



*Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy*

# **EMPATHY'S ROLE IN UNDERSTANDING PERSONS, LITERATURE, AND ART**

Edited by  
Thomas Petraschka and Christiana Werner



# Empathy's Role in Understanding Persons, Literature, and Art

This volume critically discusses the role empathy plays in different processes of understanding. More precisely, it clarifies empathy's role in interpersonal understanding and appreciating works of literature and art. The volume also includes a section on historical theories of empathy's role in understanding.

When it comes to understanding other persons, empathy is typically seen as a process that enables the empathizer to recognize a target person's mental states, a process which is in turn seen as "understanding" this person. This volume, however, explores empathy's role in understanding beyond mere mental state recognition. With contributions on processes of interpersonal understanding and understanding of literature and art, it provides readers with an overview over both differences and similarities regarding empathy's epistemic role in two rather different areas. Since important roots of the debate about empathic understanding lie at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the historical section of the volume focusses specifically on this period.

*Empathy's Role in Understanding Persons, Literature, and Art* will appeal to scholars and advanced students working in the philosophy of mind, epistemology, aesthetics and the history of philosophy, as well as in literary studies and art history.

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# Empathic Understanding

## Historical and Recent Perspectives on Empathy's Role in Social Cognition and Aesthetics

*Thomas Petraschka and Christiana Werner*

This volume follows a long tradition of philosophical research on empathy, reaching back to the Scottish sentimentalism debate in the eighteenth century and to the German debate on “Einfühlung” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The latter debate marked one of the high points of interest in the topic – Theodor Lipps, the most prominent specialist among philosophers at the time, considered empathy as vital for quite literally *all* areas of philosophy, including not only ethics and epistemology, but also aesthetics, philosophy of mind, and even philosophy of language (Lipps 2018 [1913]).<sup>1</sup> And although the Einfühlung-debate was responsible for the term “empathy” becoming part of the English language (see our introduction to the *History of Empathy* chapter in this volume), the debate in itself failed to gain any real traction in the English-speaking world at the time. After it had also petered out in German-speaking countries around 1930, philosophical interest in empathy steadily declined for several decades. Recently, however, this trend has reversed. Since the late twentieth century a renewed interest in empathy can be observed (among the most important philosophical publications are Stueber 2006; Goldman 2006; Coplan and Goldie 2011; Matravers 2017; Roughley and Schramme 2018; Maibom 2017a; 2020; 2022; Matravers and Waldow 2021). Empathy has been at the very centre of many academic fields across different disciplines such as philosophy of mind, ethics, psychology and aesthetics, and the humanities. And at least since Barack Obama (2006) famously advised Northwestern graduates to concern themselves more with society’s “empathy deficit” than with society’s “federal deficit”, empathy has also had a remarkable career in political discourses and debates within the general public.

This volume presents the latest developments in research on empathy in three areas: empathy and understanding other people, empathy and understanding literature and arts, and the history of empathy. In our brief introduction, we want to raise questions and point out problems that we consider relevant for each of these three areas and sketch out the focus of current research. At the end of each of the following sections, we will

briefly introduce the associated contributions to this volume and summarize their main ideas.

### 0.1 Empathy and Understanding Other People

An interesting feature of the well-known speech just mentioned is that Obama felt compelled to explain what exactly he meant by “empathy” immediately after he used the word for the first time. He went on to characterize it as “the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us” (Obama 2006).

Obama, it seems, is a simulation theorist. His understanding of empathy, to which we will return in a moment, is by no means the only one. In fact, the term “empathy” has no agreed-upon meaning in all of the different areas of debate in which it appears. As has been repeatedly noted (for example Coplan and Goldie 2011; Matravers 2017; Roelofs 2021), it does not even have an agreed-upon meaning among philosophers and psychologists.

In the philosophy of mind, empathy is mostly seen as an epistemic tool which enables human beings to understand their fellows and is often described as a process of “mental state recognition” or “mindreading”. Many philosophers who understand empathy in this way have proposed a distinction between high-level and low-level processes of empathy (Goldman 2006) or basic empathy and re-enactive empathy (Stueber 2006). Basic or low-level empathy is a process of mental state recognition or mindreading which typically takes place only in situations where the empathizer and the target person are face-to-face.

Let us focus first on this low-level process. There are three main accounts that describe low-level empathy in different ways: the theory theory, the simulation theory, and the perception theory (for an overview see Read 2019).

According to the so-called theory theory, human beings have a theory of human psychology which is either innate or developed over the course of their life. On this basis, they can *interpret* their fellow humans’ behaviour and come to conclusions about their mental states in a specific situation (Spaulding 2015). Low-level empathy in terms of theory theory therefore amounts to basic inference-making.

Simulation theorists claim that low-level empathy is a process of (unconscious) *simulation* which enables the empathizer to recognize the target’s mental state (Stueber 2006). This claim can already be found in the work of Theodor Lipps. It has recently gained more support by the discovery of so-called mirror neurons (see Gallese et al. 1996; Gallese and Goldman 1998; Stueber 2006; for a discussion of the role of mirror neurons in mindreading see Spaulding 2013).

Perception theorists claim that mental state recognition in face-to-face situations is a process of direct *perception*. Since affective states have (in most cases) bodily components which can be readily observed, low-level empathy amounts to perceiving these components (see Ratcliffe 2007; Gallagher 2008; Zahavi 2008).

Whichever way such low-level processes of empathy are conceptualized, their epistemic value for our understanding of other people is relatively clear: low-level empathy enables the empathizer to recognize the mental state of a target person in a specific face-to-face situation. The empathizer thus gains (propositional) knowledge about another person.

Let us now turn to the high-level process: what is “high-level” empathy? First of all, in contrast to the low-level process, it can also take place in situations where the empathizer and her target cannot directly perceive one another. While perception theory applies only to face-to-face encounters, theory theory and simulation theory can also offer explanations of high-level processes of empathy.

Theory theorists argue that high-level empathy has to be understood in terms of folk psychology and the empathizer’s inferences (see Morton 1980; Dennett 1991; Carruthers and Smith 1996; Davies and Stone 1995a; Baron-Cohen 1999). The core claim is that we understand others and also ourselves because we *infer* the specific mental state or states which are responsible for the target’s behaviour by means of applying a theory of mind. Theory theory, however, must explain how this theory of mind is acquired by the individual. This is not an easy task; in fact, it seems that theory theory is confronted with a dilemma here. If theory theory assumes that we acquire our theory of mind during our lifetime, it cannot explain how very young children (that do not yet possess the intellectual ability to acquire something like a theory of mind) are already able to understand, at least to a certain extent, mental states of other people. To solve this problem, theory theorists can argue that human beings are born with a rudimentary psychological theory of mind. This line of thought, however, might even introduce more problems than it solves since it is rather obscure what such an innate theory should look like.

Simulation theorists argue – very much in contrast to theory theorists – that high-level or reenactive empathy should be seen as a knowledge-poor process. The empathizer, they claim, does not need to rely on knowledge of any psychological theory and make inferences. Instead, the empathizer uses herself as a model for the target person’s mental state. The empathizer simply simulates the state she would be in, were she in the target’s position.

While simulationist accounts of empathy are well established in current philosophical debates (Heal 2003; Goldman 2006; Stueber 2006; Bailey 2021, 2022), our admittedly rough characterization of empathy as simulation leaves several questions unanswered. Current debates centre,

for example, on the nature of the simulation process. What exactly does it mean to “simulate” another person’s mental state? It has been suggested that it means we *imagine* ourselves as being in the mental state in question. This imagination can either be conceptualized as a form of merely *propositional* imagination or as *experiential* in its nature. If the simulation of the target person’s mental state is understood as a matter of propositional imagination, it seems relatively effortless since the empathizer does not need to re-create the experiential quality of the target’s state. This merely propositional form of simulating the target person’s perspective is often called cognitive empathy (Spaulding 2017). The assumed epistemic outcome of such an act of propositional imagination is propositional knowledge of the target person’s mental state. Such an account is, however, in danger of collapsing into a theory theory account of social cognition, because simulating – when understood as merely propositional imagination – is hard to distinguish from the kind of inference-making assumed by theory theory. The difference is only that the simulator does not use her knowledge of *folk psychology*, but instead beliefs about her *own psychology* as a basis for her inferences about the target’s mind.

There is a further reason for this “threat of collapse” (Davies and Stone 1995b): if an empathizer wants to know the mental state of a target who is, for example, having an oral exam in a few minutes, the empathizer can simulate different scenarios. She could imagine that the target is afraid of the exam or nervous, but also that the target is optimistic and confident. Her simulation might give her several different outcomes and the empathizer needs to decide which of these outcomes is most likely to be correct. How should she come to this decision? The simulation itself does not give her any criteria by which to decide which of these outcomes is correct. The empathizer needs to know more for a successful decision. Opponents of the simulation theory argue that this “more” that is needed here is exactly the kind of knowledge posited by theory theory (see Davies and Stone 1995b; Spaulding 2016).

Some philosophers suggest that we should understand simulation as imagination in a richer sense (Coplan 2011; Spaulding 2016; Bailey 2021; 2022; Stueber in this volume). They suppose that simulation not only is propositional, but has *experiential qualities* as well. This form of experientially simulating or imagining the target’s mental state is often called affective empathy (Maibom 2017b). In re-enacting the target’s state, the empathizer herself experiences affective states as part of the empathic process. Understanding simulation as experiential imagination has the advantage that it does not – or at least not as easily as in the case of propositional imagination – collapse into forms of counterfactual assumptions or inferences.

The empathic emotions or affects that come into play here are an interesting mental phenomenon and topic of extensive philosophical debates. It is an open question whether they are proper emotions or merely quasi-emotions or in some way distinguishable from non-empathic emotions (Scheler 1923; Kauppinen 2013; Müller in this volume). Sometimes empathic emotions have also been characterized as emotions the empathizer has *on behalf of* the target person (Roughley forthcoming). This claim leaves open the question whether the target person has the same (or any) emotional state when the empathizer feels the empathic emotions. This characterization has the advantage that it includes many important cases, such as where we empathize with people who cannot experience an emotion at the time or who are, for example, not yet aware of their misery. Others have stricter conditions for *empathic* emotions or affects. Martin Hoffman (2000), for instance, argues that an empathic emotion must be congruent with the target's emotion, in the sense that there must be a qualitative similarity or identical valence. Amy Coplan (2011) has also formulated a relatively strict condition for an emotion to count as empathic: in cases of successful empathy there has to be what Coplan calls "affective matching" in the sense that the empathizer's empathic emotion has to be of an identical type to the target's emotional state. If, for example, the target is in a state of jealousy, the empathizer has to experience jealousy as well – only perhaps less intensely.

However, the condition of affective matching provides a problem for accounts which spell out empathy in terms of imagination or simulation. Many people believe that we can learn what it is like to be in a specific conscious mental state only by means of experience (Lewis 1988, Paul 2014). If this is true, only those empathizers who previously had an emotional experience of the same type as the target's emotion can fulfil the condition of affective matching and can thus successfully empathize. It would not be possible to successfully empathize with people who experience something the empathizer has not yet experienced (for discussion see Kind 2021; Wiltsher 2021; Fendrell Verran 2023).

Such a sceptical view of empathy's epistemic benefit is supported by the fact that we can much more easily empathize with and understand people who are relatively similar to us, which in turn means that empathy is not a helpful epistemic tool when we need it most: in our endeavour to understand people who are different to ourselves or who have a different experiential background.

Let us momentarily put aside these difficulties and suppose the empathizer can successfully recreate the target's mental state in the sense of Coplan's affective matching condition. She then experiences what the target experiences – or at least something very similar. Because of this *experiential character* of empathy, philosophers have assumed that the epistemic

outcome of empathy is not merely propositional knowledge. Amy Coplan (2011, 17–18) calls this epistemic outcome “experiential understanding”. Others have suggested that empathy, understood as a process of experientially simulating the target’s state, is a source of *knowledge of what it is like* to be in the target’s state (Steinbeck 2014; Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo 2019; Wiltsher 2021; Berninger in this volume; Werner in this volume). If this is correct, the epistemic benefit of experientially simulating the target’s state is an additional *type* of knowledge about the target. However, advocates of this idea still need to explain the epistemic benefit of knowledge of what it is like in the first place. It is not easy to see how exactly knowledge of what it is like can contribute to the explanatory understanding of a person, i.e. the attempt to understand *why* a person behaves in a certain way or *why* she is in a particular mental state: when it comes to answering these questions, it is not obvious why an empathizer with knowledge of what it is like should be in an epistemically better situation than an empathizer with only propositional knowledge about the target person (see Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo 2019; Stueber in this volume).

