

ALESSANDRO GIOVANNELLI

In Sympathy with Narrative Characters

Sympathetic responses to characters are a pervasive form of narrative engagement, and they contribute importantly to what makes perceiving a narrative a rewarding experience. Yet, the notion of sympathy has received relatively little attention in contemporary philosophy of art, especially when compared to the lively debates surrounding the notion of empathy.¹ Here, I propose an analysis of sympathy that addresses the notion's complex structure, one that enjoys several explanatory advantages in understanding our responses to others. Sympathy will prove to be a multifaceted phenomenon, one deserving an even more thorough investigation than offered here. However, it will amount to progress if my analysis succeeds in isolating a paradigmatic mechanism of engagement—call it “paradigmatic sympathy” or “sympathy proper” or, for short, “sympathy”—such that a number of responses that are commonly called “sympathetic” can be understood as being in various ways akin to it.

My topic is sympathy as a broad mechanism of one's engagement with another, hereafter also the “target” of the response, where the other is responded to with favor (while we can dub *antipathy* the mechanism by which one responds to another's experience and situation with *disfavor*).² It is not sympathy as an emotion, as when the term is used interchangeably with such terms as ‘pity,’ ‘sorrow,’ ‘tenderness,’ and so forth. Sympathetic responders in the sense relevant here may feel any one of a wide range of emotions, depending on the situation affecting their target: not just pity, but also happiness, anger, disappointment, and so forth. Hence, I submit, we respond sympathetically not just when we pity Desdemona as she tries in vain to persuade Othello of her loyalty and love, but also when we feel happy for

Superman as he succeeds in reviving Lois Lane, or when we feel a complex entanglement of emotions for Willy Loman as he ends his life. Largely for this reason, what follows will include little critique of other accounts, since most of them look at sympathy as an emotion or a set of emotions. By contrast, my proposal on sympathy as a mechanism of engagement, if successful, will provide us with a criterion to identify a wide range of responses as sympathetic.³

I. SYMPATHY AND EMPATHY

Typically, sympathy is discussed by contrasting it to empathy, and indeed an understanding of the former notion can start from pointing out the ways in which it differs from the latter. As a first approximation to such an understanding, notice that, while empathy roughly amounts to feeling *with* another, sympathy amounts to feeling *for* him or her.⁴ My niece fears the dentist but I do not fear him, at least do not fear him for myself. Rather, I am worried for my niece. A mother is grieving for the loss of her child but I do not grieve; I pity her. The new graduate is joyful and happy and I am happy too, but for her, not for myself; and so forth. Or so it seems.

Undoubtedly, empathy and sympathy are different psychological phenomena and different modes of engagement with narrative characters. They differ from each other for the emotional responses they prompt and, related, for their relationship to action. Empathy seems to be the paradigm of a self-oriented response: roughly, when empathizing with someone, I vicariously experience his or her mental states, in a sense as if they were mine.⁵ Sympathy, instead, seems to

be paradigmatically other oriented. Responding sympathetically seems to emphasize the other's experiences and situation, often perceived as different from one's own. Famously, Thomas Hobbes considered it to be constitutive of "pity" (what he also refers to as "compassion" or "fellow feeling") that one's own situation be perceived as different from the target's.⁶ Sometimes, sympathizing with someone may be considered a condescending response partly because the sympathizer is in a better situation than the target and likely perceives oneself as being so.⁷ On the other hand, sympathizing with someone who is better off than we are—responding favorably to his joy, for example—may become part of a mixed response to a fortune that did not hit us, and be mixed, for example, with envy or self-commiseration. Further, in itself, empathy has no relationship to desire; hence it is in principle compatible with any attitude toward the person we empathize with. My understanding the athlete's joy from her point of view can make me feel happy for her or, in contrast, make me feel envious of her victory. Or, of course, I can be indifferent to the matter.⁸ Paradigmatically, a sadist's pleasure in the pain he procures to his victim may even be enhanced by the capacity of imagining, empathically, the victim's pain and fear. By contrast, one of the first things to be noticed about sympathy is that sympathizing with someone involves a favorable attitude toward the other, a desire, *ceteris paribus*, that the other persist in a positive situation or be freed of a negative one.

All the above is, I think, quite uncontroversial. Of course, a much more precise account of empathy could be provided, and such an account might yield, by contrasting sympathy to empathy, additional insights into the latter of the two notions as well. Yet, proceeding just by contrasting empathy to sympathy not only necessarily produces an incomplete account of either notion, but it also suggests a misleading account. Indeed, the contrast between these two mechanisms of emotional participation risks being overemphasized, leading to overlooking the conceptual structure of sympathy and its intimate relationship with empathy.⁹

Rather than contrasting empathy to sympathy, I defend a view that, yes, differentiates between them, but also acknowledges their intimate relation. In particular, I claim that, paradigmatically, sympathetic responses are best understood as entailing empathy as a constitutive component. Accordingly, in the above examples, when I worry

for my fearful niece or pity the grieving woman or am happy for the graduate, often, though not always, I am also, in a sense, fearful, grieving, or happy.¹⁰ More specifically, I propose that sympathy be understood as a mechanism of one's engagement with another comprising (a) some form of empathic engagement with the target and (b) a concern for him or her, in a sense to be specified. The explanation and defense of my definition must then be twofold: it must address, first, the empathy component and, second, the concern component. I look at the two issues in turn.

II. EMPATHY AS A COMPONENT OF SYMPATHY

Later in this section, I will distinguish between two different forms of response that can be called empathic, hence two different ways in which empathy can contribute to giving rise to a sympathetic response. Before doing that, however, I need to defend the claim that an empathic component, however characterized, is indeed necessary to sympathy, for, of the claims I make, that is likely the one that will be considered most controversial. For the time being, then, let us just think of empathy as the vicarious experience, involving the imagination, of another's experience. The fact is that, no matter how empathy is understood, claiming that it is a necessary component of sympathy seems to clash against a battery of counterexamples.

