

## Ethics at the Crossroads of Disciplines: Cognitive, Affect, and Literary Studies

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### Abstract:

Patrick Colm Hogan's book explores the interconnections between cognitive science, literature, and ethics. The author argues that a cognitive and affective understanding of the concepts of narrative and empathy may shed light on the process behind our moral thought. Drawing on interdisciplinary expertise, the book not only provides an important contribution to comparative literature and ethics but also advances cognitive and affective science.

### Ethik am Scheideweg der Disziplinen: Kognitive Poetik, Affektstudien und Literaturwissenschaft

#### German Abstract:

In seinem Buch untersucht Patrick Colm Hogan die Verbindungen zwischen Kognitiver Poetik, Literatur, und Ethik und argumentiert, dass ein kognitives und affektives Verständnis der Konzepte von Erzählung und Empathie Aufschluss über den Prozess hinter unserem moralischen Denken geben kann. Durch seine Interdisziplinarität leistet das Buch nicht nur einen wichtigen Beitrag zur vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft und Ethik, sondern zielt auch darauf ab, kognitive Poetik und Affektstudien voranzubringen.

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Hogan, Patrick Colm. *Literature and Moral Feeling. A Cognitive Poetics of Ethics, Narrative, and Empathy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 306 pages, 85 GBP. ISBN: 978-1-00-916951-6.

Decades of research and debates conducted in the wake of the narrative and ethical turns have revealed several points of contact between ethics, literature, and cognitive science. Patrick Colm Hogan's book, *Literature and Moral Feeling*, masterfully brings together those three areas, pinpointing how our ethical thought and action are following narrative structures and empathic evaluation. Specifically, Hogan aims to demonstrate the "ethical centrality of empathy" (p. 37). His main thesis is that ethical categorization is built upon the same categories that govern narrative structures, namely, emotion-motivation categories. Within those categories, Hogan singles out empathy as the only emotion capable of eliciting ethical actions, which are driven by what he calls "allocentric self-interest" (p. 6). To prove his argument, the author combines literary studies with affective and cognitive science to extend his previous work, especially *The Mind and Its Stories* (Cambridge 2003) and *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories* (Lincoln 2011), to the realm of ethics and morality.

The underlying structure of the book reflects the conceptual division between narrative and empathy, which mirrors the fundamental distinction between a descriptive account of ethics and a normative one. This dualist structure is further exploited in the division between the theoretical and illustrative chapters. The first part of the book covers four chapters and focuses on descriptive ethics. The main argument that the author develops in those chapters is that human ethical reasoning is driven by the cognitive process of categorization. Specifically, he argues that in our ethical responses, we make use of "rule-defined categorization, prototype-defined categorization, and exemplar-defined categorization" (p. 4). In his attempt to show how moral responses rely on all these processes, Hogan's descriptive account of ethics aims to go beyond approaches to ethics "distinguished by their virtually exclusive stress on one or another

variety of categorization” (p. 4). In his account of the rules that govern our ethical orientation, Hogan sets three main parameters: the first indicates towards whom we tend to feel more ethical obligations (scope parameter), the second indicates whether we are more concerned with restricting other people’s unmerited pleasure or unmerited pain (valence parameter), and the third sets whether we tend to make ethical judgments relying on deontology or consequentialism (method parameter). This conceptualization is then concretized through the analysis of Shakespeare’s literary text *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. By demonstrating that the main characters’ orientations “align with a common setting of the scope parameter to nation or state and of the valence parameter to unmerited pleasure,” while Shakespeare’s own parameter settings appear to be “more broadly human and attentive to undeserved pain” (p. 51), Hogan illustrates how his heuristic model can illuminate the ethical perspective conveyed in a literary work. However, the chapter partly fails in relieving the reader from the abstract overload since, in order to give an account of the ethics of the Shakespearean work, Hogan has to anticipate and elaborate on the prototype concept, the central topic of the following two chapters.

Bearing on the assumption mainly developed in his earlier work *The Mind and Its Stories*, according to which prototypical narrative structures, also defined as story universals, are shaped by the emotion-motivation system, Hogan further maintains that those universal story structures are pivotal for our ethical thought. Although following the author’s argumentative path up to this point requires some effort on the part of the readers, they are rewarded as Hogan makes evident the entanglements between comparative literature, prototype theory, and the emotion system. He argues that those story universals, which he now refers to as genres, are “formed around ideals generated by emotion systems,” which are “remarkably similar across distinct traditions,” such as the “heroic,” “romantic,” and “sacrificial” (p. 72). Accordingly, he can argue that some fundamental ethical orientations are shared by different cultures and different periods.

The second part of the book, which includes chapters five to eight, focuses on normative ethics and the role of empathy in ethical evaluation. Through this section, the reader starts to gain an even clearer understanding of how the different concepts in the book are interconnected. Hogan emphasizes the importance of empathy in ethics, as he guides the reader into the original differentiation that he makes between actions driven by “allocentric self-interest” and

“egocentric self-interest” (p. 19). Empathy, accordingly, is what can foster nonegocentric interest, which is to say, ethical actions and “this necessarily makes empathy central to ethics, including normative ethics” (p. 6). Hogan’s argument about the embeddedness of empathy in normative ethics is convincing and a key aspect of the book.

Before exploring the relationship between ethics and empathy, Hogan provides a comprehensive account of emotions and empathy based on cognitive and affective science. He explains how cognitive processes like inference and simulation allow us to understand and respond to other people’s mental processes. Hogan distinguishes between cognitive and affective empathy, with the latter relating to the target’s feelings rather than their mental state. This theoretical background is further developed in relation to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* since, according to Hogan’s enactivist stance, “empathic response needs to be understood in the context of actual engagement in the world” (p. 182). Chapters seven and eight engage in the project of an “ethical advocacy of empathy” (p. 7) by refuting the main arguments of anti-empathy writers.

By confronting and questioning some of the most influential works on morality and the relationship between empathy and narrative, such as Jonathan Haidt’s *The Righteous Mind* (New York 2012) and Suzanne Keen’s *Empathy and the Novel* (New York 2007), Hogan’s *Literature and Moral Feeling* is an enriching and informative contribution to ethical theory, cognitive and affective sciences, and literary studies. The author displays a deep knowledge of the addressed disciplines and fulfills the ambitious task of combining multiple research fields and theoretical frameworks. However, the complexity of the book’s concepts and their interconnectedness sometimes results in a slightly fragmented and disjointed reading experience. Furthermore, the frequent anticipations and retardations required by the conceptual richness of the project tend to keep the reader in suspense, in quest of grasping the book’s project as a whole. Nonetheless, the overall argumentative pattern is convincing thanks to a robust theoretical anchoring. The highly interdisciplinary approach of *Literature and Moral Feeling* makes Hogan’s work an important point of reference for scholars and researchers interested in gaining insights into the topic of ethics and its interactions with cognitive, affective sciences, and literary studies.