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Reading Between the Lines: On Empathy and Fiction

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Abstract

It is not uncommon for the reader of a well-crafted piece of literature to feel as though he is deeply involved in the emotional lives of its characters. Indeed, given the various powerful emotional responses fiction is capable of inducing in us, one might be inclined to assert that the reader empathizes with the characters about whom he reads. Edith Stein would argue that this is an impossibility due to our inability to directly perceive the body of a fictional character (1989). Colin Radford, similarly, claims that our lack of belief in said characters prevents us from actually empathizing with them (1975). This paper will seek to examine whether such experience can truly be termed empathy within the context of the phenomenological tradition. Through analysis of Edmund Husserl's writings on intentionality and the work of Peter Lamarque, this essay argues that it is, in fact, possible to empathize with fictional persons.

Reading Between the Lines: On Empathy and Fiction

It is not uncommon for the reader of a well-crafted piece of literature to feel as though he is deeply involved in the emotional lives of its characters. When the hero succeeds, the reader may feel as though he is sharing in his elation. When the villain torments the protagonist, a sense of pain or rage may arise. If someone in the book experiences a great loss, the reader may perceive that person's anguish, feel for him, and perhaps even cry for him. Indeed, given the various powerful emotional responses fiction is capable of inducing in us, one might be inclined to assert that the reader empathizes with the characters about whom he reads. And at first glance, this statement seems perfectly reasonable—after all, what else would be happening in such situations? However, if we take a step back and try to view the matter from a more objective

standpoint, it becomes clear that the issue is far more complicated than it appears. As Gregory Currie asks, “How is it even logically possible that we respond to fiction in the way we seem to? How, more specifically, is it possible to care about people we don’t believe in?”¹ To take Currie’s logic a step further, do we even truly care for these people we are reading about? Or is what is going on something else entirely? I will argue that experience shows us that, despite some of the more technical difficulties regarding the proposition of empathizing with fictional characters, it is, in fact, possible.

To proceed with such an argument, we must first define precisely what we mean by empathy. Layman’s terms, which often heavily equate empathy with sympathy, understanding, and emotional sharing, will therefore be discarded. As Robert Sinnerbrink notes, “These phenomena... are notoriously contested, with ongoing arguments over their meaning, purpose, and value.”² Instead, we will address the matter using the general phenomenological definition, which is “the experience of another’s consciousness or subjectivity.”³ From the outset, it would seem that such a definition already gives rise to a major objection to the possibility of empathizing with fictional characters. One might hear that the process requires “another’s consciousness” to perceive and think to himself that our question has been answered. Clearly, since the characters in a book do not exist in the first place, it follows that their consciousnesses

¹ Gregory Currie, “The Paradox of Caring: Fiction and Philosophy of the Mind,” in *Emotion and the Arts*, ed. Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 63.

² Robert Sinnerbrink, “Cinempathy: Phenomenology, Cognitivism, and Moving Images,” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 5 (2016): 7, accessed December 4, 2016, http://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol0/iss5/2/.

³ Dermot Moran, “The Problem of Empathy: Lipps, Scheler, Husserl and Stein,” *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 6, no. 16 (2004): 269.

do not exist either. It would seem, therefore, that without an object to experience, we cannot empathize with them.

Before we abandon this case entirely, however, we must turn to Edmund Husserl, whom many consider the founder of phenomenology. While many of Husserl's contemporaries insisted that the intentionality, or directedness, of an experience, was a normal dyadic relationship which required that both the subject and the object of an experience exist, Husserl argued that intentionality was "a special 'relation' that can hold, even if the object doesn't exist; and that can persist even if the object ceases to exist."⁴ Finding it illogical to claim that things such as dragons and unicorns *actually* exist, albeit in the mind—which amounts to the position those who claim intentionality to be a normal dyadic relationship must hold—Husserl instead claimed that the mind can be intentionally directed at an object even if that object did not exist. A dragon, for example, is still an intentional object, but is simply an intentional object that does not exist. To relate this back to the issue with which this essay is concerned, the consciousnesses a reader perceives through a novel's characters can still be intentional objects even if they are nonexistent, and empathy may still be possible.