Certainly not all instances of favorable responses to another's experience or situation entail empathy. We may respond with favor to others and yet fail vicariously to have, in any sense, their experiences. This may happen in a number of different ways. We may be *unable* to represent to ourselves the target's experience, for instance when that is too removed from the range of our own ordinary experiences. A man may be joyful for the woman who just gave birth to their child, while being unable, even when he tries, fully to understand her emotions from her perspective. Analogously, a man sitting at a performance of the *Vagina Monologues* may very well have all the appropriate "sympathetic" responses, and yet without in some cases being able to represent to himself the relevant experiences. Other times, we may be *disinterested* in representing the other's experience to ourselves. When, in perceiving a narrative, we are presented with the suffering of positive characters who are not much at the center of

the story, we may respond in their favor, in some sense wishing them well, yet without empathically representing their experiences to us.¹¹ Somewhat analogously, we may say that we sympathize with cancer victims or with those who suffer from natural disasters without attempting vicariously to have their experiences. There may be experiences we simply do not want to imagine, albeit we are sympathetic to those who suffer them. Moreover, there are favorable responses toward targets that are too indefinite or generic to support any form of empathic engagement.

Since there are so many responses that are commonly called “sympathetic” and yet appear not to include empathy in any sense, why am I singling out, as I do, what seems to be at best just *one* form of sympathetic response? Why claim for it a sort of theoretical primacy and a somewhat privileged place in explaining narrative engagement? In fact, there are several reasons to do so, and I will devote most of this section to presenting them and their implications to an understanding of narrative engagement. At the onset, let us just note that the mere fact that the same terminology is ordinarily used to designate a range of responses, although certainly not a sufficient reason to consider such responses as instances of the same phenomenon, suggests that the differences between such responses be investigated in light of their possible kinship. Such a kinship, I claim, is best elucidated by reference to what I suggest is the paradigm of sympathy: roughly, empathy plus concern.

1. A first, general reason to acknowledge the empathic component of sympathy has to do with the value commonly attributed to sympathetic responses. Being able to respond sympathetically to others reflects well on us not just because it shows that we are capable of being concerned for others, but also because it shows us as sensitive to other people’s experiences. Being sensitive here seems to have something quite important to do with our capacity of feeling, if vicariously, what others feel, something that merely conceiving of others’ situations as good or bad for them may fail to encompass. While we may, as suggested, respond in a concerned way to all sorts of people and situations, when we respond to someone whose experience we can more intimately connect to, and are able to picture that person’s experience in our imagination, our engagement seems

deeper and perhaps more sincere.¹² Compare this to those instances when we are on the recipient’s side of sympathy. It is desirable to receive such a concerned response as grounded in the sympathizer’s feeling, if vicariously, what we feel, in his or her understanding our situation from within, rather than as grounded in the mere judgment that our situation is good or bad, as the case may be.¹³ If the situation is a negative one, the response seems less likely to be condescending; if the situation is a positive one, the response seems less likely to be mixed with envy or self-commiseration. The difference may have to do with two different ways of “perceiving” a situation affecting someone: a purely cognitive perception—an understanding *that* the other, say, is suffering—and an experiential or quasi-experiential perception—an understanding achieved through the recognition of what the other’s suffering may be like.¹⁴

All of this has a direct bearing on understanding our engagement with narratives, in at least three ways. First, it suggests that the distinction between a narrative’s protagonists and other characters has to do not just with the amount of concern we have for the former but not for the latter, but also with the quality of the concern we have and feel, a concern that is modified and often prompted by the empathic representation of the characters’ experiences.¹⁵ We are concerned for the protagonist in a special way, in the way we are when we know what it must be like for someone to undergo the experiences he or she is having.¹⁶ Second, and related, the sympathetic responses we have for the protagonists are something we value in a special way. That is, we value, other things being equal, a narrative that brings us to sympathize with characters the experiences of whom we can represent to ourselves from their point of view. Consider our reactions to real bits of news. We may be embarrassed by our lack of a deep response to the mere reporting of a major disaster, and may for that reason welcome the documentary that, by telling us the story of some of the victims, makes us sympathize with them in a fuller way.¹⁷ Third, the worries we have with respect to narratives that seem to manipulate us toward sentimentality partly are to be explained as grounded in the value we attribute to the type of response that I am arguing is the paradigm of sympathy.

2. A second reason to define sympathy as entailing empathic engagement has to do with how such an account can handle precisely those instances that would appear to be counterexamples to it. Indeed, my account may be thought to be too narrow, unable to explain a number of genuinely sympathetic responses with respect to people with whom, however, we are not empathizing. There are instances of what can be called *anticipatory sympathy*. In Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), the wife of a man who has just killed their children before committing suicide is intercepted by the police on her way home in order to prepare her for the tragic news. Though we are not shown the moment the woman learns what happened, we already sympathize with her, and quite powerfully so. There are also instances of what could be called *conditional sympathy*, directed at people or characters who will never know of a situation affecting them. A character, for instance, may be shielded from information crucial to her situation, hence lack the corresponding experience, and yet the narrative perceivers be provided with such information, and sympathize accordingly. (I discuss a specific example below.) Finally, there are instances of what we could call *sympathy by proxy* (*proxy sympathy* for short), namely, when we sympathize for someone on the grounds of an assessment of the situation affecting him or her that is different from the assessment the person in question gives. For instance, we can sympathize with someone who has put himself in an embarrassing situation even if he thinks there is nothing embarrassing in what he has done. (Again, I discuss a specific example below.)

