely theory theory, simulation theory, and their hybrids. He introduces the so-called empathy-sharing conundrum which applies to phenomena that instantiate both empathy and sharing. The conundrum concerns how sharing can be reconciled with the self-other differentiation implied by empathy: if I share your joy by my feeling it, then it is only my feeling. The differentiation between our emotional experiences is lost. The interactionist solution is that, just as individual experiences are unities of distinct temporal perspectives, so shared experiences are unities of distinct individual perspectives. Therefore, participating in a shared experience does not exclude, but, if anything, requires a differentiation between the perspectives of the individual participants. After introducing the interactionist solution to the empathy-sharing conundrum, Vincini shows that it is consistent with recent social-psychological literature.

Catrin Misselhorn focusses on empathy's role in moral philosophy and on a contrast which is often drawn in the debates between empathy-based and reason-based approaches. Misselhorn's chapter aims to reconcile both positions by showing, with the help of moral psychology, that what she calls the empathic point of view has a moral core that provides a transition to the moral point of view. Central to her argument is the claim that empathy is a form of seeing others as ends in themselves. In order to substantiate this claim, a definition of empathy is given and supported by functional and neuroanatomical evidence. It ultimately transpires that reason and empathy can and should complement each other as sources of moral behaviour.

Anja Berninger's chapter turns our attention to another question mentioned above: can we learn 'what it is like' by means of empathy? Even those who hold an optimistic view seem to be convinced that there are – at least in practice – limits to what we can learn by means of empathizing with people with an entirely different experiential background. In her chapter, Berninger considers a case in which we indeed have strong reasons to think that we will be unable to understand what an experience is like. This is the case of Holocaust testimony. However, she also argues that this failure to understand can help to produce a different kind of understanding, one that is more broadly historical in nature.

Usually, empathy is believed to help in understanding other people. In her chapter **Eva-Maria Düringer** investigates empathy's role in self-understanding. Intuitively, it seems that self-understanding is an important, if not necessary step on our way to moral improvement. Iris Murdoch,

however, disagrees: if we want to improve morally, she argued, we should be less self-occupied, not more. Introspection tends to lead attentive moral energy, which should be directed outwards, back towards the self. In order not to fall into the trap of self-obsession, against which Murdoch rightly counsels, Düringer argues that we should apply a filter to our introspection: the filter of second or third personal loving attention.

The phenomenal features of experiences also play an important role in **Karsten Stueber**'s chapter. He investigates the presumptive role of grasping these phenomenal features of other minds when striving for an *explanatory* understanding of agents who act for reasons. Stueber more fully explores how his distinction between basic and reenactive empathy allows us to regard reenactive empathy as occasionally including a phenomenal dimension. Stueber goes on to argue that mental states can be grasped as reasons for actions only if they are recognized to be appropriately integrated into a complex web of our other mental states and only insofar as they are ultimately related to what we care about. He finally argues that even if we acknowledge a form of purely experiential or affective empathy, such empathy does not possess any uniquely explanatory value. It has, however, a practical value in allowing us to provide emotional support to another person.

0.2 Empathy and Understanding Literature and Art

As already mentioned briefly at the beginning of our introduction, the German debate on “Einfühlung” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not primarily centred on the empathic understanding of other people. While related problems were of course discussed, the main focus of research on empathy was its role in aesthetics. Several of the topics that remain of interest to aestheticians today were debated in astounding detail already in that era. Vendrell Ferran (2010) and Prinz (in this volume) convincingly show that the debates on Walton-style quasi-emotions and theories of aesthetic embodiment, to give just two examples, were already anticipated by aestheticians and authors such as Stephan Witasek, Moritz Geiger, and Vernon Lee over a hundred years ago (we will come back to these relations in the section on the *History of Empathy* below).

