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Empathy – Real-Life and Fiction-Based

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In response to the so-called paradox of fiction, Kendall Walton famously argued that our affective reactions to fictions differ structurally from real-life emotions. Many authors now reject the idea that there really is a paradox of fiction. But, even if this is true, Walton may have been right in that there really are far reaching differences between the way we respond to fictions and our real-life emotional reactions. That is, even if we do not believe the paradox of fiction is a paradox, it can still lead us to doubt the homogeneity of our emotional responses and to reflect on the relation between real-life and fiction-based emotional reactions. In this paper, I want to further discuss this issue focusing on the case of empathy.

The main questions I want to answer are: What are the differences between our real-life and fiction-based empathic reactions? Are there any far reaching structural differences between the two? In my discussion, I will stress the idea that real-life empathy is often built on a relatively complex interaction between the person that empathizes and the emotional subject. I will show, first of all, that this type of social interaction is not possible in literary fiction. Secondly, I will stress that literature often offers an introspective perspective on a character's inner life. This is a perspective not open to us in real-life settings, which allows for a distinct kind of empathy.

In discussing real-life and fiction-based empathy I differentiate between two different functions empathic reactions might fulfill. Thus, following Matthew Kieran, I suggest that some forms of empathy might allow us to infer the emotional state an agent is in and to predict his subsequent behavior. In other cases, however, the aim of empathy is not to achieve some sort of epistemic aim, but rather to feel a kind of solidarity with those that are in the grip of an emotion. In this paper, I concentrate on this second kind of empathy.

I will start with some general remarks on the structure of real-life empathy. Drawing on some ideas originally voiced by Adam Smith, I will highlight the fact that empathy is a deeply social process involving two individuals: the one that empathizes (the empathizer or the spectator) and the one that is empathized with (the empathizee or the actor). According to Smith, both actor and spectator will often put themselves in the other's shoes to bring empathy about. Furthermore, both sides engage in some form of emotion regulation: the spectator tries to regulate his emotions so they match those of the empathizee. The empathizee, in turn, may need to down-regulate his emotional reactions, so that they can indeed match. In how far he must do so, depends on his relation with the empathizer. I suggest that, additionally to these forms of emotion regulation, the empathizee also engages in some forms of reason giving. The exact form this takes again depends on his relationship with the empathizer.

I then go on to show that this theory enables us to understand why empathy is sometimes so difficult to achieve in real life. Here, I show that high degrees of emotional intensity but also the type of emotion felt may make it difficult for the empathizee to engage in the sort of down-regulation and reason giving discussed.

With these distinctions in place, I then turn to the case of fiction-based empathy. I will show that fiction-based empathy is not a social phenomenon in the same sense as real-life empathy. There is thus an important structural difference between the two. I then suggest that fiction often

confronts us with the type of cases that present challenges to real-life empathy (i. e. cases where there is a lack of down-regulation, high emotional intensity and so on). Fiction, however, also provides us with additional resources that facilitate empathy even in these difficult cases. Fiction often gives us access to the stream of thought of a fictional character. Fictional texts thus allow us to get a glimpse on how emotional intensity and emotion type affect a character's thinking, as well as offering us insight into the raw emotional feel, the intensity and urgency connected to many emotions. Fictional texts generally use aesthetic means to give us access to these aspects. Thus, when feeling empathy in response to a work of fiction we must therefore not only understand the situation in question, but must also be sensitive to (some of the) aesthetic features of the text.

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