

A Response to Prof. Chonabayashi

by

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**Question** from Ryo Chonabayashi, Associate Professor in Philosophy at Soka U.

Professor Kuzmanovich's paper: Page 9: Would Currie agree with the view "our emotionally vivid sense of serious moral and psychological engagement with the thought-world of the fiction prove to be a false sense"? Wouldn't Currie simply say that empathy toward artistic **objects on its own** may be **not very reliable** given **its nature**? The latter claim is **more modest**. It seems Currie is not committed to the view that empathy never reveals any truth about human psychology. What he is committed to is the view that psychology can better reveal truths about human psychology.

**Answer:** Thank you for that question, Prof. Chonabayashi. It is a fundamental one since it goes to the heart of one of Currie's main projects, dissemination of skepticism about empathy as a form of cognition that builds ontological bridges between ourselves and others.

In the earliest versions of my paper, I had given some thought to not using the term "false sense" but in the end decided to stay with it and with the "immodest" Currie, primarily because of Part 4 of his essay under discussion and the comments on empathy (and fiction) he has made in his other publications and which are reproduced in my paper. I think you and I disagree only over the breadth of Currie's claims in this essay in part because you emphasize the claims and I emphasize the tone of those claims. In fact, I see tone as a feature of one's claims. As a result I think we agree on Currie's claims in Parts 1-3 but disagree not on the philosophical import of Part 4.

During the first three parts of the essay, Currie (1) limits the study of the truths of human psychology to empathy, specifically the claim that empathy is of special relevance to aesthetic experience; (2) dismisses as too precarious the idea of simulational empathy as a mind-reading

mechanism among humans, and then turns to (3) the role of empathy for objects as the basis (salience) for aesthetics. I understand your reading of Currie's "modest" claims for, and conclusions about (3) to run something like this:

On its own, empathy for objects is an unreliable process for claiming bodily simulation as the basis of aesthetic experience because (in its nature) bodily simulation is

- a. Non-specific (thanks to our canonical neurons, we react to actual chairs as we do to ones depicted in great paintings);
- b. Somewhat unstable (our simulational empathy could be caused by either the content of the painting or by the artistic activity necessary to produce such content);
- c. Difficult to control (as an emotion-inducing sensation, it is not merely pre-rational but often unconscious)
- d. Potentially distracting (even when we are conscious of it), and as a result of (a) – (d) it is also
- e. Rule defying.

If Currie had ended the essay at (d), I would happily endorse your reading of the "modest" claim. But he does not. Having argued against empathy as the foundational center of aesthetic responses, he seems intent on removing it from the periphery as well. Having made the argument that bodily simulation processes should not be the basis of aesthetic responses, he declares, modestly, I admit, that these processes "are not irrelevant to art and the aesthetic." However, I cannot see the statement "these processes play an aesthetic role when they play a role in the generation of a response which is an aesthetic one" as modest. Even Currie calls formulation "unhelpful." Why would a philosopher write a deliberately unhelpful statement when he is clearly not providing it as an example of a particular type of statements? Is it because because Curry cannot imagine what Novalis calls "feeling oneself into" things? (83) Possibly. In fact, at the beginning of Part 4 Currie confesses that "it is hard to see" why anyone should posit "special relevance" of empathy to aesthetic experience. Without the near-tautology at the end of the penultimate paragraph, one could see

such a statement as a simple speech act designed to express confusion. But when that statement is added to “these processes play an aesthetic role when they play a role in the generation of a response which is an aesthetic one,” we are no longer playing the language game of self-scrutiny. The speech act here is provocation by dismissal. The near-tautology invites the reader who disagrees with Currie to play Euthyphro to Currie’s Socrates. I prefer not to do that. Nor do I wish to imagine the flow of meaning from aesthetics to empathy as taking place in only one direction. Since empathy exists in order to give “us” access to “the non-us” and vice versa, why not imagine empathy and existing in the same mutually modifying relationship Gods and piety exist in “Euthyphro”?

But Currie does not wish to consider that possibility since he does not supply his analysis of arguments made by the proponents of the idea of empathy-based aesthetics that preceded the Empathists. They are dismissed without being represented. Within this essay Currie does not even supply arguments for psychological processes that do a better job of revealing truths about human psychology than empathy does. He does name mirror neurons as one possible process, but using mirror neurons as the basis of aesthetic responses is also not very helpful. In fact, it is a little like answering the question “Does the tree that falls in the forest without anyone being present make a sound?” with “Yes, just interview the disturbed molecules in the air.”