Very generally speaking, the historic and the current debates mostly agree that empathy plays at least some role in our understanding and appreciation of literature and art. This statement is uncontroversial (and uninteresting) if we understand empathy as merely propositional simulation. As we argued above, it is difficult to show that this form of imagination can even be clearly distinguished from counterfactual considerations and inference-making. Without making basic inferences about fictional characters' mental states, readers will not be able to make any sense of complex aesthetic artefacts.[2] Some philosophers have voiced concerns about

understanding empathy in a stronger sense, that is, in the sense of affective empathy or experiential simulation (see our considerations above): Peter Lamarque and others have argued that (the appreciator's) emotions in general might get in the way of a proper appreciation of art (Lamarque 2011; see also Kivy 2006; Lamarque in this volume). Since readers or listeners of music are concerned with appreciating the aesthetic value of the artworks they contemplate (at least in cases when they deal with literature and music *as art*), they should even try deliberately to ignore emotional reactions of any kind. Empathizing with the protagonist might, for example, lead the reader to overlook subtle ambivalences in the relations between the protagonist and other characters, or distract her in other ways. It risks, as Susan Feagin (2012, 636) has put it, "taking attention away from what one ought to be attending to in the work".

These concerns are not shared by all aestheticians. A forceful defence of the role of emotions in understanding literature and art has been advanced by Jenefer Robinson (2005). Robinson claims that whoever does not pity Anna Karenina or is not disgusted by Macbeth's ruthless striving for power cannot really be said to have understood Tolstoy's novel or Shakespeare's play. It should be noted that Robinson is not directly concerned with empathy here. But it is safe to extrapolate: if *emotions* in general supposedly play such an important role in understanding and appreciating literature, this will apply to *affective components of the reader's empathy* as well. Many of our emotions in dealing with fiction are empathic in nature. We suffer Anna Karenina's pain when she is devastated after losing her son Seryozha; we are, just as Ishmael is, both terrified and awestruck by Captain Ahab's demonic determination to hunt down Moby Dick; we share Elizabeth Bennett's and Mr Darcy's joy when they have finally overcome all pride and prejudice and can happily marry.

Concerning empathic emotions in particular, Robinson (2010) has put forward this argument: in order to understand and appreciate literary works as a whole, we have to understand and appreciate their parts. An important part of a literary text are its characters, which we understand in just the same way we understand real persons: via empathizing with them. It follows, if we accept these premises, that we need empathy to understand works of literature. However, all three of these premises are debatable. Robinson's most basic assumption is that characters are important parts of literary works. This is not always the case. Some of Jorge Luis Borges's short stories, for example, are abstract analyses of mysterious concepts or ideas (like the infamous *Library of Babel*) and do not feature any conversations or even any interactions between characters at all. Overarching claims about the importance of empathy for our understanding and appreciation of *literature* should therefore be avoided. Since Robinson is fully aware of this – she restricts her claims to paradigmatic

cases of the nineteenth-century psychological novel – we will not pursue this point any further. Two more premises remain to be examined: "we need empathy to understand other persons" and "understanding real persons and fictional characters works the same way". As we have discussed in the above section, it is not clear to what extent (if at all) we need empathy to understand other persons. It is also a matter of debate whether empathizing with persons and characters is the same process or has the same success conditions as empathy with real people (for recent discussion, see Werner 2020; Petraschka 2021; Matravers in this volume). In particular, Amy Coplan's condition of "affective matching" might prove a problem for empathy in the fictional case: in contrast to real people, fictional characters obviously do not possess a human psychology. It is not literally true that a fictional character is in a specific mental state, since fictional characters do not exist. A reader's empathic emotion can therefore not literally match a fictional character's mental state.

Although empathy with persons and fictional characters might not be identical, it has time and again been claimed that the latter might be some sort of training ground for the former. While reliable empirical evidence for this claim is notoriously difficult to come by (as already discussed in Keen 2007; and more recently in Currie 2020) and positive results of psychological studies like Kidd and Castano (2013) have not been easily reproducible (Panero et al. 2016, for example, report their failure to replicate the results of Kidd and Castano 2013; other empirical studies regarding this topic are Mar et al. 2009; Bal and Veltkamp 2013; Djikic et al. 2013; Stansfield and Bunce 2014), it has often been argued that fiction enhances our capacity and willingness to empathize in real life (e.g. in Nussbaum 2000; Pinker 2011). By simulating either the mental state a character is in or by imagining being in the character's situation, readers, according to this notion, train their imaginative and empathic skills. As Amy Kind claims, imagination (and thus simulation) is a skill (see also Spaulding, in this volume) and by means of practising this skill we can become better imaginers or become better at empathizing with others (Kind 2020, 2021). This, in turn, might even make readers morally better persons.