As we have seen, at least two groups of questions arise with respect to high-level or re-enactive simulation. Let us briefly sum them up. The first group of questions concerns the epistemic value of simulation and imagination in general: how can we gain *knowledge* by means of simulation? Even if we form true beliefs as a result of simulation, how can these beliefs be justified? Can simulation alone justify beliefs, and if so, how? If not, can true beliefs as a result of simulation be justified by any other means? And if not: what does this mean for the epistemic value of simulation? In what sense can simulation be of epistemic value if it does not lead to knowledge?

The second group of questions aims at the *nature* of the assumed knowledge and its relation to simulation: is propositional knowledge the only result of simulating the target’s state? If so, why is it important to experientially imagine the target’s state? What exactly is meant by “knowledge what it is like” and how can this knowledge help us to understand people better?

Before we go on to think about empathy’s role in understanding literature and art, let us once more return to Barack Obama. For him, the core idea of empathy – and we suggest this is quite representative of the wider public’s understanding of empathy – is what is usually called “perspective taking”: the “ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes”, as Obama (2006) had phrased it. Philosophers often distinguish between two forms of perspective-taking – independently of whether the process of simulation is regarded as merely propositional or experiential in its nature.

First, an empathizer can take over the perspective of a target by means of *imagining* that she herself is in the target’s situation. As a result the

empathizer knows how she herself would react, were she in this situation. As we have already discussed above, this form of perspective-taking seems to be at the very core of simulation theory. It faces the following problems: if empathy is a process of simulating the state the empathizer herself would be in were she in the target's position, empathizers run the risk of *projecting* their possible states onto the target, instead of recognizing the target's own states. If the empathizer projects her own reactions onto the target person, she may (if she is lucky) gain true beliefs about the target's state. But these true beliefs are not justified. And since they are not justified, these true beliefs can barely count as knowledge. Another problem with this view of perspective-taking, highlighted clearly by Heidi Maibom, is that empirical data suggests that people are, in general, relatively poor in predicting their own psychological, especially emotional, future reactions (Maibom 2016, 2018). If indeed we do not do well in this regard, the simulation of future psychological states is not a very reliable way of gaining knowledge about future reactions. A simulationist account of empathy thus needs to produce further evidence that (and how) a simulation based on the simulator's own psychology can be counted as a reliable epistemic tool – or even that it has epistemic value at all.

Second, instead of imagining oneself to be in the target's situation, it is sometimes claimed that empathizers simulate *being* the target. While it has been argued that this is not possible for conceptual reasons (Goldie 2011), others, like Langkau (2021), advocate a less ambitious version of the idea of imagining oneself to be the other person. Her idea is that it is not necessary to imagine being an entirely different person in order to comprehend how a target, whose psychological profile differs from the empathizer's, would feel. The aim of the simulation is not to *be* the target in the literal sense, but only to simulate what the target feels or thinks in a specific moment.

It seems, however, that the success of this imaginative endeavour will ultimately depend on knowledge about the target person: the more the empathizer knows about the target the better she can simulate the target's state. It follows that even if the simulation theorist does not need to rely on folk psychology, simulation is not as knowledge-poor as claimed by simulation theorists.

The contributions to the first part of our volume take up some of the issues we have raised here. Yet unlike us – who have only pointed out problems and asked questions – they will also give illuminating answers.

**Shannon Spaulding** starts off the volume by focussing on a problematic aspect of empathy, namely that empathy is biased in favour of one's in-group and exacerbates rather than relieves underlying inequalities. This raises the question of whether we can improve empathy. Spaulding argues that empathy comprises both skills and habits. Theoretical and empirical



considerations support the idea that we can improve both the skills and habits that underlie empathy. If this is correct, Spaulding argues, it shows that it is possible to harness the positive outcomes of empathy while avoiding some of its darker sides.

The goal of **Stefano Vincini**'s chapter is to argue for an interactionist approach as an alternative to standard views in social cognition, namely theory theory, simulation theory, and their hybrids. He introduces the so-called empathy-sharing conundrum which applies to phenomena that instantiate both empathy and sharing. The conundrum concerns how sharing can be reconciled with the self-other differentiation implied by empathy: if I share your joy by my feeling it, then it is only my feeling. The differentiation between our emotional experiences is lost. The interactionist solution is that, just as individual experiences are unities of distinct temporal perspectives, so shared experiences are unities of distinct individual perspectives. Therefore, participating in a shared experience does not exclude, but, if anything, requires a differentiation between the perspectives of the individual participants. After introducing the interactionist solution to the empathy-sharing conundrum, Vincini shows that it is consistent with recent social-psychological literature.

**Catrin Misselhorn** focusses on empathy's role in moral philosophy and on a contrast which is often drawn in the debates between empathy-based and reason-based approaches. Misselhorn's chapter aims to reconcile both positions by showing, with the help of moral psychology, that what she calls the empathic point of view has a moral core that provides a transition to the moral point of view. Central to her argument is the claim that empathy is a form of seeing others as ends in themselves. In order to substantiate this claim, a definition of empathy is given and supported by functional and neuroanatomical evidence. It ultimately transpires that reason and empathy can and should complement each other as sources of moral behaviour.

**Anja Berninger**'s chapter turns our attention to another question mentioned above: can we learn 'what it is like' by means of empathy? Even those who hold an optimistic view seem to be convinced that there are – at least in practice – limits to what we can learn by means of empathizing with people with an entirely different experiential background. In her chapter, Berninger considers a case in which we indeed have strong reasons to think that we will be unable to understand what an experience is like. This is the case of Holocaust testimony. However, she also argues that this failure to understand can help to produce a different kind of understanding, one that is more broadly historical in nature.

Usually, empathy is believed to help in understanding other people. In her chapter **Eva-Maria Düringer** investigates empathy's role in self-understanding. Intuitively, it seems that self-understanding is an important, if not necessary step on our way to moral improvement. Iris Murdoch,

however, disagrees: if we want to improve morally, she argued, we should be less self-occupied, not more. Introspection tends to lead attentive moral energy, which should be directed outwards, back towards the self. In order not to fall into the trap of self-obsession, against which Murdoch rightly counsels, Düringer argues that we should apply a filter to our introspection: the filter of second or third personal loving attention.

The phenomenal features of experiences also play an important role in **Karsten Stueber's** chapter. He investigates the presumptive role of grasping these phenomenal features of other minds when striving for an *explanatory* understanding of agents who act for reasons. Stueber more fully explores how his distinction between basic and reenactive empathy allows us to regard reenactive empathy as occasionally including a phenomenal dimension. Stueber goes on to argue that mental states can be grasped as reasons for actions only if they are recognized to be appropriately integrated into a complex web of our other mental states and only insofar as they are ultimately related to what we care about. He finally argues that even if we acknowledge a form of purely experiential or affective empathy, such empathy does not possess any uniquely explanatory value. It has, however, a practical value in allowing us to provide emotional support to another person.

## 0.2 Empathy and Understanding Literature and Art

As already mentioned briefly at the beginning of our introduction, the German debate on “Einfühlung” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not primarily centred on the empathic understanding of other people. While related problems were of course discussed, the main focus of research on empathy was its role in aesthetics. Several of the topics that remain of interest to aestheticians today were debated in astounding detail already in that era. Vendrell Ferran (2010) and Prinz (in this volume) convincingly show that the debates on Walton-style quasi-emotions and theories of aesthetic embodiment, to give just two examples, were already anticipated by aestheticians and authors such as Stephan Witasek, Moritz Geiger, and Vernon Lee over a hundred years ago (we will come back to these relations in the section on the *History of Empathy* below).

Very generally speaking, the historic and the current debates mostly agree that empathy plays at least some role in our understanding and appreciation of literature and art. This statement is uncontroversial (and uninteresting) if we understand empathy as merely propositional simulation. As we argued above, it is difficult to show that this form of imagination can even be clearly distinguished from counterfactual considerations and inference-making. Without making basic inferences about fictional characters' mental states, readers will not be able to make any sense of complex aesthetic artefacts.<sup>2</sup> Some philosophers have voiced concerns about

understanding empathy in a stronger sense, that is, in the sense of affective empathy or experiential simulation (see our considerations above): Peter Lamarque and others have argued that (the appreciator's) emotions in general might get in the way of a proper appreciation of art (Lamarque 2011; see also Kivy 2006; Lamarque in this volume). Since readers or listeners of music are concerned with appreciating the aesthetic value of the artworks they contemplate (at least in cases when they deal with literature and music *as art*), they should even try deliberately to ignore emotional reactions of any kind. Empathizing with the protagonist might, for example, lead the reader to overlook subtle ambivalences in the relations between the protagonist and other characters, or distract her in other ways. It risks, as Susan Feagin (2012, 636) has put it, "taking attention away from what one ought to be attending to in the work".

These concerns are not shared by all aestheticians. A forceful defence of the role of emotions in understanding literature and art has been advanced by Jenefer Robinson (2005). Robinson claims that whoever does not pity Anna Karenina or is not disgusted by Macbeth's ruthless striving for power cannot really be said to have understood Tolstoy's novel or Shakespeare's play. It should be noted that Robinson is not directly concerned with empathy here. But it is safe to extrapolate: if *emotions* in general supposedly play such an important role in understanding and appreciating literature, this will apply to *affective components of the reader's empathy* as well. Many of our emotions in dealing with fiction are empathic in nature. We suffer Anna Karenina's pain when she is devastated after losing her son Seryozha; we are, just as Ishmael is, both terrified and awestruck by Captain Ahab's demonic determination to hunt down Moby Dick; we share Elizabeth Bennett's and Mr Darcy's joy when they have finally overcome all pride and prejudice and can happily marry.

Concerning empathic emotions in particular, Robinson (2010) has put forward this argument: in order to understand and appreciate literary works as a whole, we have to understand and appreciate their parts. An important part of a literary text are its characters, which we understand in just the same way we understand real persons: via empathizing with them. It follows, if we accept these premises, that we need empathy to understand works of literature. However, all three of these premises are debatable. Robinson's most basic assumption is that characters are important parts of literary works. This is not always the case. Some of Jorge Luis Borges's short stories, for example, are abstract analyses of mysterious concepts or ideas (like the infamous *Library of Babel*) and do not feature any conversations or even any interactions between characters at all. Overarching claims about the importance of empathy for our understanding and appreciation of *literature* should therefore be avoided. Since Robinson is fully aware of this – she restricts her claims to paradigmatic

cases of the nineteenth-century psychological novel – we will not pursue this point any further. Two more premises remain to be examined: “we need empathy to understand other persons” and “understanding real persons and fictional characters works the same way”. As we have discussed in the above section, it is not clear to what extent (if at all) we need empathy to understand other persons. It is also a matter of debate whether empathizing with persons and characters is the same process or has the same success conditions as empathy with real people (for recent discussion, see Werner 2020; Petraschka 2021; Matravers in this volume). In particular, Amy Coplan’s condition of “affective matching” might prove a problem for empathy in the fictional case: in contrast to real people, fictional characters obviously do not possess a human psychology. It is not literally true that a fictional character is in a specific mental state, since fictional characters do not exist. A reader’s empathic emotion can therefore not literally match a fictional character’s mental state.

Although empathy with persons and fictional characters might not be identical, it has time and again been claimed that the latter might be some sort of training ground for the former. While reliable empirical evidence for this claim is notoriously difficult to come by (as already discussed in Keen 2007; and more recently in Currie 2020) and positive results of psychological studies like Kidd and Castano (2013) have not been easily reproducible (Panero et al. 2016, for example, report their failure to replicate the results of Kidd and Castano 2013; other empirical studies regarding this topic are Mar et al. 2009; Bal and Veltkamp 2013; Djikic et al. 2013; Stansfield and Bunce 2014), it has often been argued that fiction enhances our capacity and willingness to empathize in real life (e.g. in Nussbaum 2000; Pinker 2011). By simulating either the mental state a character is in or by imagining being in the character’s situation, readers, according to this notion, train their imaginative and empathic skills. As Amy Kind claims, imagination (and thus simulation) is a skill (see also Spaulding, in this volume) and by means of practising this skill we can become better imaginers or become better at empathizing with others (Kind 2020, 2021). This, in turn, might even make readers morally better persons.

Empathizing with characters might also have other epistemic benefits. Since many literary texts feature characters in non-everyday situations, it is sometimes claimed that reading literature is a way of having experiences the reader herself had neither had nor will probably ever have. Literature can facilitate the process of imagining of what it would be like to live in circumstances different to ours; experientially simulating a fictional character’s state could be a way of learning what it is like to be this character.

As plausible as this might seem at first glance, this idea faces at least two difficulties. First, it is an open question whether we can learn something from fictional literature at all. While literary cognitivists argue that it is

possible to learn from fiction (for example Currie 1990; Konrad 2017; Stock 2017; Vendrell Ferran 2018; Garcia-Carpintero 2019; Voltolini 2021), their opponents doubt this for various reasons (see Werner in this volume). Second, as mentioned in section 0.1 above, many philosophers claim that *knowledge what it is like* is a type of knowledge one can gain only by means of *first-hand experience*. If this is true, readers cannot gain knowledge what it is like by means of reading, regardless of whether the work is fictional or not (Kind 2021; Berninger in this volume; Werner in this volume).

