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From Empathy to Intersubjectivity: The Phenomenological Approach

Abstract: In this paper I explicate the classical *phenomenological* approach to empathy (an umbrella term for a number of distinct interpersonal experiences of understanding others) to highlight some original and significant aspects of this approach that still have relevance for contemporary debates in the cognitive sciences and in analytical philosophy of mind and action. The focus is on Edmund Husserl, with some discussion of Max Scheler, Edith Stein, and Martin Heidegger. I briefly sketch the history of empathy and then focus on the classical phenomenological treatment of empathy as a direct quasi-perception and not an imaginative projection of simulation. Empathy, for Husserl and Stein, names this experiential sense of grasping *another subject* and immersing oneself in the other's subjectivity, leading to an 'intertwining' (*Verflechtung*, *Ineinandersein*) of subjects (intersubjectivity) and to the constitution of the world as objective 'world-for-all'. Empathy functions only within an entire social, historical and cultural world.

Introduction: The Nature and Importance of Empathy

The complex set of phenomena included under the umbrella term 'empathy' (*Einfühlung*) was originally discussed in eighteenth-century British sentimentalist philosophy as 'sympathy' (Hume, Adam Smith); in nineteenth-century German psychology (Lipps, Volkert, Münsterberg); in hermeneutics (Dilthey); and in twentieth-century phenomenology (Husserl, Scheler, Stein). More recently, empathy has been revived as a topic in empirical psychology (Baron-Cohen 2011, 2012; Coplan and Goldie 2011) and in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind (Goldman 1992, 2006). Empathy construed as a sensitive attunement to the *feelings* of others has been seen as the basis of morality.¹ In this chapter, I briefly sketch the history of empathy and then focus on the classical phenomenological treatment of empathy.

¹ Bazalgette (2017) claims empathy is needed for a caring society; Paul Bloom (2016) argues against empathy as it restricts sensitivity to those close to us. See also Prinz 2011.

Husserl and the phenomenological tradition (Scheler, Stein) employ the term ‘empathy’ as a catch-all term for all kinds of ‘experience of the other [person]’ (*Fremderfahrung*), but primarily the direct (quasi-) ‘perception of the other’ (*Fremdwahrnehmung*). Phenomenology treats empathy as direct, intuitive, quasi-perceptual grasp of the other subject’s mental or emotional state, rather than as a simulation of or theorization about the other’s behaviour. Empathy is a fundamental and distinctive form of *intentionality*, a *sui generis* mental capacity, and not just an emotional response, an imaginative envisaging, simulation, or inference (Stein 1989/1917).

For Husserl, empathy is not, first and foremost, any kind of imaginative projection (introjection) or imagining oneself in the other’s shoes (although we are certainly capable of this kind of imaginative projection). Imaginative projection or *introjection* (Husserl uses *Introjektion*, Husserl 1989, § 49) is not yet empathy. The school boy excited by the passion of Shakespeare’s Romeo is not having a *genuine* experience of Romeo’s passion, since, Scheler suggests, the original ground for the valuing is not there. The school boy is, as it were, deceived into thinking Romeo’s passion is his. It is at best a borrowed passion, according to Edith Stein’s analysis (Stein 1989, p. 32; Stein 1917, p. 35).

Mental states are complex, stratified unities and experienced as seamless unities (perhaps best expressed adverbially; ‘she *angrily* rebuffed his entreaties’). Empathy involves the recognition of other subjects as *intentional* beings—*agents*, sense-makers, persons attentive to values. Empathy, moreover, for phenomenology, is not specifically a conscious ‘mental’ or metacognitive activity; rather it is an intuitive, embodied, flesh-to-flesh relation, constituted in and through our embodied subjectivities (Szanto and Moran 2015a; 2015b). I see someone’s hand *pressing* on the desk, and have a transferred sense of what that experience feels like for them but at the same time distinguish the other’s experience from mine.

