

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindsor

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 3

May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

A consideration of empathy in argumentation

Richard Friemann
York University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Friemann, Richard, "A consideration of empathy in argumentation" (1999). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 17. <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA3/papersandcommentaries/17>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Title: A consideration of empathy in argumentation

Author: [Richard Friemann](#)

Response to this paper by: [Claude Gratton](#)

(c) 2000 Richard Friemann

In *Coalescent Argumentation* Michael Gilbert makes the claim that empathy is the sine qua non of coalescent argumentation.¹ Empathy is so important because it is integral to understanding. In this paper I want to look at empathy as an aspect of understanding, and see what thinking of empathy as an exploration of modes might tell us.

I think that most people have an intuition about empathy which has two parts. The first part of the intuition is that empathy is *deeper* than thinking. Think of the following common experience. We often see people and realize that they are feeling some particular emotion, for example, anger. We can usually recognize angry people by some combination of their appearance and behavior, but many people would not understand this common experience to be an example of empathy.

Now it might be pointed out that recognizing that someone is angry is "deep" as well. Beneath this rather banal occurrence lies great complexity. Part of the story here is the complexity of ordinary human activity in general. Some philosophers have argued that some of our experiences are immediate; but we are now more prone to think that every experience is mediated to some degree. Even the experience of vision, once thought to be the hallmark of immediate experience is now thought to be quite mediated.

So, along with every other kind of experience, our everyday recognition of another's feelings is mediated; we could express this by saying that an inference is required. But because this inference is made so quickly and the mediation process so concealed, we don't think we are putting much effort into it at all. However, if we could compile all the facts about how the physiological and social factors worked together to allow us to interpret basic experiences, including the recognition of another's feelings, we would have quite a large database.

While no doubt it is the case that much effort goes into recognizing another's feelings, yet it is not the right *kind* of effort needed for empathy. Indeed, even making an explicit inference is still not deep enough. Take the case of a close friend. Unlike the stranger, I know my friend's idiosyncrasies so I am able to know his feelings about certain things. If I know my friend has a problem with self confidence, I can infer that he will not react positively to the news that he will be asked to be the master of ceremonies at an upcoming wedding. My greater knowledge about my friend allows me to make this inference.

Yet even in this case we tend not to think that this is an example of empathy. The knowledge we have acquired about our friends perhaps makes the inference about how they would feel a more interesting one than the inference we make in recognizing a stranger's anger, but this is still not empathy because it is merely thinking. I suggest that a paradigmatic example of empathy would include the following elements: two people face to face (the empathizer and the one to be empathized with), the empathizer feeling the

feelings of the empathizee, and a sense of comfort felt by the empathizee as a result of the empathizer's empathy. Although I don't believe that a physical meeting is necessary for empathy, I think the normal assumption would be that if I was to empathize with my friend then I would physically meet him, share his feelings, and that he would feel better in some way. What I want to focus on in this common view of the empathetic situation, is the requirement of feeling by the empathizer. This is the second part of the inference, for if empathy is more than thinking, then it must somehow include *feeling* as well.

Some feminist theorists have gone some way toward developing a more feeling oriented process of understanding. For example, Sandra Bartky, in a recent article on sympathy, suggests that "feminist theory is mistaken in having elevated cognition over this affective dimension that, whatever it is, is somehow akin to love."² That Bartky would want to discuss feeling over cognition is not surprising given some feminist critiques of "cold" Reason.

This critique of reason is really quite to the point. The dominant view is that reason can be restricted to what has been called 'logical' thinking. Such a restriction creates the dichotomy between reason and emotion, the negative consequences of which feminist critiques have brought to our attention. Bartky's focus on feeling is perhaps inevitable if one sees cognition (thinking) simply as 'logical' thinking. For if cognition is just logical thinking then everything that is not logical which we intuitively believe to be important in empathy, turns out to be noncognitive.

Bartky's motive is a good one: cognition is more than the logical. Gilbert's procedure of multi modal exploration is driven by the same motive. In multi modal argumentation there are three other modes besides the logical: the emotional, the visceral, and the kisceral. These other modes, but especially the emotional and the visceral, have an affective dimension to them. Since empathy requires affect, we can ask which approaches to the examination of affect is useful for argumentation. One kind of approach we could take is a biological one. However, examining our affective lives biologically might not have much impact on everyday argumentation, especially if such an approach focused on measuring the effects of emotions on our bodies or measuring their duration and intensity. There may be other approaches as well, but a multi modal one allows for the participants in the argument to come to grips with the affective parts of themselves which may further the argument along. So the suggestion here is that we can examine empathy as the process of exploring the nonlogical modes.

