

The Problem of Isolating and Measuring

Empathy



a philosophy talk by

Riana Betzler

(San José State University)

Friday, February 16th, 2024

3:30pm, Close-Hipp 303

Reception to Follow

In 1949, the social psychologists Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr. and Rosalind Dymond wrote a paper calling for increased attention to the empathic responses in empirical social psychology. The empathic responses, they write, "occupy a crucial position in human interaction and adjustment" (1949, 357). Not only practically important for therapy and communication, the empathic responses were considered to be foundational for the very development of the self. Given their importance, why hadn't the empathic responses received adequate attention? Cottrell and Dymond venture a response: "One answer may be that the phenomena belong so much to the taken-for-granted that they have been overlooked as challenging objects of research effort. Another possibility is that the nature of the phenomena render them extremely difficult to study with available techniques for objective observation and analysis." In this presentation, Professor Betzler focuses on the second possibility—that there is something about the nature of the empathic responses that renders them difficult to study scientifically. She shows how issues of conceptualization, validity, reliability, and integration arose in the making of the science of empathy in the 1940s and 50s. These challenges continue to beset the science of empathy today. She also shows how grappling with these challenges necessitated dealing with larger questions about the nature and scope of the sciences of the human.