In the phenomenological tradition, empathy is related to *intersubjectivity*, sociality, and our very ‘being-in-the-world’ or enworldedness or ‘embeddedness’ (*Einbettung*, to use Gerda Walther’s term). Empathy involves a co-being or ‘being-with’ the other subject within an interpersonal world. Intersubjectivity, for phenomenology, founds objectivity. It is because I grasp different perspectives precisely as different perspectives on the one world, that I have a sense of *the* world in itself (*Welt an sich*, Husserl 1954, p. 62), a common world that transcends perspectives and is indeed our ultimate context that makes us understand that my immediate world-awareness actually is a perspective. *Empathy*, for Husserl and Stein leads to an intertwining (*Verflechtung*, *Ineinandersein*) of subjects (intersubjectivity) and to the constitution of the objective world as a ‘world-for-all’ (*Welt für alle*, Husserl 1954, p. 257).

Significant questions arise about the nature and scope of empathy. How does empathy differ from emotional identification, sympathy, compassion? Is it restricted to inter-human contact? Can humans genuinely empathize with animals, plants,² or even non-living nature (a ‘brooding’ sky) or works of art? Indeed, in nineteenth-century discussions of *Einführung* (by Stephan Witasek, Robert Vischer, and Johannes Volkert), the paradigmatic objects of empathy were ‘expressive’ works of art (Depew 2005).

What are the *limits* of empathy? Can one empathize only with people *similar* to oneself? Are there temporal limits to the reach of empathic connection? Can someone today really understand the historical Socrates’ *motivation*? Besides historical figures, can I empathize with *fictional* characters, such as Hamlet (Harold 2000)?

In the contemporary analytic tradition, empathy is largely considered to be akin to what has been termed ‘mindreading’ (Goldman 2006). Thus, Alvin Goldman writes:

Having a mental state and *representing* another as having such a state are entirely different matters. The latter activity, *mentalizing* or *mindreading* is a second order activity. It is a mind thinking about minds. It is the activity of conceptualizing other creatures (and oneself) as loci of mental life. (Goldman 2006, p. 3)

On this construal, mind-reading is an explicit second-order, meta-act of mentalization. Husserlian phenomenology rejects this characterization. Empathy is direct, intuitive, quasi-perceptual, needing no conceptualization or explicit mentalization. I simply *see* your face and *recognize* you are happy.

Husserl always says that empathy is not an ‘inference’ (*Schluss*) or reasoning process.³ He calls it an ‘apperception’ (*Apperzeption*, *Vergegenwärtigung*, Husserl 1950, p. 139), a higher-order, more complex ‘mediate’ intuition (Husserl 1950, p. 138) that is *founded* on something given in immediate perception, in this case, the vibrant living body of the person being grasped empathically, e.g., a smiling face; a threatening tone of voice. Husserl also calls it a ‘quasi-perception’ (*Quasi-Wahrnehmung*, Husserl 1952, p. 263), because of its directness and the sense of immediate presence of the object (e.g., the other’s gaiety), although this perception-like intuition lacks the full contours of external perception and is founded explicitly on direct perception of bodily expressions (and an accompanying ‘apperceptive transfer’). Empathy is an act whereby one subject appre-

² Edith Stein maintains we can have an empathic relation with plants (Stein 1989, p. 67) as living things, even if not egoic consciousnesses (but see Marder 2012).

³ Husserl writes: “*Also ist der Schluss ein Sophisma*” (Husserl 1973a, p. 38).

hends not just the other's mental state (as the intended 'content' of an act) but one's focus is drawn to the foreign *subjectivity* of the other (although, as Husserl makes clear, I cannot *live* through the other's *first-personness* as the other does directly).

In *Ideas I* (1913) § 1 (Husserl 2014, p. 8), Husserl introduced in print his distinction between 'originary' (*originär*) and non-originary experiences. Originary experiences are 'first-personal', e.g., my own flow of conscious states. Husserl says, however, that we do *not* have 'originary' experience of others in empathy (Husserl 2014, p. 10; 1913, p. 8); our experiences of others are 'non-originary' (*nicht originär*).