It is also worth mentioning that empathy has, in several respects, traditionally been an important *theme* in literary texts. First, it has been widely employed as a theme in the very sense of the word: as “a unifying thread that binds together incident and character in an illuminating way” (Lamarque 2009, 150). Phillip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, a paradigmatic example of such a case, is thoroughly analyzed by Konrad in this volume. Second, literature more generally has often played with “empathy for the devil”-phenomena and tried to make readers reflect on their (non-)empathy with ambivalent characters (Mitchell 2014; Hillebrandt in this volume). In fiction – as evidenced also by the success of recent Netflix productions like *Dahmer* or *Mindhunter* – there seems to be a certain tendency to engage with evil characters and even to try to empathize with them. Research on this topic has often been concerned with the wider issue of the so-called *paradox of tragedy* or *paradox of painful art* (see Smuts 2007; and Smuts 2009 for instructive overviews). In contrast to this tendency to engage or even empathize with evil characters in fiction, people usually hesitate to empathize with persons they consider to be morally bad in real life.

The second part of this volume starts with a chapter by **Peter Lamarque** which offers a sympathetic reappraisal of the 1949 essay by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley entitled *The Affective Fallacy*. Lamarque argues that we need to question the nature and role of emotions in responses to works of literature because we need to ask at what emotions are directed (or from whence they stem) and how they play into judgements we make about literature. Following Wimsatt and Beardsley, emphasis is given to the need for specificity in emotional responses and the importance of objectivity in critical judgements. With a primary focus on empathetic responses, Lamarque distinguishes between empathy expressed in a text and empathy felt in a reader, with priority given to the former in objective criticism. The point is elaborated using further distinctions: between internal and external perspectives on fictional characters; between subject content and thematic content in works of literature; and between kinds of readers, be they professional critics or “ordinary” readers (seen as roles rather than classes of people), noting the different place for emotions in their critical responses.

Empathy with fictional characters is also the topic of **Derek Matravers's** chapter. He argues that the discussion is ill-founded and rests on a confusion that bedevils philosophical work in this area: namely, basing a distinction between our interactions with fiction and with non-fiction on the differences between our interactions with fiction and with other people in face-to-face encounters. It is plausible that there is a difference between our empathizing with represented characters and our empathizing with people met face-to-face, but – or so Matravers argues – it is a great deal less plausible that there are systematic differences between our empathizing with one sort of represented character (fictions) and another sort of represented character (non-fictions). While making his case, Matravers considers various arguments by Thomas Petraschka and Peter Lamarque. A sceptical view is taken of the claim that there is a fundamental division of narratives into two sorts: non-fiction that informs and fiction which entertains. The proposed alternative is that all (relevant) narratives have the same primary function: to transport readers to another world.

As Anja Berninger does in her chapter in the first part of this volume, **Christiana Werner** focusses on knowledge of what it is like. She distinguishes between what she calls atomic mental states (such as a perception of the colour red) and complex mental states. The latter are multi-layered and their components are atomic mental states. This distinction has an important consequence: if the empathizer has knowledge of what it is like of the components of a complex experience, she can put these components imaginatively together. Werner highlights the role of testimony: she argues that this ability to imaginatively (re)combine components of a complex experience enables one to imagine what it is like for someone else to be in their situation, only if one imagines the experience according to the respective experiencer's testimony. Finally, the chapter critically examines fictional literature's role in gaining knowledge of what it is like to experience something new.

**Suzanne Keen** engages with Rainer Mühlhoff's theory of affective resonance and social interaction, extending it to the imaginative context of fiction reading. The immersion experience, analogous to the phenomena Mühlhoff describes as "a dynamic entanglement of moving and being-moved in relation" (Mühlhoff 2015), involves empathetic experiences evoked by fictional characters and features of imagined worlds. These are created by authors and brought to fruition by co-creating readers. Keen's essay investigates structural similarities between human affective resonance and readers' empathy. Drawing on her previous theorizing of co-creating readers' various contributions to narrative empathy, she discusses affective components of reading fiction and narrative transportation.

**Claudia Hillebrandt** investigates readers' tendencies to empathize with evil characters in literature. She claims that there are certain

literary techniques that particularly promote such responses. Specifically she focusses on the interplay between evaluative text elements and different ways of referring to the emotions of characters. It is argued that the emotional impact of a literary character, at least in part, depends on the combination of these techniques within a certain work of literature. As readers are exposed to these techniques it is hard to completely avoid empathy even for villainous characters like Tom Ripley in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

Readers' empathy is also a central topic in **Eva-Maria Konrad's** chapter. She argues that Philip K. Dick's famous novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* both provokes and disorients the reader's empathic reactions. In order to demonstrate Dick's use of manifold strategies on a narrative, linguistic, and structural level, central aspects of addressing the reader's empathic attitudes are analyzed. It emerges that in all of these aspects, Dick exhaustively tests the reader's affective reactions, sparking a thorough reflection on basic assumptions and beliefs with regard to possible objects of empathy, the reader's own usual empathic or unempathic behaviour, and – even more fundamentally – the meaning of humanness in general. The fictional empathy test in the book is therefore not ultimately designed for the titular androids but for the reader.

### 0.3 The History of Empathic Understanding

The term “empathy” itself was first used in the philosophical debate in 1909. It has become common knowledge that Edward B. Titchener used it as a translation for the German term “Einfühlung” in his *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought Processes*. Less well-known is the fact that, in the same year, the same term also appeared in Charles S. Myers's *A Text-Book of Experimental Psychology*. Just like Titchener, Myers (1909, 331) used it as “convenient translation of the German *Einfühlung*” and credited his colleague, Cambridge Professor James Ward (who had studied in Göttingen under the German *Einfühlung*-expert Hermann Lotze) with the suggestion for the translation in a footnote.

The idea behind the term, however, has been around for much longer (the history of empathy has first been discussed in Ziegler (1894) and Stern (1898), more recently in Hunsdahl 1967; Wispé 1987; Jahoda 2005; Koss 2006; Stueber 2006; Lanzoni 2018; Petraschka 2023). Adam Smith (1759) and David Hume (1739) discussed a strikingly similar concept under the name “sympathy”, and the German “Einfühlung” debate took up ideas dating back to Johann Gottfried Herder and German Romanticism. Yet while Herder (1967 [1774], 503) indeed advised the reader to “feel oneself into” nature and history in order to understand it better, and authors from the era of German Romanticism mused about “feeling oneself

into” nature (Novalis 1977 [1802], 105) or works of art (Wackenroder and Tieck 1991 [1796], 88), the noun “Einfühlung” was first coined as *terminus technicus* by Robert Vischer (son of the more well-known philosopher Friedrich Theodor Vischer) in his dissertation *On the Optical Feeling of Form* (1873). Vischer (1873, 21–26) also suggested a somewhat perplexing assortment of similar terms (like “Anföhlung”, “Ausföhlung”, “Zuföhlung”, and “Nachföhlung”) that was, to the best of our knowledge, almost entirely ignored by the contemporary discussion. The opposite was true for “Einföhlung”. The concept and the term itself were soon employed in all areas of contemporary (German-speaking) philosophy, most successfully in aesthetics, where it gave its name to a branch (the “Einföhlungsästhetik”) which became the predominant school of aesthetic thought in German-speaking countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The then novel discipline of empirical psychology was also very interested in the phenomenon of empathy. Wilhelm Wundt, who had founded the world’s first Institute of Experimental Psychology at the University of Leipzig in 1879, laid the groundwork in his seminal *Principles of Physiological Psychology* (1874). His former pupil Oswald Külpe went on to found another Institute of Psychology at the University of Würzburg in 1896, which later became the home of the well-known Würzburg School of (experimental) psychology. In his lab, he did groundbreaking work for the empirical analysis of empathy (see Lanzoni 2018). In the early twentieth century, the debate on Einföhlung brought together both psychological and philosophical perspectives and became increasingly nuanced and complex. Interestingly enough, scholars in different branches of the humanities and artists of all sorts also took up the debate on empathy (see Petraschka 2023 for an in-depth analysis of these relations). In literary studies, Carl du Prel, among others, suggested understanding poetry not only as a result of the extraordinary ability of poets to empathize, but also as a means to enable less gifted readers to connect with the poet’s empathy-based view of others and the world. In art history, empathy was not only considered as a tool to analyse and appreciate artworks, but also as a means to teach art in schools (see Imorde in this volume). Poets like Rilke, who had himself attended lectures by Lipps in Munich, pondered empathy in poetological reflections and poems, painters like Franz Marc or Wassily Kandinsky and architects like August Endell (who had even begun working on a dissertation under Lipps’s supervision before he left academia and became an artist) used it as a theoretical background for their musings on abstract art and architecture (see Rehm in this volume). The Russian filmmaker Sergey Eisenstein even tried to incorporate the abstract philosophical discussions of empathy into specific shots of films, including his famous *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). For example, he incorporated short close-ups of clenched fists into a bigger



scene in which a large crowd protests against the brutality of the regime (this has also been noted by Carroll 2011, 179). In doing so, Eisenstein later explained, he had tried to induce movie-goers to mimic the gesture. And as his reading of Lipps's work on empathy had shown him, he continued, empathic mimicry of this sort would then serve to induce the very same revolutionary anger portrayed in the movie in the movie-goers themselves.

Especially interesting in this context is the role of art historian, author, and aesthete Violet Paget (alias Vernon Lee). Herself well versed in German, she immersed herself in the contemporary debates and played an important role in communicating early ideas on empathy to the Anglo-Saxon world. As the chapters by **Thomas Petraschka** and **Jesse Prinz** show, reducing Lee to this role of a mere expositor of German ideas on "Einfühlung" would mean grossly underestimating her genuine contributions to the debate. Petraschka concentrates on Lee's early work and details her correspondence with the main protagonists of the contemporaneous academic debate. He shows that she published in the relevant scientific journals and received both appreciation and serious critique from well-established academic philosophers. Petraschka thoroughly analyses an extensive critique of Lee's early work by Theodor Lipps and explains how she reacted to his arguments against her theory of empathy as "bodily induction". Lee herself made valid points against some claims by Lipps in return and, in response to the controversy, claimed a specific role as hybrid between aesthetic theory and practice for herself. Prinz picks up where Petraschka's analysis leaves off and concentrates on Lee's mature aesthetic theory. He agrees with Petraschka's contention that her contributions to aesthetic psychology have been under-appreciated. Prinz's chapter explores the evolution of Lee's views about aesthetic experience and aesthetic preference. Her mature view is shown to be rich, distinctive, and plausible. It combines a dynamic form of empathy with emotional processes, and is committed to specific and, in principle, testable claims about aesthetic responses. The viability of these proposals is explored by relating Lee to contemporary theoretical work in embodied cognition and theoretical work in empirical aesthetics. Lee's mature theory, Prinz claims, anticipates current trends and is broadly consistent with recent findings. Many of her specific conjectures await direct investigation and could be used to guide ongoing research.

**Jean Moritz Müller's** chapter is concerned with one of Lee's famous German contemporaries: Max Scheler. In his *The Nature of Sympathy* (1923), Scheler offers an intriguing, if puzzling, account of empathy. According to Müller's reconstruction, Scheler conceives of empathy as a specific kind of feeling through which we are immediately aware of others' emotions, but which is not itself an emotion and does not require us to have those emotions ourselves. Moreover, *qua* immediate awareness of

others' emotions, empathy is supposed to afford an understanding of *why* they feel those emotions. Müller's aim, however, is not only to reconstruct Scheler's view, but to defend it against two key objections which target its coherence. Müller argues that both objections fail since they respectively confuse different forms of feeling, and do not appreciate the constitutive connection between emotions and reasons.

**Ingrid Vendrell Ferran's** chapter is also concerned with early twentieth-century theories of empathy. She argues that early phenomenologists used the concept of empathy not merely to refer to the direct perception of the other's experiences as underscored by contemporary proponents of the Direct Perception Theory. They also described (in a sense close to Lipps and today's Simulation Theory) how, by virtue of imagining, we "feel into" animate and inanimate objects. Focussing on this later usage of the term, Vendrell Ferran identifies two kinds of imagination-based accounts of empathy in early phenomenology. According to "radical imaginationists", empathy can be explained in terms of a series of imaginative processes entailed in the idea of "feeling into", such as projecting oneself into the target, "imitating" its feelings and in so doing resonating with it. Voigtländer's account of empathizing with one's image in *Vom Selbstgefühl* (1910) and Geiger's account of empathy with atmospheres ("Stimmung") in *Zum Problem der Stimmungseinfühlung* (1911) can be regarded as radical imaginationists in this sense. According to "moderate imaginationists", empathy might (but need not) entail imagining. Stein's account of empathy with others in *On the Problem of Empathy (Zum Problem der Einfühlung)* (1917/1989) is then presented as an example of a moderate imaginationist account.