These sorts of cases not only may appear to be difficult for my account, showing that sympathy does *not* entail empathy, but they also suggest alternative accounts, ones not based on the target's experience.¹⁸ Susan Feagin, for instance, claims that sympathy "requires having feelings or emotions that are in concert with the *interests* or *desires* the sympathizer (justifiably) attributes to the protagonist" (emphasis added).¹⁹ By reference to the protagonist's interests and desires, Feagin explains instances of what I have called anticipatory and conditional sympathy, with regard to Carlos Fuentes's short story, "The Cost of Living." Feagin claims to sympathize with the character Ana Rentería

even before the woman knows of her husband's violent death, in consideration of "the implications [the event] has for her—sick and unable to work, with no income and even unable to fix food for herself."²⁰ Feagin also claims to feel sympathy for Ana, "in the form of consternation and exasperation," when her husband, Salvador, while his wife is lying sick in bed, goes out initially to seek extra work but then ends up spending their last money on some girl he meets.²¹ Even if Ana has no idea of what is happening, we respond sympathetically, in Feagin's view, because "Salvador's behavior is contrary to her interests and desires."²² Feagin explains what I call sympathy by proxy as well, although by referring this time to the target's interests only, hence separating them from the target's desires. She claims that we can respond sympathetically to a character even because *we* "attribute certain interests to the character that the character doesn't recognize."²³ With regard to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Feagin claims: "I worry that Dorothea will give into Casaubon's demands, and I want her to resist them, even though she herself is simply trying to decide what is morally the most admirable thing to do."²⁴

However, neither anticipatory nor conditional nor proxy sympathy present real problems for my account; nor do they show that sympathy is better conceived of as a response to a situation affecting a target's desires or interests. In fact, in all the above instances the response can be easily explained by reference to the target's experience: a future experience, a possible experience, or an experience we think the target should have. The fact is that we can empathize with the experiences of future or possible stages of a person. When we sympathize with the wife in *La Dolce Vita*, we anticipate what it will be like for her to realize that her children have been killed by her own suicidal husband. Likewise, with respect to Ana in "The Cost of Living," we imagine her learning of her husband's death and anticipate her subsequent sufferings.

Conditional sympathy is an especially interesting case. It is explained in my account by reference to a counterfactual experience: for instance, what Ana would feel if she knew how her husband has been spending their last money. This is perfectly mirrored by ordinary

instances of sympathy, for example, toward the deceased. We sympathetically pity the deceased father, knowing how disappointing it would have been for him to see his descendants fail to do the little that was necessary to complete his lifetime project. We are sympathetically happy thinking of the happiness the would-be grandmother would have felt, had she had the chance of seeing the long-desired first grandchild. We can empathize with the dead father and grandmother by reference to the emotional experiences they would have, were they still living. On the other hand, the fact that the sympathetic response targets a possible stage of the person that will never in fact be realized explains the responses' intensity and quality. We pity the father but are also glad that he, after all, did not have to witness his descendants' behavior; we are happy for the would-be grandmother, though with a good amount of melancholy. Such effects on the intensity and quality of our sympathetic responses once again prove the importance of the empathic component to sympathy: imagining an experience that we know will never take place is different from imagining an experience that we know actually occurred.

Naturally, sympathy by proxy must be explained with respect to the experience the target should have, rather than to what the target will have or could have had. Yet, such an experience is still one that we can imaginatively represent to ourselves. Again, that the target does not in fact have the experience importantly bears on our response. It allows, for instance, for a certain way of having mixed feelings with respect to a character. Reading *Middlemarch*, we may feel concern for Dorothea the way Feagin suggests, but partly because we represent to ourselves the experience of Dorothea's situation that she should have; yet, we may also feel, again sympathetically, the rather different response that comprises an empathic representation of the experience Dorothea actually has. The coexistence of these two different sympathetic responses—one grounded in the experience the character ought to have, one in the experience she does have—is perhaps what colors in complex ways our engagement with this narrative character.

In general, with anticipatory, conditional, and proxy sympathy alike, our representing to

ourselves, empathically that is, the relevant experience is done in full awareness that the target's actual experience is a different one. As somewhat already seen above, that explains how our sympathy may be mixed and combined with other responses. Further, to exemplify, the proposed account explains how sympathy for a character with respect to experiences she will presumably undergo may be combined with suspense, as in my example from *La Dolce Vita*. It also explains how the sympathy for the unaware Ana in "The Cost of Living" may be mitigated, or be made worse, as the case may be, by the contrast with her actual experiential state.²⁵ It contributes to explain, finally, how we may sympathize for someone who does not really much care for the situation he is in, but our response, again, may be somewhat mixed or lessened in intensity.²⁶

It is worth noting how a characterization of sympathy that does not refer to the target's experience, but refers just to such things as the target's interests and desires, is in fact less adequate to account for our responses in anticipatory, conditional, or proxy sympathy. Such an account seems unable to explain the differences in sympathetic response between instances when the target has the relevant experiences and instances when the target does not have them, as well as between when the target does not *yet* have such experiences, will *never* have them, and *should* have them. Related, the account seems to be unable to explain the possible changes in intensity and quality of the sympathetic response when we are given the opportunity of witnessing the target having the relevant experiences. For, according to the non-experiential account, a sympathizer's attribution to a target of the relevant interests and (at least in cases of anticipatory and conditional sympathy) desires does not depend on the target's being aware of them. Indeed, the non-experiential account may face a dilemma: either to hold that the target's relevant interests and desires are unchanged by the target's awareness (or lack thereof) of them, and hence falsely predict that the sympathizer's response will also be unchanged, or to admit that the target's interests and desires are changed by such an awareness, and that the sympathizer's responses are different because of that, and hence have to meet the burden of explaining how the

change in the sympathizer's responses does not ultimately depend on his or her imagining the target's experiences.

It is interesting to note how Feagin herself may have a somewhat hidden reference to an empathic component of sympathy. She analyzes sympathy as the response given by virtue of attributing to the target interests and desires that the sympathizer makes his or her own.²⁷

Yet, making a set of interests and desires *one's own* may very well lead to feeling, vicariously, what the target will, would, or should feel, as my account maintains.