Empathizing with characters might also have other epistemic benefits. Since many literary texts feature characters in non-everyday situations, it is sometimes claimed that reading literature is a way of having experiences the reader herself had neither had nor will probably ever have. Literature can facilitate the process of imagining of what it would be like to live in circumstances different to ours; experientially simulating a fictional character's state could be a way of learning what it is like to be this character.

As plausible as this might seem at first glance, this idea faces at least two difficulties. First, it is an open question whether we can learn something from fictional literature at all. While literary cognitivists argue that it is

possible to learn from fiction (for example Currie 1990; Konrad 2017; Stock 2017; Vendrell Ferran 2018; Garcia-Carpintero 2019; Voltolini 2021), their opponents doubt this for various reasons (see Werner in this volume). Second, as mentioned in section 0.1 above, many philosophers claim that *knowledge what it is like* is a type of knowledge one can gain only by means of *first-hand experience*. If this is true, readers cannot gain knowledge what it is like by means of reading, regardless of whether the work is fictional or not (Kind 2021; Berninger in this volume; Werner in this volume).

It is also worth mentioning that empathy has, in several respects, traditionally been an important *theme* in literary texts. First, it has been widely employed as a theme in the very sense of the word: as "a unifying thread that binds together incident and character in an illuminating way" (Lamarque 2009, 150). Phillip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, a paradigmatic example of such a case, is thoroughly analyzed by Konrad in this volume. Second, literature more generally has often played with "empathy for the devil"-phenomena and tried to make readers reflect on their (non-)empathy with ambivalent characters (Mitchell 2014; Hillebrandt in this volume). In fiction – as evidenced also by the success of recent Netflix productions like *Dahmer* or *Mindhunter* – there seems to be a certain tendency to engage with evil characters and even to try to empathize with them. Research on this topic has often been concerned with the wider issue of the so-called *paradox of tragedy* or *paradox of painful art* (see Smuts 2007; and Smuts 2009 for instructive overviews). In contrast to this tendency to engage or even empathize with evil characters in fiction, people usually hesitate to empathize with persons they consider to be morally bad in real life.

The second part of this volume starts with a chapter by **Peter Lamarque** which offers a sympathetic reappraisal of the 1949 essay by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley entitled *The Affective Fallacy*. Lamarque argues that we need to question the nature and role of emotions in responses to works of literature because we need to ask at what emotions are directed (or from whence they stem) and how they play into judgements we make about literature. Following Wimsatt and Beardsley, emphasis is given to the need for specificity in emotional responses and the importance of objectivity in critical judgements. With a primary focus on empathetic responses, Lamarque distinguishes between empathy expressed in a text and empathy felt in a reader, with priority given to the former in objective criticism. The point is elaborated using further distinctions: between internal and external perspectives on fictional characters; between subject content and thematic content in works of literature; and between kinds of readers, be they professional critics or "ordinary" readers (seen as roles rather than classes of people), noting the different place for emotions in their critical responses.

Empathy with fictional characters is also the topic of **Derek Matravers**'s chapter. He argues that the discussion is ill-founded and rests on a confusion that bedevils philosophical work in this area: namely, basing a distinction between our interactions with fiction and with non-fiction on the differences between our interactions with fiction and with other people in face-to-face encounters. It is plausible that there is a difference between our empathizing with represented characters and our empathizing with people met face-to-face, but – or so Matravers argues – it is a great deal less plausible that there are systematic differences between our empathizing with one sort of represented character (fictions) and another sort of represented character (non-fictions). While making his case, Matravers considers various arguments by Thomas Petraschka and Peter Lamarque. A sceptical view is taken of the claim that there is a fundamental division of narratives into two sorts: non-fiction that informs and fiction which entertains. The proposed alternative is that all (relevant) narratives have the same primary function: to transport readers to another world.

