

University of  
**Kent**

**School of Anthropology and  
Conservation**

Conversations on Empathy: an interdisciplinary encounter

Canterbury Cathedral Lodge,  
Kent

May 3-4, 2019



Organisers:

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The concept of empathy has been emerging as a hot topic in both academia and the public sphere. Contemporary works in the cognitive and neuro sciences, developmental and evolutionary psychology and animal ethology have shown how empathy is critical for the development of sociality in humans and nonhumans. Empathy has also received theoretical attention in anthropology, cultural studies and philosophy as a key capacity for constituting one's sense of self and others. Despite this attention, empathy has rarely been addressed in an interdisciplinary way. This workshop aims to initiate such cross-fertilisation by bringing together a group of scholars from a variety of backgrounds who have used different research methodologies and theoretical approaches to study empathy. In particular, the workshop will address the broad question of what empathy is, and how it relates to questions of perception, intersubjectivity and nonhuman life. Through cross-cultural perspectives, the workshop will consider how specific forms of empathy can be developed, hindered or gain salience in different environments. It will also address the question of how empathy towards other-than-humans can be fostered or not within everyday practices and what this particular form of empathy might mean. Emphasizing the affective, cognitive, imaginative and bodily aspects of empathy as it is constituted in practice in a range of different settings, the event proposes to make an original contribution to the social sciences through an interdisciplinary study of empathy.

### **Participants**

Miguel Alexiades (University of Kent)  
Margrethe Bruun Vaage (University of Kent)  
Gregory Currie (University of York)  
Heather Ferguson (University of Kent)  
Jon Mair (University of Kent)  
Francesca Mezzenzana (University of Kent)  
Carolyn Pedwell (University of Kent)  
Daniela Peluso (University of Kent)  
Vasu Reddy (University of Portsmouth)  
Murray Smith (University of Kent)  
Jason Throop (University of California Los Angeles)  
Lena Wimmer (University of Kent)

**Friday 3 May**  
*Cathedral Lodge*

09:15 Reception with tea and biscuits

09:30 Welcome

Discussants: Carolyn Pedwell (University of Kent) and Murray Smith (University of Kent)

9:45 Francesca Mezzenzana (University of Kent)  
Just like humans: similarity, difference and empathy towards nonhumans in the Amazonian rainforest

10:45 Vasu Reddy (University of Portsmouth)  
Why empathy is not the basis of sociality

11:45 Margrethe Bruun Vaage (University of Kent)  
Should we be against empathy? Theoretical implications of engagement with antiheroes in fiction for empathy's role in morality

*Lunch 12:45 -13:45*

13:45 Daniela Peluso (University of Kent)  
The 'rush' of the hunt: empathy and sociality with non-Ese Eja others (Peruvian Amazonia)

14:45 Jason Throop (UCLA)  
Dark and bright empathy: Phenomenological and anthropological Reflections

15:45 Heather Ferguson (University of Kent)  
A Psychological exploration of empathy

*Tea and biscuits 16:45 – 17:15*

17.30 Even Song at the Canterbury Cathedral

18:30 Personal Time to visit Canterbury Historical Centre

19:45 Dinner at the Cathedral Lodge

## Saturday 7 May

9:45-10:00 Reception with tea and biscuits

10:00-11:00 Jon Mair (University of Kent)

One-Body Great Compassion: Benefits and dangers of sharing joy and suffering in humanistic Buddhism

11:00-12:00 Gregory Currie (University of York)

Empathy, morality and literature

12:00 -13:00 - Carolyn Pedwell (University of Kent) and Murray Smith (University of Kent)

Discussion and final remarks

*Lunch 13:00 -13.45*

### **Workshop Format**

Each presentation will be 15-20 minutes followed by a discussant-led conversation. Discussants will alternate per presentation.