Having established this potential, it now behooves us to examine the process of empathy. Despite competing interpretations of the concept in the phenomenological tradition, we will look to Edith Stein's analysis, because her account of its structure presents the most direct threat to a case that we can empathize with fictitious persons. For Stein, empathizing with someone inherently requires that we directly perceive that person's body, as noted when she declares that

⁴Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2013), 130.

“empathy deals with grasping what is here and now,”⁵ and evidenced further by the fact that all her examples of empathy involve personal observation, such as “the sadness (she) ‘read(s) in another’s face.’”⁶ For her, this immediate, primordial perception is what allows the other’s feelings to “arise before (us) all at once” and to perceive what would otherwise not be available to comprehension.⁷ Thus, it would seem that written fictional characters are not able to qualify for such a situation, as they clearly have no bodies for one to observe. Even in regard to characters in television shows and movies, what we see onscreen is merely a representation, and therefore insufficient to satisfy Stein’s requirements. Stein makes her disdain for the idea of attributing our emotions for such characters to empathy clear when she marks “feelings acquired by reading” as ones which for which “the primordial valuing is lacking in foundation” and thus, nothing but a trick of our minds, produced by a self-identification with the characters we are observing.⁸

However, this seems somewhat illogical given the aforementioned definition of empathy—a definition which, notably, Stein herself offers.⁹ If empathy is an experience of another’s consciousness, and there exists some window by which we can observe a consciousness directly, one would think that ought not only to qualify as empathy, but perhaps as an even deeper form of empathy. This window, though utterly impossible in reality, may be found rather concretely in

⁵ Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, (Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989), 7.

⁶ Stein, 10.

⁷ Stein, 10.

⁸ Stein, 32.

⁹ Stein, 11.

first person literature, which seeks to represent an experience through the eyes of another. Further, it is also present to some degree in third person literature, whereby one is offered insights into a number of character's minds, minds to which he would not have access if he were a mere observer. Therefore, it appears that written fiction may bypass the condition of bodily presence in Stein's account, as we do not need to see the look on Thomas's face to know he is miserable, but rather know so by virtue of his own thoughts.

Further, Stein's body-based view of empathy would require us to hold that we are unable to empathize with, say, people whose tragedies or triumphs we hear about through any form of media, or even of a close family member or friend whose plight we hear about over phone or through a letter, rather than in person. Neither, but especially not the latter, seems correct. In both cases, one can be presented with significant information, either from the person experiencing the event, or someone related to them, without ever meeting anyone face-to-face.

Admittedly, however, to say that the sort of interaction with fictional characters which I outlined earlier is indeed a "deeper" kind of empathy may be overstating my case. The mind of a fictional character will never, no matter how well written, be as deep or complex of that of real person. And indeed, even I dislike the sound of the suggestion that one might be more capable of empathizing with unreal people than real people. Such a reflection is merely meant to observe that a description of empathy reliant entirely on bodily observation appears incredibly restrictive, especially in cases in which real world individuals are involved.

But even if we grant all this, and continue to entertain the idea that empathy can be had for the unreal person, we must confront the problem that arises from the assertion itself, rather than from its comparison to the arguments of other philosophers. This issue, termed, "problem of

belief,” holds that for one to care for or empathize with someone, one must believe in him, and that anyone aware that he is reading fiction, logically, does not believe in any of the characters he is observing.¹⁰ This is an example of what Glenn A. Hartz calls “generic cognitivism” which holds that “every emotion must be caused by an appropriate belief.”¹¹ Thus, staunch adherents to this concept argue that for one’s feelings towards fictional characters to remain logically consistent, one must reject at least one of the following three premises. “1. I care about (the character), 2. To care about someone, I must believe in him or her, and 3. I do not believe in (the character).”¹² If we are to take all of these premises at face value, the laws of logic do in fact demand we sacrifice one.

