

From: Shoko Miura

Thank you, Zoran, for an inspiring paper on the philosophical aspects of empathy. It sent me reading in many interesting directions. I heard from Akiko about your illness and I am grateful that you persevered heroically in writing your paper under extremely difficult circumstances.

My question for you is about the emotive effect of empathy. The rejection of impressionism's misconception of "affective fallacy" by the New Critics is well known and I do not mean empathy in that way. If, as you paraphrased Currie, empathy has to do with "sharing and imitating the experience of others," who is imitating whom? Whose emotion does the empathetic expression reflect? And what is the motive for sharing the emotion?

When I read your paper, I became interested in Humbert's phrase, "the smiling surface of Hourglass Lake" when he fantasizes that he succeeded in drowning Charlotte. The lake's surface is smiling to reflect Humbert's satisfaction in killing his wife. It is the lake which "imitates" Humbert's emotion—or, rather, Humbert as narrator imposes his emotion on the lake surface. There is an opposite instance of empathy in a skit by Charlie Chaplin in *Limelight* imitating various "things" such as a rose and a "Japanese tree" which are used to change the viewpoint of another character. Chaplin imitates a Japanese bonsai tree (I suppose it is a living miniature tree from his small gesture) for the benefit of the woman he had saved from suicide. He says to her that a Japanese tree "grows sideways" and both his hands and his eyes point energetically upward and to his left. His hands are the branches "growing" from his face. Indeed, many Japanese bonsai trees are sculptured to grow out of balance to one side. Chaplin's gesture expresses the tree's will to grow in one kinetic direction. It seems merely a comic routine but when we think of why Chaplin chooses a bonsai tree to make this gesture, we become aware of his intent to convince the woman that everything in this world is individually different and yet shares the common drive to live and survive. Chaplin imitates the bonsai tree in order to change the woman's despair into courage to start over. We are moved by Chaplin's tree but alienated by Humbert's smiling lake. Both are therefore successful in creating the intended effect. However, Chaplin uses empathy not to

impose his emotion but to evoke an emotion in his listener.

There is a difference in the existence or nonexistence of subjectivity of the person making the empathetic expression. Chaplin somehow avoids subjectivity in making that gesture. He does not think of himself. The emotion he finds from the tree and imitates does not originate from a self-centered viewpoint as Humbert's does. Why one "shares" an experience seems to be critical in creating an ethical effect through empathy.

So, my question is, how would an analytic philosopher view this difference? Also, would anyone like to comment on a comparison of Nabokov and Chaplin since they lived only ten years apart and died in the same year?

From: Zoran Kuzmanovich

Dear Shoko, thank you for finding something of value in my paper. I am happier now with it knowing that it has elicited the kind of reactions from you, Akiko, Brian, and Professor Ryo Chonabayahsi. The four interlinked questions you pose are, as Americans say, a real doozy in the good sense of that word. But the combination of your questions is an inspiring one, too. I cannot speak for analytic philosophers, having read (with any seriousness of purpose) roughly a third each of the philosophical output by Currie, Wittgenstein, and Popper. And I am a rather poor historian, so I will leave the task of discussing the intersections between Chaplin's and Nabokov's life to someone with a better library, better eyesight, and more interest in visa troubles, transportation of minors across state lines, preference for life in Switzerland, attitudes to Senator McCarthy, and body-snatching. I do feel (as I think you do) that someone should do such a project, especially given Chaplin's notions about beauty residing in life's "smiling sadness" in the everpresence of death and Nabokov's idea about art being based in "beauty plus pity" over beauty's dying. So I will have to concentrate on empathy, *Limelight*, and *Lolita*. I will do so informally. Since you made it possible for me to experience my first Noh play and patiently answered all of my questions about the masks, sparse sets, fixed lighting, and the haunting drums, I find that I cannot really be formal in my response to you. I have studied and taught *Limelight* paired with *Lolita* (book and the 1962 film)

because Kubrick knew Chaplin's work very well and admired it greatly. I believe the still in Figure 2 is Kubrick's winking tribute to both Nabokov's lepidoptery and Chaplin's *Limelight*.



Figure 1: Still from *Limelight* (1952)



Figure 2: Still from *Lolita* (1962)

Limelight itself is as precise as a Japanese watch, and its marvelous symmetries make it a joy to teach its form with or without the New Critics and their insistence that whatever is there must be there for more than a single reason. I hope you have taught *Limelight* or will teach it at some point.