## Abstracts

Margrethe Bruun Vaage (University of Kent)

Should we be against empathy? Theoretical implications of engagement with antiheroes in fiction for empathy's role in morality

Empathy is often seen as a virtue: being empathic is equated with being a morally good person, and empathy is seen as a route to morally praiseworthy insights and actions. Recently this view has come under attack from Jesse Prinz and Paul Bloom among others, and it is argued that empathy is fragile, biased and not a trustworthy route to morality. In this paper I concur with critics that empathy should not be seen as a reliable guide to morality. I argue that the ease with which the spectator is made to empathize with morally bad antiheroes demonstrates that empathy is amoral – neither morally good nor morally bad. Low-level empathic experiences, or what I discuss as embodied empathy, can easily lead us astray, and antihero series manipulate feelings of embodied empathy in order to make the spectator root for antiheroes although these characters commit crimes that the very same spectator would normally condemn. Nevertheless, I do not agree with the philosophers who argue against empathy that we should therefore discard empathy – even if we could. In spite of the biases of embodied empathy we can make use of a more cognitively demanding, higher order form of empathy that I label imaginative empathy in order to counteract our own biases and reach a more considered, principally informed view on the antihero and other characters.

Gregory Currie (University of York)

Empathy, morality and literature

There are two opposed traditions in thinking about morality. One, sometimes called “sentimentalism”, seeks to base morality on our empathic feelings for one another. The other insists that we be guided by moral rules and principles. One objection to the rules and principles approach is that it does not do justice to the messy particularity of moral situations; it is said that literary fiction is a good device for increasing moral sensitivity through its focus on the details of human lives. Does literature encourage or refine empathy? Many have thought so, though evidence is not easy to find. I consider the evidence, and some worries we may have about empathy as a moral force and about literature as a driver of empathy.

Heather Ferguson (University of Kent)

### A Psychological exploration of empathy

Empathy is a multidimensional term, with some researchers conceptualising empathy as an affective/emotional response to another's mental state (e.g. Stotland, 1969), while others have viewed it in terms of the cognitive mechanisms that enable us to understand others' perspectives (Dymond, 1949). Contemporary psychological measures of empathy incorporate constructs from both of these dimensions, treating them as distinct but related subscales, thereby providing an overarching and integrated approach to empathy (see Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Davis, 1983). I will describe a range of different cognitive and neuroscientific measures that can provide insights into empathic ability in humans, including self-report, computer-based tasks, eye-tracking and electrophysiological brain recording. I will present data that distinguishes the cognitive mechanisms of emotional recognition, emotional contagion, and cognitive empathy, discuss how these socio-cognitive skills change with advancing age, and consider how social experiences can influence their action (e.g. reading fictional texts).

Jon Mair (University of Kent)

### One-Body Great Compassion: Benefits and dangers of sharing joy and suffering in humanistic Buddhism

A central value in Chinese Buddhism is *ci bei*, usually translated in English as 'compassion'. How does *ci bei* correspond to or differ from 'empathy' as the term is commonly used in English or as it is used by anthropologists? One clue is in the gloss that is sometimes applied to the two characters that make up the word, according to which *ci* is 'great compassion without cause' or unconditional compassion, and *bei* is 'one-body great compassion', based on the understanding that the dualistic distinction between self and other is illusory. The same distinction is echoed in discussions of the two chief virtues of the bodhisattva, ethical models that Chinese Buddhists worship and seek to emulate. Bodhisattvas such as Guanyin are characterised by limitless compassion, but also by perfect wisdom that enables them to see through the illusory nature of existence, including of beings and of suffering itself. The combination is potentially paradoxical, but it is also what makes prudent practice of compassion possible; a degree of detachment may be necessary in order to use stern or fierce means to help suffering beings. I will argue that it is useful to think of *ci bei* as an instance of a general class of empathy concepts, and consider what we might learn about empathy by doing so, including what it might tell us about the empathy/sympathy distinction and its ethical implications, especially in the context of recent work on Chinese ethics.

Francesca Mezzenzana (University of Kent)

Just like humans: similarity, difference and empathy towards nonhumans in the Amazonian rainforest.