In such a case, then, the most obvious point of attack is whether one must truly believe in a thing to care about it. Colin Radford argues in the positive, claiming that “there is no problem in being moved by historical novels or plays” as they “depict and forcibly remind us of the real plights and of the real sufferings of real people,” but to weep over “the fate of Anna Karenina, the plight of Madame Bovary, or the death of Mercutio” is in itself a paradoxical and illogical action.¹³ He does not deny that such things occur, but he sees a deep problem in equating the emotions that arise from true human interactions with those that arise from fiction. As Hartz notes, Radford’s hardline stance betrays in him a sort of “rationalist cognitivism” in which

¹⁰ Currie, 65.

¹¹ Glenn A. Hartz, “How We Can Be Moved by Anna Karenina, Green Slime, and a Red Pony,” *Philosophy* 74, no. 290 (1999): 559.

¹² Currie, 65.

¹³ Colin Radford and Michael Weston, “How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 49 (1975): 69.

“every emotion must” not only “be caused by an appropriate belief,” but must also be “consistent with every belief one holds at the time.”¹⁴ While such a worldview seems clean-cut and attractive, the fact of the matter is that, when viewed from a phenomenological perspective, it simply does not hold. Experience shows us that our beliefs are often inconsistent with a given situation. Each and every one of us can attest to a time in our lives during which our emotions seemed to be playing us against our knowledge. Perhaps you have a nightmare, in which a threatening creature is hiding inside your closet. When you are awoken, you may be quite aware it was merely a dream, but you may still want, and simultaneously fear, to check the closet for the creature. You are certain the creature is fake, but all at once you want to check to assure yourself of its falsity and are held back by your irrational fear of what might happen if you do check.

But are our feelings for fictional characters a mere result of error, a trick of the mind? Gregory Currie argues otherwise. Rather than choosing to reject one of the three premises of the problem of belief, Currie attempts to salvage all three. Noting that “the key to understanding our responses to fictional characters is our response to real people,” he employs a theory of cognitive psychology known as the simulation theory.¹⁵ Simplified, the simulation theory suggest that we are able to comprehend and relate to others’ emotions by linking them to closely comparable past experience and simulating the emotions of that experience within ourselves.¹⁶ We put ourselves in the shoes of the person with whom we are empathizing. While Currie does not raise much

¹⁴ Hartz, 559.

¹⁵ Currie, 66.

¹⁶ Currie, 66.

objection to this in relation to interpersonal interactions, he does, however, argue that in the case of fictional characters, such an explanation is inadequate. This is because, while “(one) empathize(s) with real people’s real situations” he can only “take on roles that are merely imagined,” which is to say, he can only act as though he empathizes.¹⁷ Thus, Currie asserts that in order to account for our feelings towards fictional characters, we must apply the simulation theory in an alternative way. Rather than simulating the characters and their experiences directly, we simulate ourselves as “a hypothetical reader of fact,” who exists in the same world as the characters, would learn about their exploits as real events, and therefore has the potential to truly be emotionally moved by them.¹⁸ Through this lens we are able to empathize with fictional characters, and therefore, to circumvent the problem of belief.

While Currie’s proposal is favorable for my argument, I am nonetheless inclined to disagree with it, because it contains a problem similar to the issue I raised against Radford’s rationalist cognitivism. It does not hold true to everyday experience. When one reads a tragic scene in a novel, he doesn’t pause to remind himself that he must view it through the eyes of a character in that novel’s world before his tears begin to flow. Rather, the tears come immediately and build as he reads. An objection might be raised that Currie intends the simulation process to be a subconscious one, and given this, such worries are irrelevant. Regardless, there is a far simpler and more effective solution to this problem.

This solution can be found in the work of Peter Lamarque who, in his work, “How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?” grapples with the arguments of Kendall Walton. Walton, famed for

¹⁷ Currie, 66.

