



NAME

William Ian Miller

TITLE OF PRESENTATION

Feeling Another's Pain: Sympathy and Psychology Saga-Style

ABSTRACT OF PRESENTATION

We never really feel another's pain, except in a vaguely mirror neuron kind of way. Can you be sure, of course not, that when you love someone, they feel the same as you do if they should say they also love you? Can you be sure they feel the same as you when you grieve? Of course not, but we satisfice. We accept certain statements and behavioral signs that we are on the same page. But now let us repair to setting where bringing home to another, forcing, let us say, sympathy upon them, is crucial. The problem of verifiability of another's internal states must be overcome, and overcome in such a way that you can trust they are feeling exactly what you want them to feel. But there are some remarkably clever ways to finesse the problem of what we might call verifying another's pain, but as to its quality and quantity. And where else but in an Icelandic saga do we see precisely this issue addressed with great sophistication and wit. I then take a look at some saga cases that show their sophistication regarding coordination of internal states. I want to show you just how good some medieval people, medieval Icelanders to be exact, were at understanding internal mental and emotional states. No it was not sweet; they were toughminded; they had to be because the stakes were higher for them in most simply transactions, as say when dealing with merchants in a harbor, or when trying to gather support in order to bring a lawsuit.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

William Ian Miller, the Thomas G. Long Professor of Law, has been a member of the Michigan Law School faculty since 1984. Originally, his research centered on saga Iceland, from whence the materials studied in his blood feuds class and his book, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (1990). He has also written about emotions, mostly unpleasant ones involving self-assessment, and select vices and virtues. Thus his books: *The Mystery of Courage* (2000), *The Anatomy of Disgust* (1997), *Humiliation* (1993), and *Faking It* (2003), the last of which deals with anxieties of role, identity, and posturings of authenticity. *The Anatomy of Disgust* was named the best book of 1997 in anthropology/sociology by the Association of American Publishers. In *Eye for an Eye* (2006), he returns to matters of revenge and retribution in an extended treatment of the law of the talion. *Audun and the Polar Bear: Luck, Law, and Largesse in a Medieval Tale of Risky Business* (2008) is an extended treatment of a superbly crafted short Icelandic tale. His most recent book, *Losing It...* (2011), about aging and decline, was named by Maclean's magazine of Canada to their top ten non-fiction books of 2011; and the Chicago Tribune named it one of the ten best books of the year. He is presently at work on a book on *Njáls saga*. Professor Miller grew up in Green Bay, Wisconsin, earned his BA from the University of Wisconsin and received both a PhD in English and a JD (Law) from Yale. He has also been a visiting professor at Yale, Harvard, the University of Chicago, the University of Bergen, the University of Tel Aviv, and in 2008 was named the Carnegie Centenary Trust Professor at the University of St. Andrews. He is now honorary professor of history at the University of St. Andrews.