I will quote generously from the film since few people seem to know it well (one consequence of its having been banned in the US). Many events in the film are repeated with variations, and the similarities and differences among those incomplete repetitions generate the film's tone and thus theme. Now to your question about the differences in empathic response and motivation, where several problems quickly present themselves. The first is the problem of medium, the second of genre, and the third of tone. I need to think out loud about the first two before actually addressing the third which is where the thread of your questions leads me.

Medium: Seeing a sideways-growing small tree imitated to help a suicidally depressed young woman find the desire to live, and trying to imagine a lake smiling in approval of the cleverly concealed murder one has just imagined committing present us with very different stimuli. As film watchers who have suspended disbelief we see in shared time and space Calvero's conscious effort to imitate a flower or a tree and we see and hear the effect of such imitations on Terry. We cannot see but must only imagine Humbert's projection of his self-satisfaction onto the murky (?), glistening (?), wavy(?), cloud-reflecting(?) surface of the lake. Humbert tells us three things that complicate our image-making in the spatio-temporal and causal dimensions and thus the effect of "smiling surface":

- (1) I was not yet at that stage; I merely want to convey the ease of the act, the nicety of the setting!
- (2) I watched, with the stark lucidity of a future recollection (you know – trying to see things as you will remember having seen them).
- (3) [P]oor Mrs. Humbert Humbert, the victim of a cramp or coronary occlusion, or both, would be standing on her head in the inky ooze, some thirty feet below the smiling surface of Hourglass Lake.

By the end of this passage from *Lolita* we have to imagine the "smiling surface" of a lake named after the device from which the sands invariably run out. In light of Humbert's sentence (#2), on our first reading we briefly even fear that Humbert is actually remembering rather than planning the murder. Thus when we imagine the "smiling surface," the most damning images are those of Humbert's own current or future smile, a smile of complete indifference to Charlotte's psychological and physical pain made all

the worse if we further imagine (as we are invited to do) that the smile also emerges from Humbert's sense of his own cleverness and/or from his image of nature as a willing and approving accomplice in his murderous plans.

Genre: You say that "Chaplin somehow avoids subjectivity in making that gesture. He does not think of himself. [...]Why one 'shares' an experience seems to be critical in creating an ethical effect through empathy."

I agree that motivation plays an important in our empathic responses and their link to ethics.. Humbert, for example, emphasizes the ways in which he intends to take advantage of Charlotte's weaknesses. Calvero senses Terry's weakness and attempts to help her overcome it. The empathic link between them is based on Terry's paralysis over life's futility that has led her sister into prostitution and driven her to suicide and Calvero's paralysis as a has-been comedian who became box office poison after discovering his wife's infidelity and then needing to be drunk in order to be funny. But since empathy is supposed to be immediate and unfiltered by reflection, there is a problem of sharing in comedic empathy, especially physical or slapstick comedy of the Chaplin type. So I read your "somehow" as being rightly a cautionary one.

Where empathy is usually a result of our unconscious mirroring of the mental/emotional state of others, Calvero's humor is based on his conscious decision to hide rather than share the pain he feels. He hides his pain both from the audience and at the end from Terry as well. And the drinking can be seen as the effort to hide the pain from himself. I know your question was not about the ending, but please bear with me while we address the "somehow" and the idea of sharing within the film's genre. So Calvero rejects mass empathy by hiding his feelings and even his heart attack. After the heart attack, he also diverts what more likely would have been Terry's pity and gratitude rather than empathy by pretending to imagine a future for himself and Terry now that they are both successful. Humbert, however, shares the glee of his imagined freedom-from-Charlotte only with nature since he must not share it with anyone else (while of course sharing it with us, "*hypocrite lecteurs*"). It is also possible to read Calvero at the end as dying from both heart attack and a broken heart in the sense of Humbert's "coronary thrombosis." It is possible but not advised. In the case of a broken

heart, we would be empathizing with Calvero's desire not to live without Terry. But we could think of self-sacrifice as not necessarily involving a broken heart as I think you do by putting emphasis on "sacrifice" rather than "self." At least that is how I read your separation or even opposition of "subjectivity" and self-centeredness. Calvero knows that both Terry's career and her erotic desire for Neville (played by Chaplin's son) would be sacrificed if Calvero were to give in and marry Terry whose desire for such a marriage is driven mainly by idealistic gratitude. So, instead, Calvero sacrifices himself for Terry, and the sacrifice gives him back the dignity he has sought ever since his headliner days. Paradoxically that dignity he has regained from his staged self-humiliation: he has again gotten "up on his feet" and he "goes out on top" having sacrificed himself not just for Terry but for his art. We understand the poetically just/formally required nature of such an ending, we applaud the performance, and we admire the dignity of the way he camouflages his pain, but I am not sure that most of us could really empathise with, that is share and imitate, such a pain and such a feeling. (Historically, Chaplin's lack of self-sacrifice on behalf of his British compatriots during WWII galled a number of his former fans, in London and elsewhere. But that part we will leave to the future historian.)