Husserl introduces a second distinction between the actual moments that are originally given or present themselves in a 'presentation' or 'exhibit' (*Darstellung*), in what he calls 'primary originary' (*primäre Originarität*), and what he calls the 'secondary originary' of the emptily co-presented other sides of the object that do not actually appear (from the side of the other subject). The other subject is also present in a kind of empty manner since I cannot experience her experience from the inside. I apprehend the other as the dark side of the moon. Empathy is non-original in that I never grasp your side of the experience but I grasp the experience (partly or wholly) as *yours*.

It is important to stress that empathy, then, for phenomenology, does not require both persons to be in the *same* mental or emotional state (as in emotional identification or fusion). We do not *share* a state with the other, or need to have previously experienced it in order to recognize it. Nor does empathy require me to *activate* the same emotion in myself in a rehearsal or simulation. Thus, attending a movie, I can apprehend and, in a sense, 'live through' the murderous rage of the killer on screen, although I may never have experienced previously such a consuming rage (and don't want to murder anyone).⁴ Perhaps I can imaginatively amplify or 'dial-up' a current annoyance into a total rage (such 'amplification' David Hume assumed as one of the innate capacities of the mind), but it surely seems possible to apprehend novel experiences one has never personally had. Otherwise, as Husserl points out, I could never apprehend the other *as other* but only as a modification of myself (*alter ego*). My current mental state can even be the opposite of that which I apprehend in the other. I can actually be sad but apprehend you as happy. Indeed, your joy may itself infect me (through

⁴ Much of the debate concerning empathic experiencing in art (literature, theatre, painting) in traditional German aesthetics, focused on the question of whether fiction-induced feelings or emotions (e.g., in his *Confessions* 1.13 Augustine recalls weeping for the slain Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid*) are real feelings or aesthetic 'virtual' or fantasy feelings. Husserl and Stein maintain that motivations experienced in art are not genuine motivations founded in real experiences.

what Scheler called *Ansteckung*, ‘emotional contagion’, Scheler 1973a, p. 240) to also be happy, or at least to be able to calibrate my sadness against your joy. I can join in your happiness in a way that may *modify* my sadness. Or I may have reasons that *motivate* me to share in your joy and put aside my sadness; I start to feel joyful from this motivation. In that case, my sadness is shot through with rationalization. Or your joy may *irritate* me in my sadness, or make me *jealous* for your good fortune (and I do not have to be conscious that it is doing so—I can simply change mood in some kind of response to your emotional state).

Empathy, phenomenologists insist, is neither a simulation nor a form of inferential reasoning. Of course, empathy may well be accompanied by reasoning. One may apprehend an ambiguous or unclear aspect in the other’s communicated self-presentation that requires further exploration. But here one is mining the richness of the given experience. Similarly, it may be the case that there are pathological conditions, e.g., severe autistic spectrum disorder (Baron-Cohen 1995), where the immediate intuitive apprehension that founds the reasoned inquiry is missing and, therefore, persons suffering this condition need to be educated to interpret, read signals, rationally comprehend how others respond to one’s behavior, and so on.⁵

As Max Scheler and others have recognized, empathy is a grasp of the other subject, a kind of ‘mind-sightedness’, but it is not necessarily a morally good experience (although, in the English language, empathy has only positive connotations). There is empathy among thieves (as both Adam Smith and Scheler acknowledge). Empathy may not be benign or caring of others, e.g., pretending, lying, deceiving, spin-doctoring, acting, emotionally manipulating or influencing, love-bombing, may employ empathy. A torturer can use empathy to get inside their victim’s head.

Let us briefly review the evolution of the concept of empathy (and its sister concept ‘sympathy’, see Moran 2004).

5 A total inability to comprehend or acknowledge another perspective would seem to also rule out the possibility of using language to attribute mental stances to others. Personal testimony from persons putatively on the autistic spectrum suggest they can rationally understand the implications of a particular social situation without personally undergoing the appropriate feeling.