3. The final reason to prefer an account of sympathy as entailing empathy has to do with the causal connection that is reasonable to presume exists between the two. Although the present investigation is not about the causal mechanisms of sympathy, it is not a far-fetched hypothesis—and is one that finds, if nothing else, confirmation in shared, ordinary experience—that empathizing often leads to sympathizing. Without denying what I have suggested (in Section I), namely, that empathy is compatible with hostile and indifferent attitudes, we can claim that, often enough, representing to oneself, in imagination, another's experience leads to sympathizing with him or her.²⁸

Without aiming at a complete analysis of empathy, one important distinction must, finally, be introduced. Certainly, the range of mechanisms of response that could be called empathic is wide, running the gamut from what is sometimes called "emotional contagion" (or, as I would prefer to say, *affective mimicry*)—that is, the response to another's manifestation of an affective state (typically by facial or bodily movement) with a mirroring affective state—to various forms of perspective taking. Here, it is best to confine the term to those forms of engagement that are mediated, or constituted by, some form of imagination.²⁹ Yet, of empathy conceived of imaginatively, there are still at least two forms. Let us distinguish between (1) imagining a situation from the target's point of view as the empathizer would live it and (2) imagining it as the target lives it or would live it.³⁰ In both cases, the perspective imagined comprises the relevant—relevant to the situation, that is—cognitive, evaluative, and conative framework. And, in both cases, such a framework is *assigned* to the target. Although empathy as per (2) has a

prima facie stronger claim to be what contributes to paradigmatic sympathy, there is no reason not to be inclusive here. Hence, I suggest that we consider the former, too, of these two imaginative projects as apt to constitute sympathy.³¹

III. THE CONCERN COMPONENT OF SYMPATHY

While the claim that sympathy entails empathy may be perceived as controversial, hence my somewhat extended defense of that claim in the previous section, there is no real controversy in claiming that sympathy entails some form of concern for the other.³² The real question, rather, is how best to understand such a concern component. In this section, I propose an understanding of concern as amounting to the *adoption*, in imagination, of the target's relevant goals (or of goals that are suitably congruent with the target's). In investigating the concern component of sympathy, it is important to keep in mind sympathy's connection to action, hence its connection to desire. The imaginative adoption of the target's goals, I claim, is the notion best suited to do the job here. In particular, I will show how it is the notion that best explains the specific form of desire sympathy entails and the specific connection to action that is necessary for a response to be sympathetic.

In a nutshell, I analyze concern, like empathy, as yet another form of perspective taking. A sympathizer is someone who, in addition to taking on in imagination, so to speak, the target's experience, also takes on, in imagination, the target's relevant goals (or some suitably congruent goals). Accordingly, if my account is correct, when sympathizing with someone, we engage our imagination (at least) twice: to empathize with the target and to adopt his or her goals. In this sense, I submit, sympathy can indeed be referred to as some sort of "super-empathy."³³

Upon investigation, the complexity of sympathy shows a certain degree of simplicity. When we sympathize with someone, I have claimed, we first of all empathize with him or her. That is, we represent to ourselves the target's situation either as it would appear to ourselves, were we in the target's place, or as it appears to the target. *Either* way, I have suggested, the empathic response assigns a cognitive, evaluative, and conative framework to the target. It follows that, as we empathize with someone, we imaginatively represent to ourselves,

among other things, some of the target's evaluations and desires with respect to the situation. When our response is a sympathetic one, I submit, something additional happens: we go beyond the mere representation of the target's evaluations and desires, by *adopting them as our own*. According to my account, then, sympathy entails a self-referential element, one needed to explain properly sympathy's connection to action, an aspect of my account that I further spell out in what follows.

The analysis of concern as the adoption of the target's relevant goals is best explained and defended by pointing to the inadequacy of alternative explanations. I address two such alternatives: concern as the endorsement of the target's relevant goals and concern as caring for the target. I begin with endorsement.

One might think that sympathizing with someone simply entails, in addition to empathy, the endorsement of the target's goals. Indeed, there is a sense in which endorsing the target's relevant goals is necessary to sympathy, although, as I will clarify, the amount of endorsement may be quite minimal. Yet, certainly endorsing the target's goals, conjoined to empathic engagement, is not sufficient to sympathy. This is easy to see by looking at instances of personal memory. When remembering something that affected me, say, negatively, I typically endorse my relevant goals at the time, for example, that my pain disappear. Yet, not in every such case do I thereby sympathize with myself. Not always, for instance, do I pity myself for the pain I suffered. It seems that endorsing the target's goals, even when conjoined to the empathic representation of the target's experience, is missing the first-person involvement that sympathy requires: a focus on the target's goals, an experience, if a vicarious one, of the relevant evaluative framework as one's own. In the example mentioned, I may endorse my goals back at the time of the experience I am remembering, but simply in the sense that I approve my wanting, back then, the experience to stop. Today, I may be neutral with respect to that experience. I may not, then, imagine desiring that experience to stop. Indeed, it may make no sense for me now to desire, or even imagine to desire, for that experience to stop. The event may simply be too remote and too removed from my current concerns. Or I might have reasons not to pity myself for it. While I have no reasons not to endorse my

goals back then—I still, for instance, believe I did not deserve the pain I suffered—I may have reasons not to imagine desiring those goals realized: self-pity may not be a noble response for me now, for any one of a number of possible reasons.³⁴ The fact is that a response takes the form of self-pity only if something more than endorsement of my goals is part of the response, something like the occurrent, though imaginative, adoption of such goals.

What does such an adoption involve, that mere endorsement fails to provide? It adds, I maintain, the active *desire* of seeing those goals realized. Desires are connected to action and they seem to function as indicators of utility for the person having the desire: a desire for *x* seems to be a reason to get *x*, and desiring *x* seems to imply that *x* is perceived as good or useful to get for the person who has the desire.³⁵ Yet, sympathy's connection to action, and the nature of the desires entailed by sympathetic responses, must be properly conceived. The desires that a sympathetic responder must have need not be the same as the desires the target has. The woman grieving for the death of her child may desire to die, so that her pain can disappear; I, instead, may desire, sympathetically, only that her pain be alleviated.

