

Section 9

Empathy and Moral Judgement: Kantian Themes and Smithian Approaches

Organizer: Erasmus Mayr (Friedrich-Alexander Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg)

Participants: Remy Debes (University of Memphis), Christel Fricke (University of Oslo), Karsten Stueber (College of Holy Cross)

Abstract:

In recent years, the relation between empathy and morality has been the object of intense discussion. However, this debate has often been bedevilled by a failure to sufficiently keep apart factual questions about moral psychology and metaethical questions about the objectivity and normative authority of moral judgements. Here, we will squarely focus on the latter question. Specifically, we will investigate whether a construal of empathy taking its cue from Adam Smith allows us to articulate a plausible 'middle way' between Kantian constructivism and Humean sentimentalism, which are often seen as the most promising alternatives to a robust moral realism, but face well-known problems of their own.

Titles and Abstracts of the talks

1.

Remy Debes: Respect as Understanding

It has become standard to think that among the criteria of a complete moral theory is an account of respect for persons. However, whereas Kantian approaches have ready answers to this expectation, non-Kantian approaches have proven less satisfying. In this paper I attempt to rectify this. I argue, first, that one way of respecting persons is constituted by understanding the significance of their experiences, from their point of view; and second, that such understanding often is achieved by the kind of empathy Adam Smith articulated in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Ironically, the result is an account of respect that Kantians would struggle to capture.

2.

Christel Fricke: On Adam Smith's Reflective Moral Sentimentalism

When Adam Smith tried to explain the function of empathy in the processes of justifying moral judgements, he was primarily thinking of empathy as a tool for understanding how other people think and feel. For Smith, empathy plays a major role not only in understanding others' emotional reactions, but also in understanding their moral judgements. Sentiment-based moral judgments tend to be partial, which makes them liable to error. Properly understanding another includes understanding the sources of this partiality, while justifying moral judgments is a matter of eliminating the partiality of the underlying sentiments and the beliefs. For this purpose, Smith suggests that we engage in an actual or virtual communication in which empathy plays a major part.

3.

Karsten Stueber: Naturalism and the Normative Authority of the Moral Point of View

Contemporary Kantians are fond of tying the authority of moral judgements to principles that are either supposedly constitutive for rational agency or that are inherent in Strawsonian reactive attitudes characterizing human interpersonal relations. Yet, it is Adam Smith's account of moral judgment that is most easily compatible with the philosophical framework of naturalism. I therefore propose that we should follow Smith in conceiving of the impartial spectator perspective and the principle of impartiality as quasi-a priori commitments of our folk psychological practice of making sense of each other's actions through empathic perspective taking. It is in terms of such commitments that we can explicate the intersubjective validity and objectivity of normative (including moral) reasons.

4.

Erasmus Mayr: Smithian Sympathy, Objectivity and the 'Binding Character' of Morality

While many Kantians believe that the supposedly categorical authority of morality can be explained by a consistency requirement for willing, it has proved notoriously difficult to fill out this idea. As I am going to argue, Smithian empathy can make a crucial contribution to this task in a way which is congenial to Kant's own understanding of moral judgement. What makes empathy particularly well-suited for this is Smith's idea that by evaluating the judgements of others about our own decisions we necessarily commit ourselves to evaluations of these decisions themselves. It is only by complying with basic moral norms that we can maintain consistency between these commitments and our volitional states.