¹⁸ Currie, 68.

his response to the problem of belief, claims that, just as it is obvious we cannot be physically effected by the occupants of a fictional world, neither can the inhabitants of a fictional world affect us psychologically. As Larmarque notes, “Walton advises against accepting any cross-world interaction, even in the one way psychological cases where it seems to occur.”¹⁹ Thus, when we *seem* to feel for characters, he contends that our perception of them is equivalent to “a game of make-believe,” and that we are only able to react to them in “quasi” emotions.²⁰ While Larmarque recognizes the merits of Walton’s argument, especially in regards to physical interaction between reality and the fictional, he does not see things so starkly. Instead, contrary to Walton, he claims that fictional characters can, in fact, enter our world— not as actual tangible people, but rather, as “mental representations, or ... thought contents characterized by ... descriptions.”²¹ Put simply, the words on the pages of a book allow the created reality to cross over into our own by generating depictions of it in our mind. We thus have the opportunity, “in the real world,” to “psychologically interact with” a fictional one.²²

Larmarque then goes on to claim that, despite intuitions otherwise, “thoughts as representations can be the proper objects of emotional responses,” citing fairly common fears of imaginary creatures such as ghosts, leprechauns, and aliens as examples.²³ While the objects themselves are nonexistent, we still regularly react in genuine fright at the thought of them. He

¹⁹ Peter Larmarque, “How can we fear and pity fictions?,” *British (The) Journal of Aesthetics* London 21, no. 4 (1981): 292.

²⁰ Kendal L. Walton, “Fearing fictions,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 1 (1978): 6-12.

²¹ Larmarque, 293.

²² Larmarque, 292.

²³ Larmarque, 294.

notes further that, in spite of the claims of rationalist cognitivism, such thoughts can induce in us emotional reactions even when the actual situation we find ourselves in does not call for it. As he explains:

I am in no danger at the moment of being mauled by a lion. This is no doubt good reason for saying that it would be absurd and irrational for me at this moment to be afraid of being mauled by a lion. But it is not absurd or irrational, but natural and likely, that I might be frightened here and now by the thought of being mauled, should I bring to mind snarling teeth, thrashing of claws, searing pain, and so on.²⁴

Similarly, it is not unreasonable or paradoxical for us to weep or fume over the thought-content of a miserable fictional character, even if there is no true misery present, because via this thought content, we could reasonably experience the consciousness of said character. We can, therefore, solve the problem of belief because, though we still do not believe in the characters, we have established an object in which we do believe and through which we can have genuine emotional and empathetic reactions.

Larmarque's solution is appealing for a number of reasons. For one, it is, on the whole, much simpler than Currie's and requires less mental gymnastics both to enact and to explain. Further, it is congruent with phenomenological evidence in ways that the previous arguments were not. It is reasonable to claim that we react to fictional characters as thought contents. Clearly, we do not believe them to be real, even as we feel for them. It consequently seems that an explanation akin to Larmarque's is in order, as it accounts for both the imaginary nature of the objects in question and allows for a genuine empathetic response. Further, Larmarque's assertion that we interact with characters and their worlds as thought contents ties directly back to

²⁴ Larmarque, 295.

Husserl's claim that intentionality does not have to be directed at an existent object. Just as we might mentally engage with a dragon despite its unreality, so too can we engage with the consciousnesses of fictional characters. Beyond that, this explanation accounts for the deficiencies in Stein's account of empathy, in that a logic similar to Larmarque's view of how we empathize with fictional characters could be applied to the aforementioned situations in which one learns of someone's plight through remote means. By generating thought content of the person perceived through media, we empathize with him regardless of his bodily proximity.

Thus, while there appear to be complications in regards to the process of empathizing with fictional characters, our instincts concerning our feelings towards them are correct. We can, in fact, empathize with them, although through a slightly different process than that which occurs in the face-to-face encounter. This difference, while notable, is not enough to remove the label of empathy from the interaction. Experience shows us that there are various other circumstances in which we empathize without direct bodily perception of another person.

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Explanatory Note: This page is titled "References" rather than "Bibliography" in order to reflect the Chicago Author-Date citation method I utilized for this paper. The majority of pieces are articles from philosophical journals, though a few are books I had in my possession for the class.