Nor do the desires entailed by sympathy need to be "desires to do" (*desires-to* for short) but, rather, they may just be "desires that" (*desires-that*), for example, that the target's situation be ameliorated (or not worsened).³⁶ Hence, a sympathizer need not have a motivation to act, not even under the *ceteris paribus* proviso. To have sympathy, it is sufficient that the sympathizer has the appropriate desire-that with regard to the relevant situation.

This is not to deny, of course, that typically sympathizers will develop motivations to act, that is, *desires-to*. Nor is it to deny what is likely true, namely, that the presence of a desire-that of the relevant kind puts pressure on the sympathizer to develop an actual motivation, one that would prompt him or her, other things being equal, to help the target. Yet, in itself, I submit, an appropriate desire-that with respect to a target's situation is sufficient to qualify a response as sympathetic.³⁷

That sympathy entails the adoption of the other person's relevant goals, hence that it may often require trading our own attitudes with respect to a situation for those we assign to the person with whom we sympathize, corresponds well to recent empirical research. This research shows

how sympathetic responses greatly diminish when the sympathizers know that the target has decided not to care about the pain affecting him or her.³⁸

Further, that in order to sympathize we must conform ourselves, so to speak, to the other's objectives makes room for possible degrees of *resistance* in adopting those objectives. Some goals are just too alien for us fully to sympathize with their owner. Sympathizing with a masochist at the moment when she seeks experiences I would in any way avoid may be difficult mainly because of a difficulty, for me, of assuming the masochist's perspective on her pain, hence of adopting her goals with respect to her pain. Further, our adopting another's relevant goals is subject to normative constraints, some of which are moral, and it is psychologically so perceived. When an emotional reaction seems to us inappropriate, as the sadist's joy at another's pain, we are unlikely in normal circumstances to sympathize. When a response seems to us to be excessively strong or excessively weak, given the circumstances, then we may sympathize at a lower degree than when the reaction looks appropriate to us. Here, rather than bringing easy-to-find narrative examples, it is worth noting how this claim matches ordinary experience: I surely sympathize with my father when he worries about his upcoming surgery, but I can also be annoyed by his worrying excessively about what is, after all, minor surgery.³⁹

Sometimes, our resistance derives from a sense of lack of appropriateness, so to speak, not of the response to the situation but of the situation itself. Our sympathy may be attenuated by the persuasion that, say, the pain suffered by the other is something he deserves, such as the pain caused by a just punishment. Or sympathy may fail to be prompted altogether when we disapprove of what, say, brought about the other's happiness, for example, when we witness the happiness of the developer who finally succeeded in getting permission to build a mansion inside a natural reserve. Or, more trivially, when the good fortune touches someone who has already been blessed by good luck, we may have difficulties sympathizing with the happy person. The sense of injustice does not always have noble roots. We may have difficulties sympathizing with someone who wins the lottery on her first try simply because we have been unsuccessful for years. Or we may fail to sympathize simply because it was *he* and not *we* who won.

On the other hand, my characterization of sympathy also includes elements that can help explain how sympathizing with people or, for that matter, with fictional characters, can be relatively easy, in spite of the differences between our value system and the target's. One such element is the above-mentioned nonmotivational force of the desires that entailed by sympathetic responses. Sympathizing with a target does not as such commit one to any action. The other element is the qualification for which sympathizing only requires the adoption of the target's *relevant* goals. With sympathy, as in fact with antipathy, the goals imaginatively adopted, or rejected, are only those relevant to the state of mind empathically represented. By no means does sympathizing with someone, nor does responding to him or her antipathetically, involve adopting or rejecting that person's entire set of goals, not even those relevant to the situation. Much more limitedly, when we sympathize with, say, someone in pain, we must adopt that person's objectives with respect to *that* occurrent emotional state, and thus typically share his or her desire to have the pain disappear. Overall, then, sympathizing can be shown to be, in most cases, a relatively easy matter. It may be easy for me to be happy for the fans of the popular singer who are thrilled by seeing him, with no need for me to adopt, in imagination, the fans' overall set of goals or objectives, not even limited to what is relevant to the situation, the goals that bring them, for instance, to spend time and money to attend the meetings of the fans' club. It may be sufficient that I adopt their goal of remaining in a state of joyful, shared excitement. Analogously, for antipathy: I may be annoyed by a mother's excessive and "cheesy" joy for her son's accomplishments at school, and ultimately, antipathetically, desire that some of that joy disappear, yet without desiring that the entire set of goals that person has with respect to her son's school performance fall apart.⁴⁰ Thus, it should not be surprising if, especially when dealing with fictions, we happen to be happy for the villain's joy in having escaped from jail, or happen to pity him when he is caught by the police, responses that might both be a bit embarrassing to have.

The above contributes to explain how narrative authors have at their disposal a range of possibilities to prompt or hinder our sympathetic responses, as well as many ways in which they can fail in their intents. Indeed, by no means does

sympathy, its being prompted or hindered, depend solely on one's personal persuasions. In perceiving a narrative, we may fail to sympathize with a positive character, or may sympathize with an evil one, largely based on how the narrative portrays the character.⁴¹

Whatever the mechanisms behind them, these rather common facts suggest an important hypothesis, that perhaps not every time we adopt another's goals, or for that matter reject them, do we do it out of a full or "thick" endorsement, or rejection, of such goals. Although, for instance, we may sympathize with the villain for having escaped, we may still fail to endorse the villain's overall evaluative system, which includes not only his desire for freedom but also his views on the lives of others as having little or no worth. In this sense, then, the endorsement of the relevant goals need not be full, for a full endorsement of the villain's goal of remaining in the state of joy that freedom gives him would also require endorsing the evaluative system his joy is located in. It is partly for this reason that the adoption of the target's relevant goals ought not to be conflated with the more holistic notion of *caring*.⁴²

Part of the problem with the notion of caring is its vagueness. Hence, unless the notion is somehow qualified, it is easily shown not to be sufficient to sympathetic concern. A psychotherapist can certainly be described as someone who, in some sense of the term, *cares* for her patients. Further, a psychotherapist is also someone who, we should hope, at least sometimes can empathize with her patients, properly imagining their experiences. Nonetheless, a psychotherapist is not thereby someone who necessarily sympathizes with her patients; indeed, it may be incompatible with her profession that she ever does that.