According to the procedures of coalescent argumentation, exploring modes occurs in the context of gaining an understanding of someone's position. So let's imagine someone trying to do this. Suppose there are two people: Kelly and Terry; Kelly is of the opinion that Terry is inconsiderate. Circumstances conspire to bring her into a situation where she makes an attempt to understand Terry's actions. What should Kelly do?

After hearing Terry's explanation for his actions she should try to see what his reasons would sound like from his perspective. One part of this would be to go deeper into the logical mode. Kelly might understand logically that Terry's behaviour was motivated by,

say, the feeling of anger. This logical understanding, understanding that if people are angry they might be abrupt or short with others, is necessary for Kelly to know what Terry's explanation means. But this logical understanding may not be sufficient. Kelly may not think that Terry had good *enough* reasons to behave in an inconsiderate manner. She may be thinking that being angry should not lead to such behaviour. One reason she may hold this view could be that Kelly doesn't quite see the connection between Terry's anger and his inconsiderate behaviour. If this happens it may be an indication that Terry's real motivation for his actions do not primarily lie in the logical mode. So what Kelly should do now is move into the other modes to see if this would help her better understand Terry.

In the emotional mode Kelly would have to try to understand what Terry's feelings were like. But is this an example of empathy? It could be thought that exploring the emotional mode doesn't have an affective dimension. Isn't it the case that thinking about feelings is quite different from feeling such feelings? I think this is a perfectly sensible thing to say; but I don't think it is the only thing we can say. Exploring the emotional mode need not be a cognitive reflection on feelings. And when it is not just a cognitive reflection, empathy occurs. Empathy certainly is cognitive in the sense that there is some mental activity occurring, but we can actually feel something as well. It comes down to what we mean by *exploring*. We explore to a greater degree by taking all the modes into consideration, but we can also explore the modes superficially or more substantially.

Here a suggestion from Bartky can help. Bartky discusses Elizabeth Spelman's view of imagination. She quotes Spelman on the importance of it. "I must try to enter imaginatively into the worlds of others. Imagination isn't enough, but it is necessary..." (Bartky, 179). Imagination is necessary because Kelly may not have had the same experiences as Terry. Even if she had, she still needs to respect the difference between her experience and his. But does imagination provide for actually *feeling* anything?

Exploring the visceral mode can help here. If Kelly finds out from Terry that part of his explanation for his behaviour is that he was angry, then she can try to feel angry. But Kelly could do a better job of feeling what Terry's anger was like if she knew why he was angry in the first place. Suppose Terry's anger was linked to a deep sense of grievance based on his socioeconomic status. For Terry, his 'inconsiderate' behaviour is his way of coping with what he perceives to be a hostile environment. If Kelly knows this she is in a much better position to really feel Terry's anger than if she did not have this information.

This way of putting the point is slightly misleading in that in a typical exploration of the emotional mode we would not only want to know *what* someone was feeling, but *why*. However, not all of our feelings have their origin in the emotional mode, so asking why people feel the way they do might lead us to visceral considerations. Concentrating on the visceral, the material context someone is in, is what Bartky, again following Spelman, calls 'apprenticeship' (Bartky, 179). Simply imagining someone's anger can be done without taking into consideration the situation which produced the anger. But if we imagine how someone's anger might arise out of their specific context, then we are doing something which requires more work. This is the difference between mere imagination and apprenticeship.

Apprenticing ourselves to someone in this way does allow us to really feel something; and if Kelly apprentices herself to Terry she will have a greater understanding of him. Kelly already had a logical understanding of Terry's behaviour. But suppose in her logical understanding, she was not inclined to describe Terry's situation as 'oppression'. By being guided by Terry's explanations of how he felt and the reasons for these feelings, Kelly can better understand Terry's behaviour because she can feel it. The result of this may be that Kelly would now say that Terry is oppressed.