Art historians **Joseph Imorde** and **Robin Rehm** both investigate the ways in which debates on empathy were taken up by the art world in the early twentieth century. Imorde is especially interested in the role of art in the context of education. He claims that around 1900 the principles of instructional treatment of works of fine art in schools dramatically moved away from looking at images as auxiliary tools towards conveying the formal and substantive qualities of works of art as ends in themselves. The starting point of this development was the wide dissemination of all kinds of art-historical printed matter. Publishing houses expressed the goal of bringing the uneducated into closer contact with "high art". Interestingly, training aesthetic empathy was seen as one of the most important ways to reach these new aims of popular education. Rehm analyses the way in which the painters of *Der Blaue Reiter* took up philosophical debates on empathy. According to Rehm, it was Wilhelm Worringer (especially in his influential dissertation *Abstraction and Empathy*) who, drawing on the aesthetics of Lipps (who in turn took up ideas already advanced by Friedrich Schiller), devised a position that was interesting and acceptable for classical modern painting.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

- 1 In a posthumously published paper Lipps (2018 [1913], 643) actually claimed, somewhat obscurely, that since “sentences express beliefs in the same way a gesture expresses joy of grief”, it would make sense to say that “beliefs are empathized into sentences” (our translation).
- 2 It might be possible to come up with some very special examples of avant-garde-artworks that do not even need basic inference-making to be appreciated (Dadaist poems or paintings like Yves Klein’s *Monochrome Blue*). Our claim still holds for most “standard” cases of art and literature.
- 3 We want to thank the German Research Council (DFG) for funding our Research Network on *Feeling and Understanding* and thereby enabling us to organize several conferences and workshops on topics that are discussed in this volume. We also want to thank Andrew Wells for his careful proofreading and helpful comments and Evi Reitberger for her help with the formatting.

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## Section 1

# Empathy and Understanding Other Persons





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# 1 Empathy Skills and Habits

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## 1.1 Introduction

Empathy is widely praised by public figures, psychologists, and philosophers. These empathy boosters point out the many positive effects of empathy. Individuals who are more empathetic tend to be socially and psychologically better off than people who are less empathetic. Moreover, empathy seems to be a promising tool to cut through partisanship and division insofar as empathy allows us to understand others' perspectives and lived experiences. According to some scholars, empathy is central to our species becoming less violent, more cooperative, and may be an essential ingredient in our humanity. Despite the praise, it is easy to find examples of empathy's shortcomings. Critics of empathy argue that it is fragile, easily manipulated, entrenches an us vs. them mentality, and, in reality, makes conflict worse.

These observations raise the following question. Can we improve empathy? That is, can we get better at employing empathy in contexts where it would be beneficial while avoiding the dark sides of empathy? Answering this question requires that we understand the cognitive components that underlie empathy, the motivations that drive us to empathize in some cases and not in others, and the aims of empathy. I will argue that we can in fact improve empathy and that doing so requires that we understand which elements of empathy are skill-based and which elements are habitual. Reflection on improving empathy invites the comparison to Aristotelian virtues. In the final part of this chapter, I will examine whether empathy is a virtue.

## 1.2 What Is So Great about Empathy?

Broadly speaking, empathy is understanding and sharing the feelings of others. More precisely, on the view I shall adopt, empathy has two necessary and jointly sufficient components: perspective taking and affect sharing, sometimes called cognitive empathy and affective empathy (Coplan 2004; Goldie 2000). To empathize is to (try to) imaginatively adopt a

target's mental states and, as a result, come to share the target's affect. The empathizer's mental state attributions may not be complete or completely accurate, and her affect may be diminished or slightly different from the target's affective experience. Perfect correspondence is not required. As long as the perspective taken and affect experienced mostly correspond to the target's perspective and affect, this will count as successful empathy.

Empathy, on this view, is distinct from sympathy or compassion, which do not involve perspective taking or affect sharing (Eisenberg and Eggum 2009). Empathy may generate these emotional responses, but sympathy and compassion are cognitively different from empathy. Empathy is also distinct from emotional contagion and personal distress (Batson et al. 1987). Emotional contagion involves affect sharing without perspective taking, and personal distress is a self-oriented response to another's negative affective response. Each of these capacities differs from empathy. In this chapter, I shall focus specifically on empathy.

Many public figures and scholars hold the capacity for empathy in high regard. The praise of empathy highlights the many benefits of empathy for the empathizers, the targets of empathy, and society. For decades, psychologists have documented the many positive effects of empathy. In developmental psychology, it is well established that as children develop the capacity to understand and share others' feelings, they begin to display more pro-social behaviour, such as expressing caring responses to distressed individuals and spontaneously helping others in need (Eisenberg 2000). Moreover, the two components of empathy, perspective taking and affect sharing, seem to be tightly connected with the development of morality in children (Hoffman 2001). For adults, empathetic behaviour is associated with increased emotional wellbeing, greater social connectedness, better health, cooperation, helping behaviour, and altruism (Batson 2011; Eisenberg 2000; Eisenberg and Fabes 1991). In sum, people who are more empathetic are better off personally and engage in more pro-social behaviours than people who are less empathetic.

Empathetic behaviour is negatively correlated with narcissistic behaviour (Watson et al. 1984; Burgmer et al. 2021). That is, individuals who are more empathetic are less narcissistic, and vice versa. Narcissism involves a grandiose feeling of self-worth, exaggerated sense of entitlement and superiority, tendency to be impulsive and aggressive, and a willingness to manipulate and exploit others to achieve one's own personal goals. Whereas empathy seems to be good for the empathizers *and* the targets of empathy, narcissistic behaviour is associated with a few positive effects for the narcissist but many negative interpersonal effects. This negative correlation between empathetic behaviour and narcissistic behaviour scales up to the societal level. Societies that have populations with higher levels of empathy have correspondingly lower levels of narcissism, and vice versa

(Konrath et al. 2011).<sup>1</sup> Thus, if empathy and narcissism are polar opposite behavioural patterns, it is much better overall to have more empathetic individuals in a group.

The empirical findings above point to many positive effects of empathy. Some scholars take these findings to indicate an even more central role for empathy in human society. Steven Pinker (2012) notes that violence has declined over the last millennia, and he argues that the explanation for this decline of violence is that our circles of empathy have expanded far beyond our immediate kin. The philosopher Michael Slote (2007) argues that empathy is at the centre of our ethical obligations to others. His ethics of care grounds moral development, individual moral obligations, and political rights in empathy. Relatedly, Heidi Maibom (2022) argues that empathy is key to making us less biased creatures by allowing us to consider and balance diverse perspectives and lived experiences. Martha Nussbaum (2016) argues that empathy is an essential element of our humanity. On her view, literature exercises our moral imagination and helps us to empathize with those who differ from us.

In addition to these academic arguments, many public figures such as Barack Obama, Hannah Arendt (1964), Mohandas K. Gandhi (2012) regard empathy as crucial to a functioning society. These public figures consider empathy to be the most powerful tool for cutting through partisanship and division and speculate that without empathy societies would collapse. In sum, there is a great deal of support for the idea that empathy is developmentally, personally, morally, and socially important.

Although empathy is widely praised by scholars and public figures, not everyone is an empathy booster. Critics of empathy argue that empathy will not save us from interpersonal and intergroup conflict. In fact, they argue, empathy makes such conflicts worse (Bloom 2017; Prinz 2011). These critics maintain that empathy can be exhausting and lead to burn-out, numbness to suffering, or worse (Corcoran 1989; West et al. 2006). They argue that we tend to empathize strongly with our in-group and resist empathizing with out-groups, and even enjoy the suffering of out-groups in competitive or threatening contexts (Cikara et al. 2011; Bruneau et al. 2017). Thus, the prescription for more empathy is often counterproductive in cases of conflict. Empathy, they argue, can further entrench conflict and force us into an us vs. them mentality (Breithaupt 2019). Finally, even when we try to empathize with others who are dissimilar from us or in unfamiliar contexts, sometimes we are unable to accurately empathize with their experiences (Tullmann 2020), causing further misunderstandings and frustration.<sup>2</sup> Critics of empathy argue that we should give up on empathy and employ other tools in pursuit of social harmony, e.g., rational compassion (Bloom 2017) or moral emotions like fear, anger, and shame (Prinz 2011).<sup>3</sup>

Empathy has many positive, pro-social outcomes for the empathizers and the targets of empathy, but empathy can be challenging and used in a way that makes conflict worse. A question naturally arises here: can we improve empathy? If we could improve how we empathize, perhaps we could reap the pro-social benefits without making interpersonal and intergroup conflict worse. In the next section, I will consider this possibility.

### 1.3 Improving Empathy

Is it possible to improve how we empathize, and if so, how? The answer to this question depends on how you conceive of the capacity for empathy (Cuff et al. 2016). One critical question concerns whether we conceive of empathy as a trait or a state. A trait is a property of an individual; it is an individual's stable disposition to think or act in a certain way. In contrast, a state is a property of an individual in a situation. A state reflects much more contextual variance. Whether we characterize a given cognitive phenomenon as a trait or state depends on many factors, including our explanatory interests (Steyer et al. 2015). If one is interested in explaining the reliable individual factors that produce a certain disposition, a trait characterization would be appropriate. However, if one is interested in examining the variability of thoughts and behaviour, a state characterization is more apt. On both a trait and state construal, genetic and environmental factors are part of the causal story. The difference between the two construals is how much effect situational factors have on the phenomena in question.

With that prelude in place, we can consider the significance of situational factors on our empathetic behaviour and ask whether empathy is more like a stable disposition or more like a transient state. If we conceive of empathy as a trait, i.e., a stable disposition determined by genetic and environmental factors beyond our control, then there is little one could do to improve it. On this conception, empathy is a bit like introversion or extraversion. An introverted individual could, perhaps, engage in practices that are more energetic and sociable, but there is little she can do to alter the dispositions to be reserved and find extended social interaction tiring. The situations she is in have little effect on her disposition to be introverted. If empathy is like that, the capacity is mostly determined by genetic and environmental factors beyond our control, and the situations we are in have little effect on our willingness or ability to empathize. If this view of empathy is correct, we can employ strategies to limit the degradation of empathy, but there is not much we can do to positively improve empathy.<sup>4</sup>

However, we may conceive of empathy as less trait-like and more state-like. On this view, empathy is an attribute of a person in a situation, and thus the activation of empathy is influenced by various situational factors. Empathy would be like moods on this view. Genetic and developmental

factors certainly play a role in determining the range of an individual's moods, however environmental factors play a predominant role. And if one wants to change one's mood, there are numerous changes one can make to positively improve one's mood. If empathy is more like this, then prospects for improving empathy are quite promising.

So, is empathy more like a trait or a state? Although clearly there are genetic and developmental factors that influence empathy and stable differences amongst individuals in the inclination for empathy (Davis 1983), there is good reason to think that empathy is an attribute of a person in a situation, i.e., more state-like than trait-like. Jamil Zaki and colleagues have amassed an enormous amount of data – from studies in developmental psychology, evolutionary science, social psychology, and social neuroscience – indicating that empathy has both automatic and context-dependent characteristics that dynamically interact. Zaki and colleagues persuasively argue that the best way of making sense of these characteristics of empathy is by conceiving of empathy as a motivated capacity (Weisz and Zaki 2018; Zaki 2014). On this view, empathizing is deeply influenced by our own personal cares, goals, and motivations, which drive us to avoid empathizing in some contexts and seek out opportunities to empathize in other contexts. Zaki and colleagues identify three universal approach motivations and three universal avoidance motivations for empathizing. When empathizing with others will lead us to experience positive affect, strengthen affiliation with others, and display socially desirable traits, we are more inclined to empathize. In circumstances where empathizing will lead us to experience suffering, material costs, or interference with competition, we tend to avoid empathizing. These patterns arise in behavioural, psychological, and neurological data. We carry out these avoidance and approach motivations through regulatory strategies like situation selection (e.g., choosing where you walk, who you are around, which stories you read), attentional modulation (e.g., shifting what you look at, tuning in or out of social interaction), and appraisal (e.g., judging that an experience is or is not authentic, is or is not deserved, etc.).

If these observations about how we empathize and the theoretical framework for explaining these observations are at least somewhat on target, then conceiving of empathy as mostly trait-like is wrongheaded. Our personal goals, motivations, and cares exhibit a great deal of influence on how, when, and with whom we empathize. Unlike our disposition to be introverted or extraverted, exercising our capacity for empathy seems to be a matter of choice that is highly dependent on situational factors. Furthermore, the fact that empathy is generally regarded as praiseworthy is better explained by views that regard the exercise of empathy as at least somewhat under voluntary control. Now, this is not the place for a full analysis and defence of motivated empathy. Instead, what I will do here is take these initial considerations to be *prima-facie* evidence for

the motivated empathy framework. The view does not presuppose any controversial philosophical ideas about empathy that are in dispute here, so adopting the framework should not be problematic for my argument. Instead, I shall assume that the motivated empathy view is more or less correct and ask whether and how we can improve our capacity for empathy.