It seems that any qualification of the notion of caring apt to respond to examples of this sort will have to appeal to some form of perspective taking, as according to the account I have proposed. In any event, caring, no matter how qualified, is also shown not to be necessary to the notion of sympathetic concern. Take someone like Heinrich Himmler as he is famously described by Jonathan Bennett: firmly believing in the rightness of the Nazi cause and yet still capable of (and indeed affected by) sympathetic feelings for the very Jews he was contributing to the extermination of.⁴³ Speaking of Himmler as caring for his victims, in any sense of the term, seems completely

counterintuitive. This might just be a matter of not departing too much from ordinary language, and hence of resisting the paradoxical claim that the slaughterer may *care* for his victim.⁴⁴ Or it may be that the notion of caring involves a broader and less distinct embracing of the target's goals. By contrast, I am claiming that Bennett's Himmler *could* adopt his victims' relevant goals (say, the goal of surviving, that of having a family, that of suffering no physical pain) and hence sympathize with them. Since my analysis is in terms of desires-that, not of desires-to, it can make sense of how a sympathetic response may be accompanied by no motivation to action at all, hence no motivation for Himmler to act in favor of his victims. Moreover, to the extent that Himmler is described as suffering from physical afflictions deriving precisely from his sympathetic feelings for his victims, and hence might after all be attributed desires to help them (desires-to), my analysis has the resources to account for that hypothesis as well. The adoption of the target's goals can be so selective, and may entail such a minimal endorsement of those goals, that the resulting desires to do can coexist, if with tension, with the other desires-to, those for the "final solution" that Himmler had. If it were possible to realize the final solution by sending all the Jews to Mars, or by magically transforming them into non-Jews, and so forth, Himmler, I suggest, would have presumably preferred not to kill them. Those are desires, however, that, I suspect, someone *caring* for another person could not have, for they are compatible with an almost complete denial of the system of values the person's goals are part of.

In sum, the concern that is essential to sympathy is best analyzed as amounting to the adoption of the target's relevant goals, and such an adoption as entailing desires of the desire-that sort that are congruent with the target's desires and goals. Of course, with respect to fictional narratives, these desires are, to use Gregory Currie's phrase, "in the scope of an imagining."⁴⁵ Yet, this is an area where continuity over discontinuity between responses to reality and fiction is to be emphasized. After all, the desires the sympathetic responder has are represented to oneself thanks to the imagination, for real and fictional targets alike. Moreover, I suggest, the adoption of the relevant goals occurs in the imagination, again, for real targets as for fictional ones. In the two sorts of instances, the imagination plays a role. Once a desire-to arises—what is not essential to sympathy, I have been

claiming—then it is especially relevant that, with respect to fictional targets, the desire be strictly within the scope of the fiction, of the imagining.

Indeed, there are plenty of cases involving real targets when it is not clear whether the desires-to are any more outside the scope of the imagining. With respect to events from the past, for instance, we are as disconnected from the possibility of action as with respect to fictional events.⁴⁶ Likewise, there may often be instances of conditional sympathy where no possible action is at stake. Moreover, anticipatory sympathy may sometimes address a situation so far ahead of us that we really do not know whether our desires will have changed by the time they can be realized.

IV. CONCLUSION

Sympathy as a mechanism of engagement with others *generates* emotions. It also *qualifies* those emotions as sympathetic, where the qualification partly has to do with the emotion's formal object—an emotion is sympathetic only when it has another's experience and relevant goals as its focus—and with the emotion's etiology—an emotion is sympathetic only when it arises from the process of empathizing with another and taking on, in imagination, his or her relevant goals. Such an account of sympathy has several explanatory advantages for a theory of narrative engagement, many of which I have tried to show throughout. The many ways by which narrative perceivers may be brought to respond sympathetically or antipathetically to characters, and the many psychological and normative dimensions of this important aspect of narrative engagement, are best explained by an account of sympathy as a response mechanism, one that comprises an empathic and a concern component, both of them ultimately explained in terms of perspective taking. What emerges from the preceding analysis contributes to support *pluralism* in the explanation of our engagement with narrative characters, and not just in the sense that we respond to characters in a number of ways, most notably by empathy and sympathy. It is these very mechanisms of character participation that show a certain level of multidimensionality. Sympathy, in particular, proves to be a complex phenomenon and one that, in reason of its complexity, can be placed at the theoretical center of a constellation of responses that are ordinarily called sympathetic. What makes such

pluralism attractive, besides its reflecting a shared experience, is that it lends itself to a somewhat unified analysis, one that shows the pervasive role of the imagination in our narrative responses, and of empathy even in responses that are properly categorized as non-empathic.

I conclude by remarking how narratives, thanks to their capacity of presenting us, so to speak, “from within,” with situations and characters' mental states in their progression through time, are especially apt to elicit rich and articulate sympathetic responses. Indeed, paradigmatic sympathy, understood as comprising empathy and an imagination-driven form of concern, likely finds its full-blown manifestations when a situation is presented in a narrative context. In such contexts, one can be best afforded with an opportunity for empathic engagement, including the representation of a target's goals and their consequent imaginative adoption. In that respect, narratives provide their perceivers with opportunities for deep, rich engagement that in real life occur only in those rare cases when we can closely connect to a situation: when someone we know especially well takes the time to share with us his or her experiences (by telling us his or her “story”), or when we think back to important events that affected us (by telling ourselves our “story”). Indeed, improving our understanding of sympathy contributes to our appreciation of the importance and power that narratives may have in bringing about what C. S. Lewis calls “an enlargement of our being.”⁴⁷ We achieve such a state partly thanks to our sympathetic responses, through the stories we encounter as perceivers of narratives and as people who live our own lives and, in a sense, live those of our fellow humans.⁴⁸