As Anja Berninger does in her chapter in the first part of this volume, **Christiana Werner** focusses on knowledge of what it is like. She distinguishes between what she calls atomic mental states (such as a perception of the colour red) and complex mental states. The latter are multi-layered and their components are atomic mental states. This distinction has an important consequence: if the empathizer has knowledge of what it is like of the components of a complex experience, she can put these components imaginatively together. Werner highlights the role of testimony: she argues that this ability to imaginatively (re)combine components of a complex experience enables one to imagine what it is like for someone else to be in their situation, only if one imagines the experience according to the respective experiencer's testimony. Finally, the chapter critically examines fictional literature's role in gaining knowledge of what it is like to experience something new.

Suzanne Keen engages with Rainer Mühlhoff's theory of affective resonance and social interaction, extending it to the imaginative context of fiction reading. The immersion experience, analogous to the phenomena Mühlhoff describes as "a dynamic entanglement of moving and being-moved in relation" (Mühlhoff 2015), involves empathetic experiences evoked by fictional characters and features of imagined worlds. These are created by authors and brought to fruition by co-creating readers. Keen's essay investigates structural similarities between human affective resonance and readers' empathy. Drawing on her previous theorizing of co-creating readers' various contributions to narrative empathy, she discusses affective components of reading fiction and narrative transportation.

Claudia Hillebrandt investigates readers' tendencies to empathize with evil characters in literature. She claims that there are certain

literary techniques that particularly promote such responses. Specifically she focusses on the interplay between evaluative text elements and different ways of referring to the emotions of characters. It is argued that the emotional impact of a literary character, at least in part, depends on the combination of these techniques within a certain work of literature. As readers are exposed to these techniques it is hard to completely avoid empathy even for villainous characters like Tom Ripley in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

Readers' empathy is also a central topic in **Eva-Maria Konrad**'s chapter. She argues that Philip K. Dick's famous novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* both provokes and disorients the reader's empathic reactions. In order to demonstrate Dick's use of manifold strategies on a narrative, linguistic, and structural level, central aspects of addressing the reader's empathic attitudes are analyzed. It emerges that in all of these aspects, Dick exhaustively tests the reader's affective reactions, sparking a thorough reflection on basic assumptions and beliefs with regard to possible objects of empathy, the reader's own usual empathic or unempathic behaviour, and – even more fundamentally – the meaning of humanness in general. The fictional empathy test in the book is therefore not ultimately designed for the titular androids but for the reader.

0.3 The History of Empathic Understanding

The term "empathy" itself was first used in the philosophical debate in 1909. It has become common knowledge that Edward B. Titchener used it as a translation for the German term "Einfühlung" in his *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought Processes*. Less well-known is the fact that, in the same year, the same term also appeared in Charles S. Myers's *A Text-Book of Experimental Psychology*. Just like Titchener, Myers (1909, 331) used it as "convenient translation of the German *Einfühlung*" and credited his colleague, Cambridge Professor James Ward (who had studied in Göttingen under the German Einfühlung-expert Hermann Lotze) with the suggestion for the translation in a footnote.

The idea behind the term, however, has been around for much longer (the history of empathy has first been discussed in Ziegler (1894) and Stern (1898), more recently in Hunsdahl 1967; Wispé 1987; Jahoda 2005; Koss 2006; Stueber 2006; Lanzoni 2018; Petraschka 2023). Adam Smith (1759) and David Hume (1739) discussed a strikingly similar concept under the name "sympathy", and the German "Einfühlung" debate took up ideas dating back to Johann Gottfried Herder and German Romanticism. Yet while Herder (1967 [1774], 503) indeed advised the reader to "feel oneself into" nature and history in order to understand it better, and authors from the era of German Romanticism mused about "feeling oneself

