



Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences (MIT Press)

Karsten Stueber

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In this timely and wide-ranging study, Karsten Stueber argues that empathy is epistemically central for our folk-psychological understanding of other agents--that it is something we cannot do without in order to gain understanding of other minds. Setting his argument in the context of contemporary philosophy of mind and the interdisciplinary debate about the nature of our mindreading abilities, Stueber counters objections raised by some in the philosophy of social science and argues that it is time to rehabilitate the empathy thesis. Empathy, regarded at the beginning of the twentieth century as the fundamental method of gaining knowledge of other minds, has suffered a century of philosophical neglect. Stueber addresses the plausible philosophical misgivings about empathy that have been responsible for its failure to gain widespread philosophical acceptance. Crucial in this context is his defense of the assumption, very much contested in contemporary philosophy of mind, that the notion of rational agency is at the core of folk psychology. Stueber then discusses the contemporary debate between simulation theorists--who defend various forms of the empathy thesis--and theory theorists. In distinguishing between basic and reenactive empathy, he provides a new interpretive framework for the investigation into our mindreading capacities. Finally, he considers epistemic objections to empathy raised by the philosophy of social science that have been insufficiently discussed in contemporary debates. Empathy theorists, Stueber writes, should be prepared to admit that, although empathy can be regarded as the central default mode for understanding other agents, there are certain limitations in its ability to make sense of other agents; and there are supplemental theoretical strategies available to overcome these limitations.

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