ALESSANDRO GIOVANNELLI
Department of Philosophy
Lafayette College
Easton, Pennsylvania 18042

INTERNET: giovannelli@lafayette.edu

1. Some of the most notable exceptions include Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 1995) and Susan Feagin, *Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetics of Appreciation* (Cornell University Press, 1996). The elements into which Smith analyzes what he calls “the structure of sympathy” are both “levels of [film spectator] engagement” and “levels of [film] narrative structure” (*Engaging Characters*, p. 82). Since my intent here is to look at sympathy just as at a mechanism of response to characters, to the extent that I discuss any

existing account closely, I then concentrate only on Feagin's. With regard to engagement with film characters, Noël Carroll offers an account of sympathy as an emotion in *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), chap. 6. Yet, Carroll also emphasizes how sympathy "is the most pervasive emotion from the beginning to the end of the movie" (p. 178) and the "most persistent emotional bond that we have with respect to the fictional protagonists" (p. 179). That is, sympathy has what Carroll calls "breath." It also has a "special depth" (p. 179): it structures our perception of the action and our responses to the characters and what happens to them (for example, the "negative emotions that we muster in response to the protagonist's setbacks are a function of our sympathy for her," p. 179). However, sympathy's breath and special depth in this sense seem to be reasons to abandon treating sympathy as an emotion and rather give an account of it as a mechanism of emotional engagement, as I propose.

2. Usually, the adjustments of my analysis to the case of antipathy will be obvious and hence I will rarely spell them out.

3. This is also the reason why at least aspects of accounts that are fairly different from mine, such as Peter Goldie's, may not be incompatible with my approach; see his *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), especially chap. 7. Nonetheless, Goldie's account of sympathy is driven by a general persuasion that is at odds with my view: Goldie sees the fact that sympathy involves a motivation to help the target, while such imaginative processes as empathy do not, as sufficient to conclude that sympathy is an emotion, and hence not an imaginative process (p. 215). I return to the issue of motivation in Section III.

4. See Alex Neill, "Empathy and (Film) Fiction," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. 175–194, see p. 175.

5. Only in this sense, however, is empathy self-oriented. In another sense, empathy is still focused on another (though in special cases the other may be oneself). I present a slightly more refined account of empathy in Section II. See also my "In and Out: The Dynamics of Imagination in the Engagement with Narratives," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2008): 11–24.

6. Indeed, Hobbes considers pity as emerging from the fear of one's situation becoming like the target's: "*Grief*, for the Calamity of another, is PITY; and ariseth from the imagination that the like calamity may befall himself; and therefore is called also COMPASSION, and in the phrase of this present time a FELLOW-FEELING"; *Leviathan, or, The Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (London: Printed for Andrew Crooke, 1651), p. 27. Notice that, were Hobbes to be right, sympathy, while other oriented, would be *self*-regarding, which shows that the distinction between self-oriented and other-oriented responses ought not to be confused with the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding responses.

7. This seems to be especially true of pity, when contrasted to compassion; see Lawrence Blum, "Compassion," in *Explaining Emotions*, ed. Amélie Rorty (University of California Press, 1980), pp. 507–517. Yet, this is a contrast I do not need to address, since I am offering an account of

sympathy as a mechanism of emotional engagement, not as any one emotion.

8. Compare Richard Wollheim, *On Art and the Mind* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), chap. 3; Michael Stocker and Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 214–215; and Stephen Darwall, "Empathy, Sympathy, Care," *Philosophical Studies* 89 (1998): 261–282, see p. 261.

9. Noël Carroll, for instance, at times emphasizes the differences between empathy and sympathy in ways that suggest that the two mechanisms of engagement are incompatible with each other; see, for example, his *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 351. I have criticized such an approach in "In and Out," p. 15.

10. Others have seen the intimate relation between sympathy and empathy. For instance, Douglas Chismar, in "Empathy and Sympathy: The Important Difference," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 22 (1988): 257–266, claims that sympathy "includes empathizing" (p. 257) and "is a special kind of empathy, viz., empathy coupled with a benevolent attitude towards the other person" (p. 258). Raymond Martin defines 'sympathy' as empathy plus concern—"a kind of super-empathy"; *Self-Concern: An Experiential Approach to What Matters in Survival* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 96.

11. I return to the distinction between narrative protagonists and other characters later in this section.

12. Certainly, the *phenomenology* of our engagement seems different, and in ways that appear to signal more depth and sincerity.

13. Compare Patricia Greenspan, *Emotions and Reasons: An Inquiry into Emotional Justification* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 62, regarding what she calls "identificatory love." Not so differently from what I here call "sympathy," identificatory love is for Greenspan not an emotion but "a tendency to take on various identificatory emotions, in response to others' emotional pleasures and pains—to fear 'for' them when they are threatened, say" (p. 37).

14. Indeed—and this may count as an additional reason for my account on its own right—typically, when we favorably respond to someone but with no empathic involvement, we can think of a different response that would include such an involvement.

15. See Section III.

16. Nor does the distinction have to do with having or not having concern for the characters, as instead suggested by Chismar: "While I may empathize with all the characters of a drama, I am likely in sympathy only with the hero" ("Empathy and Sympathy," p. 257). Rightly does Chismar emphasize the pervasiveness of empathy (for which see also my "In and Out"); and certainly there may be characters in a narrative that we only empathize with. Yet, the distinction between the responses we give to protagonists and to non-protagonists at least sometimes depends on a difference in the degree and sort of concern we have for them, rather than between having and not having concern.

17. Of course, this is not to deny that narratives may acquire value precisely by presenting us with protagonists we find difficult to empathize or sympathize with (such narratives as Patrick Süskind's novel, *The Perfume*, or Sidney Lumet's 2007 film, *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, which turn around psychologically mysterious or ultimately dislikable characters, come to mind).

