
The Puzzle of Group Empathy

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Résumé

Recent work on empathy has drawn attention to a range of important political functions that empathy can play in democracy. Democratic theorists and political epistemologists have argued that empathy with political outgroups can help reduce political polarization (Read 2022), facilitate a distinctive kind of understanding (Hannon 2020), and generally contribute to deliberative democracy (Goodin 2003). In order for empathy to play these political roles, it seems like it must be possible to empathize with social groups. However, philosophers and psychological writing on empathy typically conceive of empathy as a *dyadic* phenomenon which takes place between an individual empathizer and an individual target person whose perspective they empathize with. This generates a problem for philosophers who argue that empathy can play an important political role: is it possible to genuinely empathize with groups? If so, how should we make sense of this idea? If not, how can we vindicate the important political functions of empathy without appealing to group empathy? In this paper, we develop and explore the options available to grappling with this puzzle. We suggest that the most straightforward adaption of empathy to groups—empathizing with group agents—comes with controversial metaphysical commitments and does not account for some important cases of group empathy. However, we also argue that simply rejecting group empathy makes it difficult to vindicate empathy's political functions. We then explore some alternative, less metaphysically loaded, but more cognitively complex, ways to make sense of group empathy: 1) empathy with representative members of groups; 2) empathy with hypothetical agents who we take to be representative of a group; and 3) empathy with perspectives (Camp 2017) that are characteristic of groups. We argue, in general, that these proposals offer promising ways to make sense of group empathy and to defend empathy's political roles.

References

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Mots-Clés: Empathy, Group Agency, Democracy, Perspective

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