Within debates on empathy, it is often assumed that feeling empathy towards nonhumans requires an imaginative effort, which allows a human perceiver to partially grasp “what it might be like to be a nonhuman animal”. While the difference between nonhumans and humans seems insurmountable from the perspective of Western academics, it is not conceived to be so by indigenous people who live in the Amazon, for whom access to the inner experiences of nonhumans seems to be relatively unproblematic. Drawing on fieldwork in the Ecuadorian Amazon among the Runa, this paper explores the ways in which indigenous Runa people manifest empathetic relationships towards animals and contrasts such experiences with Western conceptions of empathy. I will argue that, in order to investigate cross-culturally empathy-like processes towards nonhumans we need first, to pay attention at local understandings of similarity and difference and, secondly, to explore the role played by direct experience and imagination in shaping people’s perception of nonhuman others.

Daniela Peluso (University of Kent)

The ‘rush’ of the hunt: empathy and sociality with non-Ese Eja others (Peruvian Amazonia)

The paper I am developing is about how and when empathy is experienced by or made relevant for Ese Eja youth surrounding hunting. Here I explore research that brings studies of cognition and behaviours related to adrenalin together with ethnographic work on dreams and a series of visual narratives that I have collected on hunting experiences, particularly ‘first hunts’ of large predators, attacks by predators and the capture of hunting ‘children’ (the offspring of the hunted animal). Given ontological underpinnings of human and non-human shared qualities and differences and possibilities for intersubjectivity and transformation, this paper hopes to better understand the extent to which emphatic relationships matter in relation to stress-infused physicality and perception. Throughout, this paper I will explore how the notion of Augenblick (‘the glance of the eye’) can elucidate links between empathy and encounters with non-human in Amazonian cross realities. My hope is to contribute to the interdisciplinary literatures that view empathy as linked to action as well as to engage across disciplines by presenting an additional layer of perspective-taking through an examination of the Amazonian literature.

Vasu Reddy (University of Portsmouth)

Why empathy is not the basis of sociality

We have all experienced moments where another person’s sorrow or injury brings sudden tears to our eyes or where we are infected by another’s joy even when, in either

case, we have no special fondness or special relationship with that other, and the sorrow or joy is not personally relevant. We also have heard of or seen instances of cruel or insensitive actions which shock us and leave us confused about how this could occur between one human and another. Or indeed, between a human and an animal. While empathic feelings might characterise the sudden flashes of being with the other, or the absence of such feelings characterise the cruel actions, I would like to explore the argument that empathy doesn't explain how these phenomena arise or emerge in development, and that perhaps empathy doesn't even capture what is going on in the moment during actions of co-feeling or cruelty. Understanding the roots of what we call empathy lies, I argue, in understanding how we come to see others as persons, as subjects. And the development of an understanding of subjectivity in others comes, not from seeing the other as 'another I', the other as 'like me', but from an openness to an 'other' who is attractive, interesting and sufficiently different for me to engage responsively and dialogically with. I will explore this argument using data from early human infancy.

Jason Throop (UCLA) and Dan Zahavi (University of Copenhagen and University of Oxford)

### Dark and Bright Empathy: Phenomenological and Anthropological Reflections

The aim of our contribution is to clarify the nature of empathy and its role in sociality. Taking issue with a recent proposal by Bubandt and Willerslev, we argue that their conceptualization and definition of empathy is confused, that they fail to distinguish sufficiently clearly between empathy and other forms of social cognition, and that their main claim, that empathy has a dark side to it, and can be used for nefarious purposes, far from being novel, was already recognized by leading empathy theorists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We then revisit and present core ideas from formative writings on empathy found in early phenomenology, we demonstrate the anthropological relevance of these ideas, and argue that phenomenologists such as Husserl, Stein and Scheler develop an account of the link between empathy, alterity and sociality that is considerably more refined and sophisticated than anything offered by Bubandt and Willerslev. In the final part of the paper, we engage with Geertz' highly influential claim that anthropologists can safely leave empathy behind and argue that empathy plays such a fundamental role in the fabric of social life that its use in ethnographic research is not only permissible, but unavoidable