Tone. Your questions are specifically about the rose and the Japanese tree: "If ... empathy has to do with "sharing and imitating the experience of others," who is imitating whom? Whose emotion does the empathetic expression reflect? And what is the motive for sharing the emotion?"

The scene you are analysing comes about when Terry confesses she attempted suicide because she finds life "without meaning," and because even in music and flowers" she finds only "utter futility." To that Calvero responds with

Calvero: What do you want a meaning for?

Life is a desire, not a meaning.

Desire is the theme of all life!

It makes a rose want to be a rose, | and want to grow like that.

Ever seen a Japanese tree? | They're lopsided, they grow this way.

Of course pansies grow this way.

The dark ones frown and go like that.
However, the meaning of anything
is merely other words | for the same thing.
After all, a rose is a rose. | Not bad, should be quoted.

I will leave off picking the low lying fruit of the allusions to Shakespeare and Gertrude Stein and move on to your analysis of this scene. Your analysis is outstanding:

Chaplin's gesture expresses the tree's will to grow in one kinetic direction. It seems merely a comic routine but when we think of why Chaplin chooses a bonsai tree to make this gesture, we become aware of his intent to convince the woman that everything in this world is individually different and yet shares the common drive to live and survive. Chaplin imitates the bonsai tree in order to change the woman's despair into courage to start over.

As you point out, in this initial mention of flowers and trees, Calvero is imitating the rose's/pansy's and tree's shape and desire for growth, hoping that Terry will mirror such desire and abandon her desire to die. He is also subtly recapitulating his insistence that human consciousness is a wonderful toy that has taken billions of years to be grown and should not be destroyed so carelessly. Consciousness as a wonderful toy is of course a very Nabokovian thought. In planning Charlotte's murder, Humbert has no such thoughts about Charlotte's consciousness as something rare and precious, though after Lolita abandons him, he posits just such a possibility not for Charlotte's but for Lolita's consciousness:

my Lolita remarked: "You know, what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own"; and it struck me, as my automaton knees went up and down, that I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile cliches, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate - dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions..."

What prevents Humbert from positing the richness of Lolita's consciousness

is the almost mechanical nature of his sexual desire for Lolita. For Calvero, sex is not a concern except in his dreams. And even in those dreams the memory of his wife's infidelity still affects him: when he reaches for Terry's waist, she picks his pocket. In his waking life, he soberly tells Terry "I've arrived at the age where platonic friendship can be sustained on the highest moral plane." That sentence strikes me as a polite announcement that for physiological reasons sex between them is no longer on the table.

I introduced the problems of medium and genre because I wish to be very cautious about my answers regarding trees and flowers. The images of the flower and the tree will return during Calvero's song about reincarnation and the life of a sardine. He sings this song at the Empire Ballet at the gala performance given in his honour at the end of the film and arranged for him by Terry and Neville.

It makes my heart feel warm
To know that I'll return
In some other form
But I don't want to be a tree
Sticking in the ground
I'd sooner be a flea
I don't want to be a flower
Waiting by the hour
Hoping for a pollen to alight on me

Please note that the images of the flowers and the tree he imitated for Terry were meant to mime growth and thus change. But in the "Sardine Song" the flower and the tree are rejected because they are stationary. The tone here changes completely: what was good for motivating Terry out of her hypochondriac paralysis and depression is openly rejected as not being good enough for Calvero. We could argue perhaps that sardines are a few evolutionary levels up from flowers and trees, but I do not think such an argument from evolutionary climbing is sufficient to account for Calvero's desire here since the refrain is "So when I cease to be/ I want to go back, I want to go back,/ I want to go back to the sea."

The audience reaction is different as well. The first time Calvero

(under a different name) sang that song, the Middlesex audience fell asleep or walked out. Fearing such an outcome again, and believing that such an outcome would “kill” Calvero, Terry has gone so far as to bribe a group of her sycophants to laugh and applaud after every joke. But the complete Empire Ballet audience greets Calvero’s jokes with loud laughter and even tears. And the same audience gets to see him carried off-stage in a drum as if he were a sardine in a round can. So, looked at as a parallel to the empathy scene you analyzed, the “Sardine Song” in some ways suspends or questions that initial empathy.