18. Neill, for instance, separates sympathy from empathy precisely, in part, on these grounds: "With sympathetic response, . . . one's response need not reflect what the other is feeling, nor indeed does it depend on whether the other is feeling anything at all"; "Empathy and (Film) Fiction," p. 175. For a somewhat similar claim, but with an emphasis on appropriately perceiving the situation a character is in, see Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 95; *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, pp. 354–355; and *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, chap. 6.

19. Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*, p. 114.

20. Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*, p. 115. See also Daniel Putman, "Sympathy and Ethical Judgments: A Reconsideration," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1987): 261–265, see p. 262. In *The Philosophy of Horror*, Carroll notices the same sort of example and uses it to claim that narrative perceivers' responses do not mirror those of the characters: "When the heroine is splashing about with abandon as, unbeknownst to her, a killer shark is zooming in for the kill, we feel concern for her. But that is not what she is feeling. She's feeling delighted. That is, very often we have different and, in fact, more information about what is going on in a fiction than do the protagonists, and consequently, what we feel is very different from what the character may be thought to feel" (pp. 90–91). See also Carroll, "The Ties That Bind: Characters, the Emotions, and Popular Fictions," in *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture*, ed. William Irwin and Jorge Gracia (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2007), pp. 89–116 and *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, chap. 6.

21. Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*, p. 115.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. The sympathetic response may be complicated in other ways too, as when, watching Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), we feel a mix of anticipatory and conditional sympathy for a bather who perhaps will, perhaps will not, be attacked by the shark. The response would be further mixed in a yet more complex way, and include proxy sympathy, for example, if the bather were presented as having reasons she fails to consider herself in danger. (See also note 20.)

26. See note 38.

27. Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*, pp. 114–115.

28. This importantly corresponds to psychological findings on the connection between empathy and altruistic behavior; see C. Daniel Batson, *The Altruism Question: Toward a Social-Psychological Answer* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991).

29. Darwall ("Empathy, Sympathy, Care") categorizes emotional contagion under the umbrella notion of empathy. Here, I leave affective mimicry aside because I am not convinced that it can combine with concern into a unified, sympathetic experience.

30. Sense (1) corresponds to what Adam Smith calls "sympathy": "It is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are [another person's] sensations," that is, "by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case"; *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. MacFie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), p. 9. Smith also refers to this process, more suc-

inctly, as "changing places in fancy with the sufferer" (p. 10). Darwall calls it "projective empathy" ("Empathy, Sympathy, Care," pp. 266–270), while he calls (2) "proto-sympathetic empathy" (p. 271). For a more detailed investigation of sense (2) empathy, see my "In and Out."

31. In Section III, I go back to this distinction between two senses of empathy, in relation to the sorts of desires that sympathy may be claimed to entail.

32. Paradigmatically, see, for example, Goldie's approach, briefly summarized in note 3. See also Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, in which sympathy is construed as "non-fleeting care, concern, or, more widely, a non-passing pro-attitude toward another person (or fictional character, including anthropomorphized beings of all sorts)" (p. 177).

33. See note 10.

34. Self-pity may be inappropriate because it is incompatible with the sort of person I have grown into since I had that experience; it may be part of my identity, for instance, that I was able to overcome that negative experience. Or, sometimes, self-pity may be inappropriate simply because feeling it would be a one-too-many response, having pitied myself for that past incident already a few times.

35. I am following partly Dennis Stampe's analysis here; see his "Desire," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Samuel Guttenplan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 244–250.

36. I am adopting, here, Feagin's useful distinction between "desires to do" and "desires that" (see *Reading with Feeling*, chap. 2).

37. My account of sympathy has a certain similarity to Blum's account of what he calls "compassion." Yet, being that Blum is interested in compassion as a moral emotion, he emphasizes the sympathizer's disposition to action in a way that is not true, in my view, of sympathy as a mechanism of emotional engagement: "We would hardly attribute compassion to X if she were to saunter by on a spring day and, seeing an elderly man fall on the sidewalk, walk right by, perhaps with a sad shudder of dismay, leaving the old man lying alone" ("Compassion," p. 513). By contrast, I argue that sympathy is "easier" than this (though I agree that the specific emotion Blum calls compassion is not).

38. See Putman, "Sympathy and Ethical Judgments," p. 261, regarding experiments reported in J. Sabini and M. Silver, "On the Captivity of the Will: Sympathy, Caring, and the Moral Sense of the Human," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 15 (1985): 23–37.

39. Carroll conjectures that the most common way for popular moviemakers to elicit sympathy for the protagonists is that of portraying them as in some way morally virtuous, if broadly and relatively speaking (*The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, pp. 181–182). Such a conjecture squares well with my own account, including its emphasis on the adoption, in sympathy, only of the target's *relevant* goals (see later in this section).

40. Arguably, as sympathy in my sense differs from compassion, so does antipathy in my sense differ from *Schadenfreude*.

41. An investigation of the *causes* of sympathy, which I do not pursue, would have to address the role of purely sensory means, such as those employed, in suitable media, through music and lighting. It would also have to include

what could be called “conventional sympathy”—gestures that, within the appropriate cultural setting, refer to or prompt sympathetic responses (not so differently, perhaps, from sending a “sympathy card” to someone). In any event, I suggest, most of the ways to prompt or hinder sympathy will ultimately correspond to the possibilities my account suggests, i.e., to ways to prompt or discourage empathy and concern.

42. Both Putman and Darwall, for instance, appeal to caring in their analyses of sympathy.

43. Jonathan Bennett, “The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn,” *Philosophy* 49 (1974): 123–134.

44. By contrast to the executioner, who more plausibly could be described as in some way caring for the executed.

45. Gregory Currie, “Narrative Desire,” in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga

and Greg M. Smith (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 183–199, see p. 185.

46. Compare Richard Moran, “The Expression of Feeling in the Imagination,” *The Philosophical Review* 103 (1994): 75–106.

47. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 137, quoted in Justin Oakley, *Morality and the Emotions* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 52.

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