If empathy is indeed a motivated state, how can we improve it? Let's consider a more familiar task. Suppose we have set a New Year's resolution to improve our physical fitness. In our quest to improve our fitness, there are numerous sorts of changes we could make. We could start doing yoga to improve our posture. Perhaps we learn the proper form for weightlifting to avoid injury. Or we might aim to optimize our gait and foot strike for running or stroke technique in swimming. These interventions aim at improving various skills that are important for achieving better fitness. These skills help to prevent us from getting injured and allow us to reap more of the benefits from our exercise. The acquisition of skills is initially guided by our goals, and through repeated practice we can come to non-consciously exercise spontaneous top-down control over our skilled actions (Fridland 2014; Bermúdez 2017). Skills are improved through controlled practice, clear and rapid feedback, and refined practice. Thus, to improve our weightlifting form, obviously, we must lift weights. But we also need feedback on our form from, say, a trainer, who can tell us in real time what changes to make. And then we need to continue to practise that form and continue to get feedback until our skills plateau.

In aiming to improve our physical fitness, we can and should engage in this sort of process. Clearly, though, focusing only on improving such skills is not sufficient for improving our fitness. We must also develop good exercise habits, e.g., getting to the gym more often, running before work, or regularly meeting a friend to exercise. Habits, like skills, often are initially set by our goals (Douskos 2019). Based on our goals, we repeatedly execute a certain behaviour in a certain context, and it becomes routinized so that the behaviour is executed spontaneously and without conscious awareness. Once a habit is established, it may persist despite no longer satisfying the goals that initially guided the behaviour. Indeed, a habit may be in conflict with many of an agent's goals. Improving our habits typically involves disrupting old habits and establishing new habits. To disrupt bad habits, we raise conscious awareness of the undesired activity (Wood and Rüniger 2016). Perhaps we have a friend or an app that alerts us when we miss a workout. Some people might even set up a system of negative consequences for missing workouts. To establish better habits, we make the exercise of the desired activity unconscious and spontaneous. We do this by routinizing the activity – working out at the same time every day, sleeping in our gym clothes to reduce the number of steps it takes to get to the gym, structuring our days so that other events do not conflict with our

workout time, or temptation bundling, i.e., combining a task one dislikes with something one really enjoys and looks forward to.

If our goal is to improve our physical fitness, clearly, we need to work on improving our skills and our habits. The skills keep us from getting injured and ensure that we are getting the most out of our efforts, and the habits ensure that we make progress on various measurable health outcomes, such as strength and cardiovascular fitness. How we improve our skills is different from how we improve our habits (Amaya 2021; Douskos 2019), but both sorts of improvements are important. Indeed, in some cases, you must establish better habits to make meaningful progress on skill improvement. This case may be obvious to many readers because many people have deliberated on how to improve their physical fitness.

The lesson applies in other domains, as well. Think about a graduate student aspiring to be a professional academic philosopher. Clearly, she must learn many specialized skills, such as how to extract an argument from a long text, how to identify assumptions implicit in an argument, how to succinctly synthesize a wide area of research, and how to make a paper publishable in professional journals. Learning these skills requires practice and timely, clear feedback on her work. However, these skills on their own are not sufficient because the graduate student also needs to learn good scholarly habits. She needs to learn habits that facilitate active critical reading, regular and frequent writing, and effective notetaking. Establishing these good scholarly habits may require disrupting old habits that are not conducive to the goal of becoming an academic philosopher and routinizing the desired behaviours. To do this, she must set habits in roughly the same way as we set exercise habits: carving out time each day to read/write, having a writing/accountability partner, and setting up a system for taking and retaining notes. And just like with the physical fitness case, some scholarly skills are difficult to acquire without good scholarly habits. Thus, to improve as an academic philosopher, she must improve both her skills and habits, often in tandem.

With these lessons in hand, we can now turn to the main question: can we improve empathy, and if so, how? Note that improving empathy does not mean increasing empathy. For decades, psychologists have studied the variables that increase empathy. They have found that reading fiction (Bal and Veltkamp 2013), acting in theatre (Lewandowska and Węziak-Białowolska 2020), having siblings (Hoffman 2001; Lam et al. 2012), and caring for pets (Daly and Morton 2009) are all behaviours that increase individuals' empathy. That is, these activities make people more empathetic in more circumstances. However, improving empathy is not the same as increasing empathy. Sometimes empathy is easily exhausted in the absence of other psychological changes. Intervening simply to increase empathy without addressing the other psychological impediments does not



improve empathy. In fact, it might make us less likely to empathize in the longer term. Moreover, the way we typically use empathy is counterproductive in cases of conflict because we tend to empathize exclusively with our side, which further entrenches the division. Thus, we need to figure out whether and how we can improve empathy, not increase it. I will argue that to improve empathy, we must focus on improving both our empathetic skills and our empathetic habits.<sup>5</sup> In particular, we ought to aim to improve our perspective taking abilities (skill), our inclination to think about others' perspectives and emotions (habit), and grasping out-group perspectives and emotions (both skill and habit). In the next section, I will review empirical evidence for improving empathy in these ways.

#### 1.4 Empirical Evidence for Improving Empathy

Emerging empirical studies suggest that we can improve empathy by shifting the motivations that drive us to pursue or avoid empathizing (Zaki and Cikara 2015). For example, one hurdle to using empathy effectively in intergroup conflict is that we refrain from empathizing with individuals from the out-group or even take pleasure in their suffering. One promising strategy for extending empathy to out-group members is to emphasize an out-group member's shared values and goals (Levine et al. 2005).

Here is an example to illustrate. Parents who choose to vaccinate their children and parents who refuse vaccinations for their children can seem very different to each other. They each regard their own choices as the right and best choices for protecting their children from unnecessary suffering, and they regard the other's choices as uninformed, risky, and morally wrong. Cutting through misinformation about vaccines and health is extremely difficult, especially in the context of online anti-vax echo chambers. However, getting people to understand the perspective, goals, and emotions of someone from the other side is achievable. Consider Sandy, who vaccinates her children, and Linda who does not. The first step is to get Sandy and Linda to set aside misconceptions about each other. Sandy might be surprised to learn that most anti-vax parents are not uneducated. In fact, on average they have higher levels of education than the general public (Biasio 2017). Then you get them to humanize someone from the other side. You show Sandy that Linda is a devoted, loving, and protective parent. She insists on her children wearing bicycle helmets, worries about what social media will do to their self-esteem, hopes her children will be kind to the shy kids at school, celebrates their straight-A report cards, and sits quietly with them as they mourn their first friendship breakup. Linda has many of the same values, goals, and behaviours as Sandy. Recognizing this common ground makes it possible for them to imagine experiencing the other's worry, fear, and potential guilt of trying to protect their

children but harming them instead. Getting Sandy and Linda to imagine the worry and fear the other feels helps them to humanize each other, to see that both parents are motivated by love for their own children and are trying to raise their children in a complicated and sometimes scary world in the best way they know how.<sup>6</sup>

In emphasizing the shared goals and values, the intervention shifts the group boundaries. Sandy and Linda are not all that different from each other. Linda has many false beliefs about vaccines, of course, but Sandy and Linda can see that they are both experiencing the same parenting fears. Shifting the group boundaries does a couple useful things. In terms of motivations, it mitigates the competition motivation that drives us to avoid empathy with the other person, and it enhances the affiliation motivation that drives us to empathize. Additionally, it opens the door for more productive dialogue and more thoughtful interventions. When Sandy and Linda feel understood by each other and empathize (at least to some extent) with the other's experiences, they are more willing to acknowledge their own doubts and discuss their fundamental concerns. Of course, a full intervention will involve extracting Linda from the echo chamber of misinformation about vaccines. But we cannot even start that process without her first recognizing the possibility that someone who sees things differently is worth taking seriously, and one proven effective way to shift that perspective is through empathy. Interventions that teach individuals how to identify meaningful shared goals and values with an out-group member improve perspective taking abilities, and with enough repetition, make empathy with an out-group much less effortful than it otherwise is.

A related strategy for extending empathy to an out-group member in the context of conflict is to have members of both groups collaboratively work together toward a shared goal. Hannah Read (2021) describes real-life examples of "antagonistic moral opponents" who come to empathize with each other by finding meaningful common ground in collaborative tasks. Through these collaborative tasks, antagonistic moral opponents form a new in-group together. Read describes the well-known collaboration between Ann Atwater, a Black civil rights leader in Durham, NC, and C.P. Ellis, head of the KKK in Durham. In 1971, Atwater and Ellis were tasked with co-chairing ten days of talks on desegregating Durham public schools. They both had the sincere goal of improving Durham public schools for their own children, and it turned out that their experiences and feelings as parents had some important similarities despite how differently situated they were in life. Sharing in each other's affective experience created a sense of trust between Ellis and Atwater that was not possible before. The interaction was life-changing for both, but especially for Ellis who destroyed his KKK card on the last night of the talks. The two became lifelong friends who shared a deep empathy for each other.

The Ellis/Atwater case is dramatic and famous because it seems so unusual. However, the theoretical foundation for this kind of intervention is well established. It dates back to the 1950s with the publication of Gordon Allport's (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*. Allport argued that to decrease prejudice, you must bring antagonistic groups together and give them equal status in the intervention, make the interaction personal, focus on their shared personal goals, and engineer institutions around them to support cooperation. Decades of subsequent research support the basic idea that we can come to empathize with antagonistic moral opponents through such personalized, collaborative projects (Pettigrew and Tropp 2005). This kind of intervention works by interrupting the habitual response to empathize with one's in-group and creating space for opponents to create a meaningful new in-group, thereby diminishing the competition motivation that drives us to avoid empathy with the other person and enhancing the affiliation motivation that drives us to empathize.

For some antagonistic moral opponents, creating the space for finding common ground is not sufficient. This is especially true for antagonistic moral opponents who have status or power differentials. In these kinds of cases, identifying and working toward shared goals does not overcome the differences in perspective that are baked into dominant/subordinate social relations. There is an undeniable asymmetry that shapes the perspectives of each party and giving the individuals equal status in the intervention ignores the lived experiences outside the intervention that make their perspectives so different. Especially for the subordinate social group, this asymmetry generates a disposition to distrust the dominant social group. However, there are promising interventions even for these challenging relations. Emile Bruneau and Rebecca Saxe (2012) recruited individuals from dominant and subordinate groups to participate in online face-to-face exchanges where members of a historically disempowered/subordinate group engage in perspective giving to an individual from an empowered/dominant group. In one study, Palestinian participants described the personal difficulties of living in a dangerous occupied territory, and Israeli participants were instructed to accurately summarize their counterpart's statement. In another study, Mexican immigrants engaged in perspective giving and White Americans living in Arizona engaged in perspective taking. In both studies, the intervention resulted in significant positive attitude change for both the subordinate and dominant groups and significantly more empathy for the other side. Allowing the subordinate to express her experiences and feelings and be understood by the dominant defuses the competition element for both participants and leads to greater empathy for the subordinate and dominant. This kind of intervention helps members of dominant social groups inhibit their habitual response to talk rather than listen. Practising summarizing the perspective they have heard develops

better perspective taking abilities and it communicates to the other person that they are empathizing, which is important for mitigating conflict (Yeomans et al. 2020).

The interventions to improve empathy I have discussed so far focus on dyadic interactions. However, sometimes the impediment to empathy is personal rather than interpersonal. Individuals who are excessively self-focused, depressed, have low self-esteem, or poor emotional regulation skills find it challenging to empathize with others, especially for negative emotions. For these kinds of cases, intervening simply to increase empathy will be ineffective or even counterproductive. Interventions to improve empathy for these cases must focus on the personal psychological obstacles to empathy. For instance, higher levels of self-esteem are correlated with better perspective taking and higher levels of empathy (Galinsky and Ku 2004). This suggests a possible intervention that focuses first on raising participants' self-esteem. Doing this may make others' alternative perspectives seem less threatening in terms of competition and values. Coaching individuals to improve emotional regulation skills – that is, to get better at monitoring, evaluating, and modifying their emotional reactions – also improves their capacity to empathize with others (Zaki 2014, 1613–1614). Empathy is not an exhausting psychological feat when you have good emotional regulation skills because empathizing with negative emotions is not as likely to generate personal distress (Batson et al. 1987; Eisenberg et al. 1994). Finally, we can improve empathy by targeting norms from one's in-group (Grant and Hofmann 2011; Grant 2008) or aspects of one's identity (Klein and Hodges 2001) that support empathy. For example, emphasizing one's religious identity or their goals and ideals as, say, a teacher encourages people to reframe their role in the interaction and in doing so nudges them to extend empathy further. In various ways, these personal interventions make empathy less risky and more conducive to achieving one's goals and fostering affiliation. These personal interventions target both our mental habits (negative thinking, self-focused narratives, reflection on personal ideals and values) and skills (emotional regulation).