into" nature (Novalis 1977 [1802], 105) or works of art (Wackenroder and Tieck 1991 [1796], 88), the noun "Einfühlung" was first coined as *terminus technicus* by Robert Vischer (son of the more well-known philosopher Friedrich Theodor Vischer) in his dissertation *On the Optical Feeling of Form* (1873). Vischer (1873, 21–26) also suggested a somewhat perplexing assortment of similar terms (like "Anfühlung", "Ausfühlung", "Zufühlung", and "Nachfühlung") that was, to the best of our knowledge, almost entirely ignored by the contemporary discussion. The opposite was true for "Einfühlung". The concept and the term itself were soon employed in all areas of contemporary (German-speaking) philosophy, most successfully in aesthetics, where it gave its name to a branch (the "Einfühlungsästhetik") which became the predominant school of aesthetic thought in German-speaking countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The then novel discipline of empirical psychology was also very interested in the phenomenon of empathy. Wilhelm Wundt, who had founded the world's first Institute of Experimental Psychology at the University of Leipzig in 1879, laid the groundwork in his seminal *Principles of Physiological Psychology* (1874). His former pupil Oswald Külpe went on to found another Institute of Psychology at the University of Würzburg in 1896, which later became the home of the well-known Würzburg School of (experimental) psychology. In his lab, he did groundbreaking work for the empirical analysis of empathy (see Lanzoni 2018). In the early twentieth century, the debate on Einfühlung brought together both psychological and philosophical perspectives and became increasingly nuanced and complex. Interestingly enough, scholars in different branches of the humanities and artists of all sorts also took up the debate on empathy (see Petraschka 2023 for an in-depth analysis of these relations). In literary studies, Carl du Prel, among others, suggested understanding poetry not only as a result of the extraordinary ability of poets to empathize, but also as a means to enable less gifted readers to connect with the poet's empathy-based view of others and the world. In art history, empathy was not only considered as a tool to analyse and appreciate artworks, but also as a means to teach art in schools (see Imorde in this volume). Poets like Rilke, who had himself attended lectures by Lipps in Munich, pondered empathy in poetological reflections and poems, painters like Franz Marc or Wassily Kandinsky and architects like August Endell (who had even begun working on a dissertation under Lipps's supervision before he left academia and became an artist) used it as a theoretical background for their musings on abstract art and architecture (see Rehm in this volume). The Russian filmmaker Sergey Eisenstein even tried to incorporate the abstract philosophical discussions of empathy into specific shots of films, including his famous *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). For example, he incorporated short close-ups of clenched fists into a bigger

scene in which a large crowd protests against the brutality of the regime (this has also been noted by Carroll 2011, 179). In doing so, Eisenstein later explained, he had tried to induce movie-goers to mimic the gesture. And as his reading of Lipps's work on empathy had shown him, he continued, empathic mimicry of this sort would then serve to induce the very same revolutionary anger portrayed in the movie in the movie-goers themselves.

Especially interesting in this context is the role of art historian, author, and aesthetician Violet Paget (alias Vernon Lee). Herself well versed in German, she immersed herself in the contemporary debates and played an important role in communicating early ideas on empathy to the Anglo-Saxon world. As the chapters by **Thomas Petraschka** and **Jesse Prinz** show, reducing Lee to this role of a mere expositor of German ideas on "Einfühlung" would mean grossly underestimating her genuine contributions to the debate. Petraschka concentrates on Lee's early work and details her correspondence with the main protagonists of the contemporaneous academic debate. He shows that she published in the relevant scientific journals and received both appreciation and serious critique from well-established academic philosophers. Petraschka thoroughly analyses an extensive critique of Lee's early work by Theodor Lipps and explains how she reacted to his arguments against her theory of empathy as "bodily induction". Lee herself made valid points against some claims by Lipps in return and, in response to the controversy, claimed a specific role as hybrid between aesthetic theory and practice for herself. Prinz picks up where Petraschka's analysis leaves off and concentrates on Lee's mature aesthetic theory. He agrees with Petraschka's contention that her contributions to aesthetic psychology have been under-appreciated. Prinz's chapter explores the evolution of Lee's views about aesthetic experience and aesthetic preference. Her mature view is shown to be rich, distinctive, and plausible. It combines a dynamic form of empathy with emotional processes, and is committed to specific and, in principle, testable claims about aesthetic responses. The viability of these proposals is explored by relating Lee to contemporary theoretical work in embodied cognition and theoretical work in empirical aesthetics. Lee's mature theory, Prinz claims, anticipates current trends and is broadly consistent with recent findings. Many of her specific conjectures await direct investigation and could be used to guide ongoing research.

