HON-H233 (16214) An Interdisciplinary History of Empathy
Fritz Lieber
MW 2:30pm-3:45pm
HU 217

For a more detailed course description, please contact Professor Lieber (flieber@indiana.edu).

Our working definition of empathy is the feeling of other people’s feelings. As we study the history of this idea from ancient Greece to the present, we investigate and complicate that definition. From President Obama who named empathy a valuable trait in a Supreme Court justice, to an audience at a pole vaulting contest who lean in their seats as the vaulter curves over the bar, empathy is a central concept in government, law, athletics, art, science, education, medicine, human science, and the humanities. Empathy has a privileged seat at our human table, but how did it get there? What are its roots? What can the history of empathy tell us about it psychologically, socially, and physically? Why is empathy a pervasive and important concept across cultures and disciplines?

Our course is interdisciplinary. We follow empathy in philosophy, neurology, literature, criticism, psychology, art and aesthetics, social and behavioral science, psychotherapy, and morality. Beginning with theories of shared feeling as the basis of physical and social organization, we work our way to modern interpretations of empathy as attitude, understanding, perspective-taking, transposition, development, relationship, and mirroring. Students write a midterm and final paper.

The class is conducted as a seminar discussion. All readings are original documents, including excerpts from Hippocrates, Plato, Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne, Joshua Reynolds, Rousseau, David Hume, Adam Smith, Herder, Keats, Freud, Charles Cooley, Mary Calkins, E.B. Titchener, Carl Rogers, and others.