This section reviews some of the empirical data on how we can improve empathy. In particular, these studies show how we can improve our perspective taking and affect sharing skills, make empathy with out-groups easier, make empathy with in-groups less habitual in cases of conflict, and make empathy generally less threatening and burdensome. When we make these changes, and importantly when the target of our empathy sees our efforts to understand and empathize better, the effects can be powerful. These changes make space to build a narrow slice of trust between individuals who would otherwise regard each other with apathy, disdain, or distrust. These interventions indicate that we can overcome some of the critiques of empathy, such as that it leads to burnout, exacerbates conflict,

and can lead to frustration and misunderstanding when our empathetic efforts go awry. Improved empathy involves skilfully imagining the perspective of others, even different and distant others, knowing when empathy is called for, and knowing who the right target of empathy is in cases of conflict. This kind of improved empathy can make communication and collaboration on shared projects easier (Madva 2020, 244). It can resolve conflict due to misunderstanding and allow us to have deeper discussions, deliberations and more enlightenment about the experiences and needs of other people (Hannon 2020, 605).

### 1.5 Is Empathy a Virtue?

Above I sketched a view of empathy according to which, with practice and thoughtful structuring of our social environments, we can improve both our empathetic skills and habits. That is, we can learn to empathize in a way that does not deplete us emotionally and psychologically, empathize with opponents in cases of conflict when that is appropriate, and more accurately empathize with others who differ from us. If this view is on target, it seems that we can improve empathy to reap many of the well-established benefits of empathy without incurring the negative effects that can follow from how empathy is typically used in challenging situations. Doing this requires that we avoid empathizing too much (vicariousness) or too little (callousness), knowing which situations call for empathy, and knowing the appropriate targets of empathy.

An interesting possibility arises out of these reflections on improving empathy. Is empathy a virtue? That is, is improved empathy, or proper empathy as we may call it, a virtue? Virtues come in two varieties: intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtues constitutively aim at epistemic goods, such as truth, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, and moral virtues aim at living a flourishing life. Heather Battaly (2011) considers the possibility that empathy is an intellectual virtue. She argues that empathy is either a skill or a capacity, but either way it cannot be a virtue. If empathy is a skill, it is exercised voluntarily (like a virtue) but it can be used for the wrong reasons (unlike a virtue).<sup>7</sup> For example, one could deliberately make mistakes when empathizing and thereby not aim at understanding, truth, etc. If empathy is a capacity, then it is activated involuntarily (unlike a virtue) and is therefore not praiseworthy.

Though this is a provocative argument, we have several reasons to doubt its soundness. First, I think we should reject the skill/capacity dilemma. I have argued here that empathy is neither purely a skill nor purely a capacity. Empathy involves both skills and habits. Moreover, empathy is more fruitfully analyzed as a transient state than a stable trait or involuntary capacity. Second, I find the idea that we deliberately make mistakes in

empathizing puzzling. The example Battaly offers as evidence of this possibility is of two adult sisters who know each other quite well, and one of them deliberately decides to engage in substandard imagining of her sister's emotions knowing that it will result in false beliefs about her emotions. To put it simply, I do not think this ever happens. Perhaps a lot hangs on what counts as deliberately. But on any reasonable understanding of that word, I do not think that people try to make mistakes in empathizing. Why even bother empathizing under those circumstances? But even if they did, it would not count as empathy. As I noted above, though there need not be a perfect match between the subject and target, empathy requires some degree of correspondence and matching between the subject and the target. And in this case of deliberate error, there is a wide gap between the subject and target. The mental exercise in this example is simply imagination, not empathy. Thus, I do not regard this as a compelling argument against empathy as an intellectual virtue.<sup>8</sup>

Rejecting a negative argument is not the same as offering a positive argument, though. Is there positive reason to think that empathy is an intellectual or moral virtue? Many of the elements of virtue are in place for empathy. There is a clear mean between excessive and deficient empathy. Hitting the mean requires wisdom and practical rationality to determine the appropriate targets of empathy and situations in which empathy is called for. The open question concerns the aim of empathy. If empathy is an intellectual virtue, it ought to aim at understanding, truth, knowledge, and the like. If empathy is a moral virtue, it ought to aim at living a good or flourishing life.

On the conception of empathy I have adopted here, empathy – even improved empathy – need not aim at living a flourishing life. There are two reasons for this. First, I distinguish empathy from caring, sympathy, and compassion. On my view, empathy has two individually necessary and jointly sufficient elements: perspective taking and affect sharing. (And there are some success conditions on these elements.) Moral emotions such as caring or compassion may be a product of empathy, but they need not be. Thus, empathy does not have these moral emotions as a constitutive part or even necessary consequence. As a result, there is not a tight connection between empathy and aiming at the good or flourishing. Second, and relatedly, on the motivated view of empathy I adopt, there are numerous reasons we pursue and avoid empathy, many of which do not concern living a good and flourishing life. The motivations that drive us to pursue or avoid empathy concern social affiliation and social desirability, experiencing positive or negative affect, and avoiding negative effects on competition and material or financial possessions. Now, I argue that we can improve our empathy habits and skills, but we may do this with various goals in mind. For example, we may want to empathize to collaborate better with

a hostile colleague and, as a result, get a raise or promotion. Thus, it seems safe to say that on the account of empathy I adopt that empathy does not count as a moral virtue.<sup>9</sup>

I think there is a good case for empathy being an intellectual virtue, though. Empathy always aims at understanding a target's thoughts and feelings. We may have various motivations for wanting such understanding. Perhaps we want to satisfy curiosity about what it's like to be someone very different from ourselves, or to develop a stronger relationship with them, gain an upper hand in competitive negotiations, or seem like a good person. Whatever the motivation, one of the aims of empathy always is truth, knowledge, insight, or understanding. Thus, I think we can safely conclude that empathy is an intellectual virtue.

## 1.6 Conclusion

Reflection on the positive pro-social effects of empathy and negative aspects of empathy in the wild invites the question at the heart of this chapter: can we improve empathy? That is, can we retain the social connectedness, cooperation, and altruism while avoiding the us vs. them mentality and empathetic burnout? I argue that we can. Considering how we can improve empathy raises many questions about empathy. These include whether we should think of empathy as more trait-like or state-like, what are the skills and habits that underlie improved empathy, and whether empathy is a virtue. I have argued that empathy is most fruitfully conceived of as a state of a person in a situation rather than a relatively immutable personality trait. I have argued that we can improve empathy by improving our perspective taking and affect sharing skills, our habitual inclination to think about others' perspectives, and our ability and inclination to grasp out-group perspectives and emotions. Doing so creates space for trust in the context of interpersonal and intergroup conflict. With this picture in hand, I argued that empathy likely is an intellectual virtue but not a moral virtue.

The analysis of empathy and interventions discussed here focus on individuals' exercise of empathy. I do not intend this to imply that we can dismantle interpersonal and intergroup conflict simply through individual efforts. Tackling intergroup conflict especially requires group-level, structural, and institutional interventions. What this reflection on individual interventions on empathy reveals is which kinds of large-scale interventions are likely to help and which are not. For instance, we can conclude from the findings canvassed above that implementing mandatory empathy trainings or informational sessions is likely to be a waste of time and money for organizations because making them mandatory is not a good way to motivate people to be more empathetic.

In contrast, consider group-level interventions that selectively sort people into experientially diverse cohorts. These diverse cohorts may be small groups of incoming college students who take all their classes together, or a team working on collaborative projects, or mentoring groups. In each of these cases, the individuals are already going to be part of the organization, so the interventions do not require subjects to commit extra time and effort to tasks above and beyond those that are expected of the role. Instead, the interventions capitalize on the fact that individuals are already going to be in small to medium sized groups, and they use this to thoughtfully sort the individuals with an eye toward creating meaningful common ground and collaboration on shared goals. The research on individual interventions indicates that these group-level interventions are likely to be much more successful in encouraging empathy with individuals from different backgrounds.

## Notes

- 1 Worryingly, across many diverse populations social scientists are finding a decline in empathic behaviour and an increase in narcissistic behaviour (Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing 2011, Neumann et al. 2011, Nunes et al. 2011).
- 2 I am focused on the critiques of empathy related to conflict. There are other critiques of empathy, as well. For example, Bloom and Prinz argue that empathy is too focused on individuals, which makes it a poor tool for addressing moral problems like climate change or advocating for sensible social policies. A proponent of empathy, like me, would likely reply that empathy is not the right tool for *every* problem. We should be pluralists about which tools are a good fit for the various social, moral, and political problems we have.
- 3 Some of these critiques of empathy are fair. Empathy can be exhausting, and it can exacerbate conflict. However, it is important to understand that many of these problems with empathy are problems for all proposed solutions to entrenched conflict. We tend to be more compassionate, care about, empathize with, and feel righteous anger on behalf of our own side in a conflict. This is the tribal nature of human groups. Thus, while I will go on to suggest some ways to mitigate the problems associated with empathy, these problems are in no way unique to empathy.
- 4 Interestingly, if empathy is more trait-like and there is not much we can do to change it, then the empathy critics' suggestion that we avoid empathy turns out to be useless advice. On the trait view of empathy, that would be like telling introverted people to be more extraverted.
- 5 I should clarify that empathy, even improved empathy, is not *always* an appropriate response to interpersonal and intergroup conflict. Empathizing with an antagonistic moral opponent may mask important differences between people. And when we attempt to empathize but fail to find common ground for that empathy, that could harden our perspectives and make conflict even more intractable. See Read (2021, forthcoming) for a nuanced analysis of some of the risks and rewards of empathizing with political opponents.
- 6 I am describing an interactive version of this intervention where Sandy and Linda get to know each other. An interactive intervention, especially one where



each side explicitly indicates their recognition of common ground, is likely to be especially effective (Yeomans et al. 2020). However, this intervention could be one-sided, as well. In that version, the subject gets to know about a target but not vice versa. On the one hand, this intervention may be less effective because it misses out on the possibility of mutual understanding, but on the other hand it scales up more easily.

- 7 See Stichter (2021) for an argument that virtues are skills.
- 8 For a different sort of argument that empathy is an intellectual virtue, see Kotsonis and Dunne (2022). Kotsonis and Dunne have a different account of empathy than the one that I offer here. Their account of empathy primarily involves perspective taking, and there is not much discussion of affect sharing.
- 9 On my view, there may be a virtue with respect to empathy. That is, there may be morally virtuous ways to exercise empathy. The moral virtue in that case would likely be something like caring. Other accounts do not so clearly distinguish empathy from caring and compassion and sympathy, and so empathy may count as a moral virtue on those accounts. For those accounts, the dialectic between critics and boosters of empathy gets complicated as the empathy boosters build in many of the elements that critics argue empathy in the wild seems to lack.

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# 2 Can interactionist approaches solve the empathy-sharing conundrum?

*Stefano Vincini*

## 2.1 Introduction

In the field of social cognition, interactionist approaches (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009; Eilan 2020; Gallagher 2020) are an alternative to the standard views of Theory Theory, Simulation Theory, and the hybrids combining Theory Theory and Simulation Theory. The goal of this chapter is to connect recent developments in interactionist approaches with the empathy literature. This connection is important because these recent developments offer a solution to a conundrum in contemporary empathy research. The conundrum concerns the relationships between empathy and sharing, and, for this reason, I shall call it the “empathy-sharing” conundrum.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In Section 2.2, I make a few distinctions and remarks that are necessary for a proper understanding of the empathy-sharing conundrum. After these preparatory considerations, I introduce the conundrum. In Section 2.3, I present a first development in interactionist approaches that concerns the ontogeny of social perception. I show that this recent ontogenetic account satisfies a preliminary condition for the solution to the empathy-sharing conundrum. In Section 2.4, I discuss a second development in interactionist approaches that concerns shared intentionality. I suggest that this renewed take on shared intentionality constitutes a solution to the empathy-sharing conundrum.

## 2.2 The Empathy-Sharing Conundrum: Preparatory Distinctions and Remarks

Specifically, the empathy-sharing conundrum refers to phenomena that instantiate both empathy and sharing, and concerns how empathy and sharing can co-exist in these phenomena. However, in order to understand why some researchers believe that “[h]ow to solve this conundrum is an important question for anyone working on empathy” (Maibom 2020, 168; cf. Slaby 2014, 255), we need to have an idea of the possible importance of the relationships between empathy and sharing. Indeed, it is clear that

the stricter the relationships between empathy and sharing are, the more significant it is to understand how these phenomena go together.

