Chapter 18: “In Fictional Shoes: Mental Simulation and Fiction” by Deborah Knight

The “Mental Simulation Model” of empathetic responses to fictional characters.

What does this involve?

Standard answer: “…we simulate how someone reasons if we want to predict their actions, and we simulate how they feel if we want a clear sense of how things are for them. The objective of simulation is to answer the question, ‘What is it like to be someone else?’” [271Lt]

With fiction, this would be converted to the question “What is it like to be someone fictional?”

Knight’s position: the mental simulation model “is less than wholly adequate to the task of accounting for our interest in, or our emotional involvement with, fictional characters.”

**The Folk Model**

Knight accepts Neill’s explanation for our interest in/empathetic response to fictional characters “is sustained by the same folk psychology we use to understand and interpret the actions of those around us.”[272Lt/m]

Knight’s main point is that while the simulation model makes natural appeal to this folk-psychological way of treating fictional characters as we treat actual people (and gains some of its force and plausibility from how we *do* apply idioms taken from folk-psychological approaches to understanding what other people are thinking, feeling, and why they are doing what they do), our relationship to fictional characters is *also* mediated by “textual elements in a fictional structure … as focalizers of metaphoric, symbolic, thematic or generic significance.”

JP: So we can regard King Lear as an aging monarch dealing with the loss of both his personal power and within his own family, but **also** as a representation of threats to monarchy itself, threats that began to emerge in the period in European history that Shakespeare lived through and which his play can be taken to be a way of commenting on and reacting to/portending.

Her main point is that in focusing too much on the folk-psychological idioms in which we talk about fictional characters, we develop “a skewed view of how fictions work, and how they work *on us*.” (my emphasis; [272Rt])

**Mental Simulation**

We are trying to estimate the mental states of others (a basic need, especially when trying to predict their future behavior), and that is what is appealing about simulation theory. It is apt in application to fictional characters as essential to the process of feeling empathy for them.

Simulation theory’s application to fictional characters and narratives seems natural since “explaining mental simulation [in the theory of mind] includes terms such as make-believe, pretence, dramatic enactment, imaginative projection, and social role-playing” [272Rb]

This is part of what philosophers of mind (Alvin Goldman, e.g.) call the “practical reasoning mechanism” by which we are able to understanding the behavior and experience of others in virtue of sharing “a similar way of processing beliefs, desires, and other attitudes.”

[273Lt]

The practical reasoning mechanism usually contributes to what leads to *action* in our own case, but when applied to estimate the mental states of others, it is chiefly serving to make *prediction* of their actions possible.

Knight finds problems with this model of what is going on when we simulate the mental states of others:

1. The ‘black box’ that is conceded to be ‘the practical reasoning mechanism’ must “contend with … temptations of competing desires and the need to select one action from a range of options.”

Upshot: Knight’s complaint is that the mechanism has to do more things that she thinks it can handle (it amounts to the claim that this *depends on too much background cognitive processing to be a plausible account*) and *also* that it must estimate *which of the things going on around the fictional character/other person* would count as the **actual inputs** to which they respond with various **outputs** (i.e., beliefs, desires, intentions, plans, etc.).

JP: Counter: but this is something we successfully do with other people, so why not with fictional characters whose **inputs** are in various ways *more predictable and better distinguished from various possible inputs* by the magic of the *fictional narrative’s devices* (after all, the author of the narrative wants us to experience the character *in some ways* and *not in others* and uses fictional devices of narrative to produce that effect in us). So, her objection that the ‘practical reasoning mechanism’ has to process too much is disputed by evidence in accounts of cognitive processing coming from cognitive psychological models of automatic processing that suggests we *do* have the ability to sort among possible inputs, and why not when trying to estimate what a given situation would stimulate in another person’s system of processing inputs? We *aren’t so different* as to make this as hard as Knight seems to think.

JP’s Counter 2: we don’t need to be *right* in imagining another’s reaction to a situation for the simulation theory to be thereby made suspect. *People mistake the intentions/inner states of others ALL THE TIME*, but that doesn’t mean *accuracy is essential if the model is to characterize how we come to develop empathy for others!!!* (it seems to suppose that only successful empathy [empathizing *in the right way*] is required for the theory to be correct. But this doesn’t seem to stand as evidence that the theory is wrong (only that we are not always good at empathizing *accurately*).

Knight makes good point: mental simulation doesn’t require or yield empathy.

JP: Sure. But mental simulation could be a necessary condition for empathy.

I don’t find Knight convincing in her conclusion that simulation theory fails because it can’t explain how we estimate **correctly** part of the time. But this seems to require that the theory account for something that it might not need to (because, for example, perhaps we are *not very good at estimating what others will do based on what we think they are feeling, believing, intending, etc.* but **cannot do without trying to make such estimates anyway, and this is natural and unavoidable given our need to work with others**.]