Jean Moritz Müller's chapter is concerned with one of Lee's famous German contemporaries: Max Scheler. In his *The Nature of Sympathy* (1923), Scheler offers an intriguing, if puzzling, account of empathy. According to Müller's reconstruction, Scheler conceives of empathy as a specific kind of feeling through which we are immediately aware of others' emotions, but which is not itself an emotion and does not require us to have those emotions ourselves. Moreover, *qua* immediate awareness of

others' emotions, empathy is supposed to afford an understanding of *why* they feel those emotions. Müller's aim, however, is not only to reconstruct Scheler's view, but to defend it against two key objections which target its coherence. Müller argues that both objections fail since they respectively confuse different forms of feeling, and do not appreciate the constitutive connection between emotions and reasons.

Íngrid Vendrell Ferran's chapter is also concerned with early twentieth-century theories of empathy. She argues that early phenomenologists used the concept of empathy not merely to refer to the direct perception of the other's experiences as underscored by contemporary proponents of the Direct Perception Theory. They also described (in a sense close to Lipps and today's Simulation Theory) how, by virtue of imagining, we "feel into" animate and inanimate objects. Focussing on this later usage of the term, Vendrell Ferran identifies two kinds of imagination-based accounts of empathy in early phenomenology. According to "radical imaginationists", empathy can be explained in terms of a series of imaginative processes entailed in the idea of "feeling into", such as projecting oneself into the target, "imitating" its feelings and in so doing resonating with it. Voigtländer's account of empathizing with one's image in *Vom Selbstgefühl* (1910) and Geiger's account of empathy with atmospheres ("Stimmung") in *Zum Problem der Stimmungseinfühlung* (1911) can be regarded as radical imaginationists in this sense. According to "moderate imaginationists", empathy might (but need not) entail imagining. Stein's account of empathy with others in *On the Problem of Empathy (Zum Problem der Einfühlung)* (1917/1989) is then presented as an example of a moderate imaginationist account.

Art historians **Joseph Imorde** and **Robin Rehm** both investigate the ways in which debates on empathy were taken up by the art world in the early twentieth century. Imorde is especially interested in the role of art in the context of education. He claims that around 1900 the principles of instructional treatment of works of fine art in schools dramatically moved away from looking at images as auxiliary tools towards conveying the formal and substantive qualities of works of art as ends in themselves. The starting point of this development was the wide dissemination of all kinds of art-historical printed matter. Publishing houses expressed the goal of bringing the uneducated into closer contact with "high art". Interestingly, training aesthetic empathy was seen as one of the most important ways to reach these new aims of popular education. Rehm analyses the way in which the painters of *Der Blaue Reiter* took up philosophical debates on empathy. According to Rehm, it was Wilhelm Worringer (especially in his influential dissertation *Abstraction and Empathy*) who, drawing on the aesthetics of Lipps (who in turn took up ideas already advanced by Friedrich Schiller), devised a position that was interesting and acceptable for classical modern painting.[3]

Notes

1 In a posthumously published paper Lipps (2018 [1913], 643) actually claimed, somewhat obscurely, that since "sentences express beliefs in the same way a gesture expresses joy of grief", it would make sense to say that "beliefs are empathized into sentences" (our translation).
2 It might be possible to come up with some very special examples of avant-garde-artworks that do not even need basic inference-making to be appreciated (Dadaist poems or paintings like Yves Klein's *Monochrome Blue*). Our claim still holds for most "standard" cases of art and literature.
3 We want to thank the German Research Council (DFG) for funding our Research Network on *Feeling and Understanding* and thereby enabling us to organize several conferences and workshops on topics that are discussed in this volume. We also want to thank Andrew Wells for his careful proofreading and helpful comments and Evi Reitberger for her help with the formatting.

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