In this section, I start from differentiating two different uses of the term “empathy” in order to draw a first distinction between empathy and sharing. Then I discuss the connections between empathy and sharing by (a) making some philosophical reflections and (b) considering the current empirical literature. After establishing that there are phenomena that instantiate both empathy and sharing, I introduce the conundrum and a couple of limitations of the present discussion.

In ordinary English and in the philosophical-scientific literature that follows the ordinary uses of the term, “empathy” denotes at least two kinds of situations that need to be distinguished. The first is the typical situation such as feeling sorry for a homeless person or a suffering African child seen on TV (Miyazono and Inarimori 2021). The second is the kind of situation described by Gatyas (2023): your partner comes home with the great announcement of having just received a long-wished promotion and you take part in her joy. Analogously, when a child enthusiastically shows her parent a newly discovered object of interest, the parent often responds by participating in the child’s joy with congruent affective reactions, comments, and actions. In these cases, it conforms to ordinary language to say that one experiences the joy of the other person (the newly promoted partner, the excited child) “empathically” (Maibom 2020, 168). A cold partner and a strict or impassive parent who do not share the joy of their respective interlocutors may be said to be not “empathic”, to lack in “empathy”.<sup>1</sup>

Scheler (2008) drew a corresponding distinction in reference to a similar German word, “*Mitgefühl*”, rendered by the translator with “fellow-feeling”. I refer to Scheler because his examples can quickly give us an idea of the difference between the two kinds of situations just mentioned. Two parents grieving in front of the corpse of their child is a clear case of participation in each other’s emotion. A parent who would not share his or her partner’s sorrow would be characterized as considerably deficient in “fellow-feeling”. However, Scheler also considers a more prototypical use of the term “fellow-feeling” that refers, for example, to the case in which a relatively distant acquaintance of the two grieving parents passes by to offer her condolences. The difference between the two cases is apparent. The two grieving parents share an emotion; despite her empathic attitude toward the parents, the distant acquaintance does not take part in *their* sorrow (Zahavi 2014).

Scheler’s (2008) examples allow us to draw a first distinction between empathy and sharing: a person who has an empathic reaction (like the acquaintance) does not necessarily undergo an actual experience of sharing

(like the one the grieving parents are having). We should then move to a few philosophical reflections on the relationships between empathy and sharing.

A first observation to make is that, if the acquaintance is having a strong empathic reaction, she is probably sorry that she cannot do more for the parents in their terrible predicament. Although preserving distance and privacy is often the right thing to do, the empathic acquaintance tacitly hopes that the parents may share their sorrow with their family, their circle of friends, or the community to which they belong, or at least that the parents may live through their sorrow in a manner that truly supports each of them and strengthens their relationship. As a minimum, the respectful empathic acquaintance wishes that the parents may experience those kinds of shared feelings and activities that can lead them to constructively deal with their grief, but she will also be attentive to engage herself in a closer relationship with the parents if they need it. If the acquaintance has not even the remotest inclination toward sharing some of her time with the parents, because what she really cares about is her usual business, then her “con-dolences” are in reality just the fulfilment of a social convention.

Let’s further consider the other prototypical situation of a homeless person on the street. If all that the person receives in her life are the alms of the passers-by, it’s difficult to think how she could ever be happy. Perhaps the only thing you can do when you meet her is to give her some change and have a friendly small talk, but again – in your heart – you wish that she may get a job, find some friends, make a family, etc. The same applies to the reaction to the African child on TV. If you have not even the remotest kind of inclination to do something to contribute to the child’s well-being together with the child herself and other people around her, would it really be an empathic reaction? In general, one doesn’t need much reflection to come up with examples of empathic reactions toward friends, family members, colleagues, etc., where the empathic reaction leads one to engage in situations of closer connectedness, involving the sharing of emotions, attention, and activities.

It is now time to turn to the empirical literature on the relationships between sharing and empathy. A considerable body of empirical research suggests that empathy in the prototypical sense is significantly correlated with sharing, which involves experiencing oneself as part of a group, a “we” (Cialdini et al. 1997; Zickfeld et al. 2017). This body of research corroborates the hypothesis that sharing mediates prosocial behaviour (Miyazono and Inarimori 2021). For example, a teenager may not help a school mate who is being bullied because the latter is not part of “the group”. According to this hypothesis on the role of sharing for prosocial behaviour, the group to which self and other are taken to belong may progressively and indefinitely extend, to the point of including humanity at large or the whole of nature. This is why, in this kind of hypothesis,

one can empathize with and eventually help an indefinitely distant other, like the African child (Søvsø and Burckhardt 2021). This scientific literature converges with our previous philosophical reflections in suggesting that a person in need can be seen as an “appeal to engage in a communal sharing relationship” (Zickfeld et al. 2017, 11). In the case of a homeless person you pass by, the communal sharing relationship may not be actually or immediately realized, but only more or less vaguely wished for – something, however, that may motivate you to contribute to social change.

Sharing and empathy seem to be linked in ontogeny and phylogeny. There is considerable evidence that participating in shared activities and emotions is critical to the development of a child, including the child’s capacity to be empathic toward others in need (Ciaunica et al. 2021; Dahl 2019; Ferreira et al. 2021; Tronick et al. 1998). Moreover, notorious arguments indicate that shared intentionality is what we evolved for, since it is what allowed us to survive and prosper as a species. Then, from a phylogenetic point of view too, shared intentionality can be considered to be at the origins of the kinds of empathic behaviours that humans display (Tomasello 2016). In short, there are reasons to believe that sharing represents both an origin and a function of many cases of prototypical empathy. Sharing would be an origin because it would be what makes empathy possible in both phylogeny and ontogeny. Sharing would be a function because it would be what is (more or less mediately) sought for – both for oneself and for others – in empathic reactions.

Nonetheless, in order to recognize that there are cases to which our conundrum applies and thus have a motivation to pursue a solution to it, it is not necessary to accept the idea of such a strong (causal and functional) connection between empathy and sharing. One needs only to acknowledge that there are phenomena that instantiate both empathy and sharing. After our preparatory considerations, this is easily done. Cases of sharing like sharing with your partner the joy for her promotion, a parent that participates in her child’s excitement, or two parents grieving together their terrible loss, etc., are empathic phenomena. They involve empathy because they entail the core features of the prototypical cases of empathy, i.e., the understanding of the other’s affective state and a benevolent emotional response (Gatyas 2023; Søvsø and Burckhardt 2021).

The following formulation of the empathy-sharing conundrum comes from an author who is willing to grant a substantial importance to the relationships between sharing and empathy, but it is acceptable by everyone who merely acknowledges that there are cases that instantiate both sharing and empathy. The conundrum is how to reconcile sharing with the self-other differentiation that empathy entails.



On the one hand, almost everybody agrees that empathy involves sharing in some sense. On the other, almost everyone also thinks that empathy involves a clear self-other differentiation. This can easily create tension. Most agree that when I empathize with your joy *I* experience joy empathically. Moreover, I *share* your joy. But how? By *my* feeling joy. But if so, am I not just feeling my own joy and you are feeling your joy? I cannot, in any case, feel *your* joy without *feeling it myself*, in which case it is *also* my joy (at the very least). Things seem to get confusing fast.

(Maibom 2020, 168)

Maibom goes on explaining that endorsing either of the horns of the dilemma at the expenses of the other seems unacceptable. Saying that I really feel your joy by sharing in it does not work because then it is only my joy and the differentiation between my emotional state and yours is lost. Conversely, affirming that I can only feel my own joy and treat yours as yours is also untenable, since here we lose the essential element of sharing, i.e., the participation in someone else's emotion. In Section 2.4, I suggest that the conundrum derives from a default assumption in modern Western thought and that the interactionist solution to the conundrum entails abandoning such an assumption. Furthermore, a requirement that Maibom (2020, 168) indicates for a viable solution to the empathy-sharing conundrum is the idea that sharing does *not* necessarily entail reciprocal awareness between participants that each of them is sharing the emotion. I will show that the interactionist solution can satisfy this requirement.

Before I make a preliminary step for the solution of the conundrum in Section 2.3, I must note two limitations of the present discussion. First, I presuppose that both “empathy” and “sharing” are family resemblance terms that have more meanings than I have here the space to consider (Schmid 2009, 65–69). Therefore, the solution of the empathy-sharing conundrum I am offering is restricted to the meanings of these terms examined in this chapter. Second, I do not engage in the question of whether certain cases that tend to be categorized exclusively as “empathy” in contemporary academic philosophy are not also, in reality, cases of sharing. Addressing this question would be necessary for a more precise estimation of the range of cases to which the empathy-sharing conundrum applies.<sup>2</sup> However, I implicitly provide elements to answer this question in Section 2.4, which will be largely devoted to the investigation of the nature of sharing.

### 2.3 A Preliminary Step: The Pairing Hypothesis

A component of interactionist approaches is the idea that we can have an immediate access to the mental states or properties of others that

does not rely on theoretical inferences or simulation routines (Gallagher 2020; Zahavi 2014). A recent development of this idea is the proposal that Husserl's (1999) characterization of the process underpinning social perception – the “pairing” account – constitutes a viable developmental hypothesis (Dellantonio et al. 2012; Vincini 2020; Vincini and Gallagher 2021). The pairing hypothesis suggests that infant social perception relies on the domain-general process of assimilation-accommodation (Barrett 2017; Husserl 1999).

According to this hypothesis, infant social perception relies on complex sensorimotor schemas acquired since at least the mid-gestation period through the infant's own goal-directed behaviour (Delafield-Butt and Trevarthen 2015; Reid and Dunn 2021). Now, it is clear that the behaviour of a caregiver is for an infant quite different from her own and that any perceptual assimilation will here have to involve a radical kind of accommodation. However, as Avramides (2001, 224) and Satne (2021, 513) have argued, any form of social cognition implies a form of mental understanding that can apply to both self and others. The pairing hypothesis explains that infants are capable of social perception as a form of social cognition because – despite all its difference – the behaviour of others presents features in common with their own and thus activates the sensorimotor schemas acquired through the infant's own behaviour (Vincini and Fantasia 2022).

The notion of pairing social perception implies the idea of embodiment as a form of minimal ownership (Husserl 1999). Owning an embodied experience means to be the subject that lives through it. Living through an experience is the “original” way in which an experience can be given. “Originality” does not denote “infallibility”, but the most direct way in which something can be given relative to other modes of its presentation (Zahavi 2014). Living through an embodied experience entails experiencing it as being in the egocentric “here” occupied by one's own lived body. If the experience of moving my arm were not given to me “from within”, if I were not occupying the “here” where it occurs, if I had no “sensors” within my arm, then there would be a more direct way in which it could be given – precisely a givenness “from within” – and the experience would not be originally given to me; it would not be an experience that is lived through by me (Vincini and Gallagher 2021).

In a pairing social perception, the embodied experience that is perceived is presented as “over there”, i.e., in a spatial position distinct from the “here” actually occupied by one's own lived body. It follows from this precondition of pairing that, in a pairing social perception, the perceived experience is not originally given. If it were originally given, it would have to be in the “here” of the lived body, but this is excluded by the spatial constraints that must be in place for pairing to take place. Therefore,

pairing implies that the perceived experience is not given to the subject as her own experiences essentially are. In other words, pairing implies self-other differentiation, the differentiation between the self and her experiences originally given “over here” and the other “over there” with her experiences that are non-originally given to the self “over here” (Husserl 1999, 118–119).

On the basis of developmental evidence, the pairing hypothesis assumes that the spatial preconditions of pairing are in place in the infant’s experience of another person (Corbetta 2021; Vincini 2021). Accordingly, it posits that, already in early infant-caregiver interaction, the domain-general process of accommodation presents the experiences of the other person non-originally. The non-original character of the experience of another individual is a primal manifestation of the “otherness of the other” (Friedman 2002). Since the pairing hypothesis posits that self-other differentiation begins so early in development, it confirms that we can assume self-other differentiation to be implicit in ordinary social interaction. In this manner, the pairing hypothesis preliminarily ensures the differentiation of the *individual* experiences of self and other as one of the horns of the empathy-sharing conundrum – the other horn being – it will be remembered – participating in the other’s experience. But are there only individual experiences?

#### 2.4 The Interactionist Solution: The Straightforward View

Ordinary language in Western and non-Western cultures individuates shared mental processes – shared emotions, attention, intentions, goals, etc. – as processes that belong to a plurality of individuals (Barrett 2017, 148; Carr 1986a, 529; Harré 1986, 246–260; Scheler 2008, 259). A recent development of interactionist approaches, “the straightforward view”, suggests that the shared mental processes denoted by the letter of ordinary language exist. For example, when two individuals share an emotion, it is really the case that there is one and the same emotion in which the two participate.