However, this act of identification need not go so far as to become agreement. To empathize is not to sympathize. No matter how deeply Terry conveys his oppression to Kelly, she can still believe that Terry is in fact *not* oppressed. Yet in the common view of empathy the comfort the empathizee feels is derived from the acceptance of the empathizer. The atmosphere which is created out of this acceptance is seen by some to foster a greater understanding. I think Bartky believes this to be the case. If we sympathize with others, if we agree with them when we are trying to understand them, then our understanding will be greater. Let's return to Bartky to see what more sympathy might give us. Bartky is interested in love, or what seems to be equivalent terms for her, solidarity or sisterhood. Love has a unique epistemic aspect to it. She makes this clear by her example of the Clarence Thomas hearings. In the wake of the hearings, Bartky says that women want more from men than "mere acquisition of knowledge"(Bartky, 179). Men should go beyond the acquisition of knowledge where they might "understand" what Anita Hill felt." Men should strive for "...a knowing that transforms the self who knows, a knowing that brings into being new sympathies, new affects, as well as new cognitions" (Bartky, 179). Here we seem to have a kind of knowledge with the power to transform those who can attain it.

This transforming knowledge of love doesn't seem to be merely empathetic knowledge. But whatever it is, and whatever greater knowledge it may give us, it is not necessary and should not be necessary to understand someone in the context which with I am concerned: two people in a conversation where at least one is trying to understand the other in a *finite* amount of time. In *this* situation being sympathetic - actually agreeing with the other - adds nothing to one's understanding. For a genuine act of empathy to take place, we must understand why someone who is in a particular situation would feel the way he or she does, *and* feel something analogous to what the other feels.

For a genuine act of sympathy to happen, the same two elements have to be present, plus a third: agreement. I believe sympathy is empathy with agreement. Now we might think that if we agree with someone's views at the outset, then we don't need to rely on empathetic multi modal exploration because we already know what such views entail. While this is perfectly true, it is also the case that there are times when we show sympathy to another while not having a clear idea of what they are trying to say. Here we are being sympathetic to someone because we like the person (and not because we know and agree with the view he or she is espousing) and we are trying to understand what this person is saying *because* we like him or her.

In this latter case agreement is not necessary for understanding to occur. Now one might

ask, if the feeling of sympathy is not necessary for understanding, what about the previous claim that through empathy we can actually feel something of what the other feels, and better understand him or her? Why are the feelings we experience through empathy epistemically relevant but not the feeling of sympathy? The answer has nothing to do with the feeling of sympathy itself; rather, the answer has to do with the temporal position sympathy has here. All I mean by this is that whatever feelings we wish to talk about, (sympathy, love, even hate), occur *before* and *during* the multi modal process of exploration. Since this is the case, these feelings are not the *result* of the multi modal process. Only those feelings which are experienced *after* apprenticeship have an epistemic dimension, because it is through such feelings that we gain a better understanding of the other. The feelings that we have before and during the process may tell us something about ourselves, but they don't tell us anything about the other.

I will try to show this by discussing Wayne Brockriede's article "Arguers As Lovers."³ What I want to do is integrate Bartky's idea that love can form better knowledge, with Brockriede's view of love as an argumentative stance. Although Brockriede doesn't treat love as a feeling the way Bartky does, it seems reasonable to take him to be saying something similar because he too thinks there is something unique about love. For Brockriede, *only* the lover can achieve a genuine interaction. I believe he sees genuine interaction in epistemic terms: insofar as there is a hierarchy where only the argumentative lover can experience "...that alchemic moment of transformation...", I don't think it unfair to suspect that there would be some epistemic aspect to such transformation, if only in having reasons for changing one's behaviour after such transformation (Brockriede, 10).

Brockriede argues that we can adopt an argumentative stance which "may be characterized by the word *love*." He tells us that part of what this love means is that the lover sees the other as a *person* (Brockriede, 5). This is in contrast with seeing the other as an object, or a victim, the attitudes one may have if an arguer is an argumentative "rapist" or "seducer". These last are Brockriede's terms for two other possible argumentative stances. So seeing another person as a person requires that we don't reduce her to one dimension of her being; she is not just some argument opposed to us, she is a person. Would this be an example of a more adequate knowledge of the Other?