Despite that, your intuition that Calvero’s notion of selfhood differs from Humbert’s is one I share, in part because the “Sardine Song” does not end the film. After the doctor has diagnosed him as having suffered a heart attack and not a broken back, Calvero asks to be carried to the wings so he can see Terry dance. To understand the importance of this gesture, and to understand the subtitle --“the glamour of limelight from which age must pass as youth enters”--we need to look at the intersection of three motifs, all of which have to do with the relation between life and art: feet, windows, and Columbine’s death.

Feet: The feet come in by way of this exchange:

Calvero to Terry (after she has begun walking again): Don't be discouraged. You'll get on your feet again.

Terry: On my what again?

While this exchange sounds as if Terry does not understand idiomatic or figurative English, since she is already walking with Calvero by the riverside, Calvero must be talking about her artistic feet, that is, a more desirable step in her career. Whatever the case, the phrase “on your feet again,” in the language of Russian Formalists, is being foregrounded. Yet when Calvero and Griffith (Chaplin and Keaton) perform their musical number as Calvero’s final encore at the grand gala, Calvero’s feet repeatedly keep disappearing into his pant legs suggesting the degree of anxiety Calvero feels during this (drunkennes-unaided) performance, but the routine also explains why Calvero so quickly recognized and understood Terry’s psychosomatic paralysis.

Windows/Columbine's Death: The Stage Director of *Harlequinnade* explains the action to his actors:

Harlequin, who is the lover, and the clowns, are at her [Columbine's] bedside. She asks to be carried to the window. She wants to look upon the rooftops one last time. The clowns weep. She smiles. "Their clothes are not for sorrow but for laughter." She wants them to perform, do their tricks. The clowns can do their comedy.

Calvero: While she's dying?

Director: Yes.

The window comes up again in connection with dying when during their make-up session Griffith (another washed-up clown hired to replace the poorly performing Calvero in the *Harlequinnade*) gruffly announces "If anybody else says "it's like old times," I'll jump out the window! First the doorman, then the call boy, now the stage manager." When the Empire Ballet owner enters, he too makes just such a comment: "It's like old times seeing you here again putting on your war paint." Given the "if-then" nature of Griffith's announcement, the theatre owner's comment, by being foregrounded, suggests that we should expect something connected with windows and/or jumping to follow. And our expectations are justified when Calvero pretends to stumble off the stage, a routing that requires him to jump out of the audience's view into the orchestra pit. But where the younger Calvero could carry off such a trick, the older Calvero suffers a heart attack during the pratfall. Though the audience does not notice, it is not at all like old times. Yet Calvero had insisted on having that trick be his final encore number. While he is unlikely to be planning that his leap be the leap of death, in retrospect we see that where before death was a pretense for entertaining others, here it is a supreme expression of concern for another human being.

And just as Columbine in her dying moments asks to be taken to the window, the dying Calvero asks to be taken into the wings (the theater's doors/windows) to see Terry dance. And of course he dies while watching her perform her desire for life by dancing to Neville's music. She is in fact imitating his miming of the tree's and flower's growth and putting into practice his ideas about life as a desire for more life.

Humbert who very much regrets not taking pictures of Lolita, concludes his narrative by seeing it as the “only immortality” he and Lolita may ever have. Calvero’s career, forgotten by all but his earliest audiences, suggests that immortality is not guaranteed by one’s art. Rather it is Terry and Neville, both beneficiaries of empathy (Terry of Calvero’s, Neville of Terry’s), who recreate the best of Calvero’s career by creating the conditions for a gala sending off, conditions under which Calvero can go out with dignity even if that dignity is secured by stumbling off the stage into a drum. Because the gala sendoff is definitely not like old times, Calvero carries out Griffith’s threat and in essence jumps out the window by jumping off the stage. He kills himself despite convincing Terry that there are too many reasons for not doing so. While in legal and medical terms, Calvero’s death is the result of an accident, the film’s form and themes suggest otherwise. Formally, *Limelight* thus begins and ends with the act of suicide. But as you, Shoko, have already concluded, Calvero “does not think of himself,” so paradoxically Calvero’s suicide is not about Calvero. He does not kill himself because he does not wish to live without Terry or because he did not get his way. He kills himself because that is the only way for Terry to become the artist and person she with Calvero’s help now wants to become. Now that is some empathy! Imagine Humbert doing that for Charlotte or Lolita. (3264 words)

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