**Simulating Fictions**

First important question: “How is it rational to treat fictional characters as having mental states and attitudes?” [274Rm]

Her best point: the maker of the fiction takes pains to *tell us* what the beliefs, desires, inner mental states of the fictional character are *so we won’t have to use our* ***simulation device*** *to figure it out for ourselves*.[274Rm]

Lamarque deals with this problem by suggesting that when engaged with fictional characters we can approach them in either of two modes: from the internal perspective or from the external perspective. The internal perspective makes clear use of (and has a need for) the simulation model of empathetic treatment of fictional characters. But the external perspective “considers such literary matters as theme, style, and mode of representation” as our basis for our empathetic projection onto and *feeling with* the character-as-represented-by-way-of-the-literary-devices-in-use. [274Rb]

Knight prefers Lamarques’ model of empathetic response to fictional characters because it allows for a role that only the literary/filmic representational devices can play in helping to stimulate that response in a reader/viewer.

Her best evidence that simulation theory, as applied to explain our empathetic engagement with fictional characters, is inadequate is the apparent fact (her “real-Barb vs. fictional-Emma Woodhouse” case illustrates this) that whether the person we are trying to understand is real or fictional *changes what is* ***relevant***to estimating the mental states of the **person vs. person-like** entity we are trying to understand (for real people it involves what we know of their beliefs, desires, interests, character, etc., whereas for fictional people it involves things tied directly to the *mode of presentation/representation* of the fictional character [in the case of film, mise-en-sce`ne, sound, music, framing and camera movement, the contribution of the personae of the actors to the realization of characters]).

More evidence against applying the simulation model to our engagement with fictional characters: we don’t really have the concern to **predict the behavior** of fictional characters (in the way we **do have such a concern** when it comes to real people, at least part of the time).

JP: One reason for this is that in a movie, except when the film involves a mystery that directly turns on what a particular character chooses to do in the course of the story, we are *much less likely* to be trying to estimate what lies in the future (often because the storyline offers explicit signals about what to expect). Movie-watching is really not a *puzzle-solving* enterprise, by and large.

JP: But perhaps this is equally true of our empathetic engagement with real-world people? In that case, the problem with the simulation model might not be that it imposes *prediction* as the chief objective and point of *simulation-as-practical-reasoning-device* **inappropriately to fiction**, but that it is **equally inappropriately applied to real-world people**.

Another good point from Knight on 275Rm/b: how the fiction presents a character (including when a genre is involved that imposes certain conventions [an emphasis on characters doing certain things *always,* as is the case in a horror film when lead characters regularly take foolish risks because that serves the *point* of a horror story, which is to *scare us*] and these conventions can lead us to be more interested (for some genres) in what a character *might do* (a romantic melodrama), but more interested (for other genres) in what the character is feeling or thinking internally (in a complex character study, for example).

**Simulation and Feelings**

The preceding considerations about the simulation theory focus on *reasoning* and how well simulation theory handles the role of reasoning in empathetic response to fictions. Knight now to turns to feelings and how simulation theory handles its role in empathetic response to fictions.

Feelings *for* (sympathy) a fictional character do not require that we feel what the fictional character seems to be feeling/is represented as feeling. But feelings *with* (empathy) a fictional character do require that we feel what they are represented as feeling, at least to some extent.

Knight adds a caveat: *some feelings of a fictional character are* ***not*** *felt by the empathetic viewer*. Rather, they are ‘second-order’ responses (I feel glad [second-order response] the fictional character is in love, but *their gladness at being in love* [first-order response] is going to be different than mine).

Knight distinguishes simulation thought about in terms of practical reasoning and simulation thought about in terms of empathetic emotional responses as follows:

Simulation focused on practical reasoning (what will the character *do*?) is ‘off-line” (i.e., the simulator is or at least **can be** ‘disinterested’), but simulation focused on empathetic feeling responses is not able to function if we are ‘disengaged/disinterested’.

To ask: why is this?

Knight’s caveat: what you feel when watch another person in an emotional state need not be identical to that felt by the other person. You may be responding with the same emotions, but *for different reasons* (they have just lost their child and are grief-stricken, you empathetically grieve *for them* and in doing so, *feel grief yourself* (but not for the loss of the child, but for *their* loss of the child).

Call this the *asymmetry of empathetic feeling.* The asymmetry is even greater with a fictional character since while you are aware of them, they are not aware of you.

Question about Knight’s view that Feagin is wrong to give to breakout groups: why is empathetic responses to fictional characters *not* appropriately thought of as *simulation* but rather as *imaginative projection*? Do you agree, or disagree; with Knight’s view?