It seems to me that instead of characterizing this as love, it would be more accurate to call it *respect*. We respect the person's intellect by choosing those interpretations which cast what she says in a better light than those interpretations which do not. The same can be said *mutatis mutandis* for respecting a person's moral and aesthetic senses. Perhaps Brockriede uses the word love because he doesn't stop at this respect for persons but claims that we also *risk* ourselves. Brockriede quotes Maurice Natanson: "Risk is established when... (sic) his immediate life of feeling and sensibility is challenged and made open to challenge" (Brockriede, 7). There are two parts to this quote. The first, having one's life of feeling and sensibility challenged, need not have anything to do with risk. We can feel challenged, and even threatened, when we are being very closed minded. Indeed, we feel challenged precisely because we hold very dear the opinion or view being challenged. So it is the second part of the quote which establishes the connection to risk. If we *make* our immediate life of feeling and sensibility *open* to challenge, then we are

risking our feeling and sensibility.

But what does 'risk' mean here? We can answer this by showing what the lover does in contrast to the rapist and seducer. Take the rapist first. The rapist tries not to risk anything at all. Brockriede says that perhaps the ultimate kind of argumentative rape is censorship (Brockriede, 3). In this context censorship just is the act of eliminating any possibility of risk to those who are doing the censoring. The key to argumentative rape seems to be the tendency to silence others. As Brockriede says, "...he who is not permitted to present his argument or he who is not allowed to present it in the form of his choice has been raped" (Brockriede, 3).

The argumentative seducer is a more interesting case for our purposes. The seducer risks more than the rapist in that he or she would at least allow others to argue in the manner they choose. Seducers do this because unlike rapists, their goal is to get their victims to *assent* through "charm" or "tricks" (Brockriede, 4). To gain assent through seduction one must appear to be fair and honest. But do seducers risk *their* feelings and sensibilities? Seducers can certainly make use of feeling and sensibility in their seduction. For Brockriede, advertisers are identified as seducers, and indeed appeal to emotion is a valuable technique in the advertiser's repertoire. An advertisement is more seductive if it not only speaks to the logical part of ourselves, but includes the emotional, visceral, and kisceral aspects as well.

However, seduction is not love. Seducers don't risk their own feeling and sensibility. No matter how much they may be engaged in exploring emotions, they are not actually open to feeling anything different. If lovers are going to differ radically" from seducers then the difference must be in the fact that lovers really do open up their lives of feeling and sensibility.

So, what does this 'opening up' amount to? If we suppose that Kelly came to believe that Terry was not really inconsiderate because he was oppressed, then her logical understanding (her belief that Terry was inconsiderate) was transformed by her apprenticeship through the emotional and visceral modes. Perhaps this is what Brockriede has in mind, for his requirement that the lover risk his or her feeling and sensibility sounds like the potential for transformation via the non-logical modes. If Brockriede is serious about his talk of transformation, this is what risk should mean. Every aspect of the lover, the logical, emotional, visceral, and kisceral, would be open. Yet it is not clear to me that Brockriede has such a robust idea of transformation in mind. But at the very least I think we can attribute to him the idea that our *intellects* are transformed from holding one belief to holding another. This in itself can result in a significant change in a person's belief set. If Kelly believes that Terry is oppressed, then this belief will affect other beliefs she holds. If Terry is oppressed then her belief that men can't be oppressed changes as well.

If it is correct to say that being open to persuasion is part of risking ourselves, then it seems that Brockriede is envisioning the situation where a person encounters the other, is challenged, but then holds open the possibility of changing her mind. Of course, to be open to having one's mind changed, and for there to be a challenge, one must already hold

some opinion to be challenged. The question is, does being open to having one's mind changed give us a more adequate knowledge of the other than being closed minded?

I will answer this with an example. Imagine two people: Sue and John. Sue and John are having an argument, and John is trying hard to convince Sue of something about himself. Suppose that John convinced Sue, she now understands and agrees with him, and she now has a more adequate knowledge of John. She can say, "I understand him." But suppose Sue was not convinced; would this mean that she had less than an adequate knowledge of him? The answer is no, she can still say "I understand him." In this case Sue still has a more adequate knowledge of John; she just didn't agree with his argument. We can say this because using the phrase, "I understand you," can normally mean two things: it can mean a grasp of John's point from his own perspective *and* agreeing with him; or it can mean having a grasp of John's point and *not* agreeing with him. What makes it possible for Sue to have a more adequate knowledge of John is that by being open to changing her mind, she has let the 'facts' guide her.

All of this is supposed to be in contrast to not being open to having one's mind changed. To not be open minded would be to prejudice the process of understanding from the outset. Presumably the prejudice would manifest itself in the following way. If Sue tried to understand John with her mind already made up, then this would preclude the possibility of her being persuaded by anything he said. This appears to be a point about intellectual honesty. Brockriede thinks so, as can be shown by the harsh words he has for seducers and rapists. "The rapist and the seducer neither respect themselves as risk-taking, choice-making beings, nor do they attribute these human capacities to their coarguers" (Brockriede, 10). So there is something seriously wrong epistemically and morally with Sue if she is closed minded.

But if Sue is closed minded does this mean that she is necessarily a seducer? Can all cases of understanding can be covered by the categories of seduction or love? Couldn't Sue be intellectually honest and yet not be open to changing her mind? The answer will be "of course not" as long as we are not mindful of context or we assume that one context holds for all others. My example of Sue and John is only a sketch of a hypothetical situation. In its abstractness we might think it reasonable that Sue have an open mind. But does the requirement that Sue be open to the possibility of changing her mind hold good for all contexts? I think the answer is no. For what if Sue is Jewish and John is an anti-Semite who is telling her that she doesn't have a right to exist? In order for Sue to be intellectually honest must she be open to being persuaded that she doesn't have a right to exist? I don't believe so. Sue can be intellectually honest and be closed minded.

And she can be empathetic as well. If Sue empathizes with John, she will feel what it is like in some sense to be a racist. Now if we imagine (however implausibly) that Sue sympathizes with John, then she will feel what it is like to be a racist all the while maintaining a positive attitude toward John. As Sue is understanding more and more of John's view, she may also come to sympathize with it in addition to just maintaining a positive attitude toward him. So Sue could sympathize with John, or his view, or both. But none of this has anything to do with the epistemic work of trying to understand John's

view. It is not agreement that allows Sue to understand because Sue may not have a positive attitude toward John or his view and still understand by exploring the modes.

Sue gains an understanding by undertaking the task of empathizing with John. When she does this she can be feeling any emotion at all and still apprentice herself to him. Now if Sue loves John then it may be much easier for her to empathize with him than if she did not. Love can motivate us to want to understand another person. But other emotions can be motivating forces as well. The less we are motivated the more we need to work to empathize with another. The point though, is that love can motivate us to empathize, but it does not reveal anything about the other.

Brockriede saw love as requiring open mindedness. However, to think that open mindedness is required in all contexts is to assume that an attempt at understanding is an attempt at gaining the truth. So if we are in such a context, and we understand and are persuaded by the other, then we would be intellectually dishonest if we didn't say so. But if the truth is not at issue, because Sue already has the truth, i.e., she does have a right to exist, then being open to changing her mind is not a requirement. Of course putting the point this way might make it sound as if Sue would not be open to the transformation that might occur. Yet the word 'transformation' is just another way of saying being open to the possibility of changing one's mind." Thinking that one has the truth is not, by that very fact, being dogmatic. And no one can be completely open minded all the time; there must be some things which we regard as true, or at least not open to question. This should be recognized as a factor when a person tries to understand another.

To sum up, I have tried to do two things: provide an account of empathy by seeing it in multi-modal terms, and show why empathetic knowledge is all we need in order to understand someone. Empathy is the process of working our way through the nonlogical modes by apprenticing ourselves to the other's particular situation. In one sense, sympathy is the same process of exploring the non-logical modes with the additional element of agreement. As I have hoped to show with my example of Sue and John, the element of agreement doesn't add to our understanding because it is not a necessary part of the epistemic work of exploring the modes.

Endnotes

[1](#)Gilbert, Michael A. (1997). *Coalescent Argumentation*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 111.

[2](#)Bartky, Sandra. (1996). "Sympathy and Solidarity: On a Tightrope with Scheler." In Diana T. Meyers (Ed.), *Feminists Rethink the Self*. Boulder: Westview Press, 187.

[3](#)Brockriede, Wayne. (1972). "Arguers As Lovers." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 5, 1:1-11.