The straightforward view is the logical opposite of a default assumption of modern Western thought about the mind (Vincini and Staiti 2023). This assumption amounts to a form of eliminativism according to which ordinary talk about mental processes possessed by more than one individual is either illusory or merely metaphorical: only individual mental processes – i.e., only mental processes possessed by a single individual – exist. Openly criticizing such Cartesian eliminativism, the straightforward view “has not only been defended by developmental and social psychologists [...], as well as sociologists [...], but also by a number of phenomenologists” (Krueger 2016, 263; see Tollefsen 2002 for a reference to Durkheim). I add that the straightforward view has been explicitly or implicitly advocated by

analytic philosophers and by interactionist approaches to social cognition (Campbell 2011; Gallagher 2020; Gatyas 2023; Eilan 2020; Satne 2021; Tollefsen 2002).

Since the straightforward view clashes with a way of thinking most contemporary Western researchers – including the author – grew up with, it must be approached gradually. This chapter contributes to the extant literature on the straightforward view by showing how different theoretical perspectives converge on it. These are the perspectives of an eminent contemporary phenomenologist (Subsection 2.4.1), a recent interactionist approach (Subsection 2.4.2), a developmental hypothesis (Subsection 2.4.3), and social-psychological theory (Subsection 2.4.4). How the straightforward view may represent a solution to the empathy-sharing conundrum will already appear in the next subsection considering contemporary phenomenology.<sup>3</sup> The remaining subsections will serve to consolidate this solution from different perspectives.

#### *2.4.1 The General Phenomenological Theory of the Individuation of Experiences*

An eminent contemporary phenomenologist who has advocated the straightforward view is David Carr (1986a, b). In this subsection, I use his work to elucidate the straightforward view and I connect it with other work relevant to the straightforward view.

As for other phenomenologists, Carr's view of shared intentionality is based on a general theory of experiences as complex mereological wholes – specifically, a theory that is based on Husserl's theory of inner time-consciousness. A key idea is that, when I experience, for example, a melody, I have a sense that I am experiencing a melody and of how this experience develops over time. Indeed, experiencing a melody is not new to me and I have specific expectations about the experience as an “articulated [temporal] structure” (Carr 1986b, 27).

A related example can be found in Stein (2000, 137). If, while going home at night, you see what seems to be a crouched man at the end of the road, you may go closer worrying that it is a person in need of help. As you get closer, it first appears to be an animal and, when you finally get there, you see that it was just a milestone. At all phases of this perceptual experience, you have a pre-reflective more or less determined sense of how long it will take and what it will imply. When the problem is solved – “it's just a stone” – you have a sense that you are “done with it” and you just resume your journey home (you shift to another experience). This is the example of a unitary perceptual experience, the perception of something at the end of the road, and Stein (2000, 136) made it in order to emphasize that a unitary experience can tolerate “all sorts of qualitative fluctuations

within its unity” (e.g., the fluctuation from categorizing the percept first as a man, then as an animal, and finally as a milestone).

The general idea to which the previous examples point is that the life of consciousness is not totally disorganized, because it is constituted by unities that are “more or less distinguishable” already at the level of pre-reflective awareness.

Just as the melody is composed of the successively sounding notes, so my hearing of the melody is a complex experience composed of my hearings of the notes. [...] I do not experience as events the experiences I am living through. Nevertheless, their articulated structure belongs to the “background” of what I am experiencing, which is melodies, concerts, trees falling, persons talking, and other events in the world. The life of consciousness is composed, then, in the phenomenological view, of a sequence of more or less distinguishable experiences.

(Carr 1986b, 27)

Carr also notes that “as each note is experienced *as* part of the melody as a whole, so the experience of it is lived through *as* part of the complex experience of the melody” (Carr 1986b, 28). If each phase experiencing a single note is lived through as part of the complex experience of the melody, then each phase is a temporal perspective on the whole of the experience – e.g., the experience of an initial note is lived through as the beginning of the experience of the melody. In general, the Husserlian approach requires that each phase of an experience differentiates itself from the rest of the experience: otherwise, it could not function as a perspective on the temporally extended whole. If the current phase did not retain the past phases as past phases distinct from the present one and if it did not anticipate future phases as phases distinct from the present one, there would be no sense of the experience as a temporally extended whole. In a classical-phenomenological approach, an experience, or a mental process, is a unity of distinct perspectives on the whole (Vincini 2021).

Let me indicate three examples of this componential-perspectival structure of unitary experiences/mental processes:

- Carr (1986b, 55, 64) explains that when an action and the intention underpinning it are highly complex – e.g., my intention to teach a philosophy class this semester – I often have a “reflective” and “narrative” grasp of the action and the intention
- As Goldie (2011) has clarified in his analysis of grief, a narrative grasp of a mental process entails being able to entertain both the perspective of the narrator and the perspectives of the subject who undergoes the phases of the process. Indeed, like love, grief is an extended temporal

process that can even endure across the entire life-time of a person (Solomon 2002). Its many manifestations and phases have something in common that holds them together as constituents of the unitary process – all phases of grief relate us to “an all-enveloping, dynamic disturbance of life possibility” and contribute to putting us in a position to deal with it (Ratcliffe 2017, 157; Cholbi 2022). Even when the experience is such that everything looks “flat, shabby, worn-out” without me knowing that the cause of this is the loss of my beloved (Goldie 2011, 136), the experience is an obscure manifestation of the process of grief. It is the “mode” in which grief presents itself to me, despite my tendency to repress it, and thus constitutes a particular perspective on my grieving process. It is the perspective that I had on the grieving process at that time in which I seemed to have forgotten or removed the reason of my grief

- An experience or a mental process is determined by the particular perspective, or “attitude”, that the subject takes on it (Ventham 2021).<sup>4</sup> Pain can be pleasurable – so-called “algophilia” – if the subject has a certain perspective on it (Scheler 2008)

For our discussion, the key point is that, like other phenomenologists, Carr (1986b, 149) believes that the same structure of distinct perspectival components we just outlined in the case of individual experiences applies to shared experiences as well. The crucial difference is that, in the case of a shared experience, the distinct perspectives on the unitary shared experience belong to distinct individuals. Carr (1986a) discusses this fundamental analogy by comparing the temporally extended, individual experience of a tourist who observes the Eiffel Tower all by herself with the communal experience of a group of friends viewing the tower together during their Paris visit (or maybe the shared experience of contemplating the tower with a romantic partner).

If I wander about, I see the same tower from different points of view [individual experience]. When *we* see the tower together [shared experience], different points of view are simultaneous as well as spread out over time. They can be simultaneous because there are two individuals. But for each of us, the sense of the experience contains these two points of view at once. I may not see the tower through your eyes, but its being seen through your eyes as well as my own is part of the experience as *I* have it – or rather, as *I* participate in it. For manifestly, it is *not* just *I* that am having it. For each of us, there is a complex experience “going on” of this one tower which can properly be attached to only one sort of subject: the plural subject *we*. [...] [E]ach participant experiences the object and is aware of the others in such a way that

he cannot possibly attribute the experience to himself alone. After all, it has manifold phases and perspectives, and some of these are not directly available to him at all. The experience quite simply belongs to *us*; it is *ours*.

(Carr 1986b, 525–526)

In other words, Carr (1986a, 528) can say that, in a shared experience, my experience and that of the other people involved are “the same experience” because each of us lives through an overarching experience whose perspectival components are distributed among all participants. According to the straightforward view, the processes through which shared experiences are assembled and experienced as unities of distinct components are the same processes through which individual experiences are assembled and experienced as unities of distinct components. These are processes of pattern formation including the domain-general process of association by similarity and the domain-general processes of linguistic conceptualization and narrative practice (Vincini 2023). It follows that the straightforward view offers a solution to the empathy-sharing conundrum, i.e., the question of how sharing in the experience of another person may preserve self-other differentiation. The solution consists in realizing that, just as individual experiences are assembled and experienced as unities of distinct temporal perspectives, otherwise they could not be experienced as temporally extended processes, so shared experiences are assembled and experienced as unities of perspectives belonging to different individuals, otherwise they could not be experienced as shared.

In Section 2.2, we noticed that the empathy-sharing conundrum applied to situations instantiating both empathy and sharing such as the shared joy for the promotion of a family member or emotion sharing between children and their parents. Here we can add other examples widely discussed in the literature such as the communal joy for a sporting victory or the successful execution of a premiere (Schmid 2009; Vincini 2021). These are examples that are not structurally different from looking at the Eiffel Tower together with a romantic partner and where a minimal empathic attitude toward the other participants is required in order to take part in the shared emotion. In all these cases, the solution to the conundrum goes as follows.

The communal exaltation in which an individual participates is a unitary joy of which some experiential components are given to her originally – her own contributions to the shared joy – and other experiential components are given to her non-originally – the others’ contributions to the shared joy. Nonetheless, all these components are constituents of the unitary joy the individual is experiencing. This structure has a fundamental analogy with the experience of an individual (non-shared) joy, where

some components of it are given as present, some as no longer present, and some as yet to come. Indeed, it should be noted that, while some individual components of a shared experience are given originally and some are given non-originally, the shared experience as a whole is given to the individual originally because there is no more direct way of experiencing a shared joy than by participating in it. Contrary to Cartesian eliminativism, the unitary joy that presents itself to me pre-reflectively (“*die Freude die ich erlebe*”) can also be “yours”. This doesn’t occur when it is an individual joy, but when it is “our” overarching joy (Gatyas 2023).

If all components of an experience are given originally to an individual, then it is an individual experience. Sharing an experience entails both the original experience of the components provided by the self and the non-original experience of the components provided by others. To the extent that interacting individuals form these overarching shared experiences, they participate in each other’s experience and differentiate each other’s individual contributions.

The straightforward view of sharing complies with another condition for a solution to the conundrum indicated by Maibom (2020, 168), i.e., that sharing does not always require reciprocal awareness between participants that each of them is sharing the emotion. Indeed, we noted above that the straightforward view is based on the general theory of experience individuation for which there may be phases of the individual process of grief where the individual is not aware – at least in some respects, not even pre-reflectively aware – that these particular phases are manifestations of the unitary grieving process (Goldie 2011).

Accordingly, the straightforward view explains why people can participate in shared emotional patterns even when none of them is aware of it. For example, love is a shared emotional process widely recognized as such in pop and literary culture (Krebs 2015).<sup>5</sup> Like in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, two individuals can be in love with each other, but be too proud to admit it and even adamantly swear never to love each other. A sadder example is that of the youngest sibling who may react to the tragic loss of a parent in an apathetic and indifferent manner since what is happening to her family is simply too overwhelming for her. Older siblings may for a long time blame the youngest sibling for what seems to be an unforgivable lack of care. In reality, just like repression is a typical stage of individual grief, so the child’s reaction is part of the communal process of grief by means of which the family members are dealing with their loss (Cholbi 2022). It is the child’s perspective on the communal process in which she participates at the time when the apathetic reaction is the only one she can endure and the older siblings are not mature enough to understand it. As in the individual case, the participants have at least in principle the possibility



of recognizing the unitary character of the emotional process in a posterior reflective-narrative grasp (Carr 1986a).

I should note that even if one wanted to argue that certain manifestations of a shared mental process cannot be characterized as “perspectives” on the whole, this would leave the interactionist solution of the conundrum unaffected. It would be in itself no reason to doubt that the components are differentiated as belonging to different individuals and that the process is a unitary process.

#### 2.4.2 *An Interactionist Approach*

In this subsection, I discuss Fuchs and De Jaegher’s (2009) proposal as an interactionist approach to social cognition that endorses the straightforward view.

According to Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009, 471), the interaction between two individuals – e.g., infant and caregiver sharing the joy of a playful interaction – can gain “a ‘life of its own’”. The more an individual participates in a certain kind of interaction, the more the interaction becomes “an identifiable pattern with its own internal structure” (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, 471). In this approach, social cognition – i.e., the understanding of the mental processes of other people – is possible because shared emotions, intentions, or attentional processes are global, interactive, embodied processes that involve more than one individual. Thus, when an individual experiences one of these interactive processes, she becomes aware of the unitary mental process that another person is experiencing too.

The resulting patterns of interaction acquire a meaningfulness over and above the meaning of the individual actions. Social understanding then, comes about in the way that each of the partners, while interacting, implicitly experiences or explicitly realises the commonly generated meaning patterns of the interaction.

(Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, 472)

The emerging affect during a joyful playing situation between mother and infant may not be divided and distributed among them. It arises from the ‘between’ or from the over-arching process in which both are immersed. The [socio-cognitive] understanding achieved by this moment-to-moment interaction is part and parcel of the process.

(Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, 479)

Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009, 482; cf. Søvstø and Burckhardt 2021, 5) emphasize the pre-reflective and implicit nature of this awareness of the global mental states shared with other people. Like other work on the

straightforward view (Vincini 2023), Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009, 472) suggest that this awareness is based on general processes that are not restricted to the social domain. In particular, they point to a “pervasive” process of embodied assimilation called “incorporation”.

This process takes place when instruments are integrated in sensorimotor schemas – e.g., “driving a car and feeling the road surface under the tyres” or a blind person feeling tactile sensations on the tip of her stick (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, 472). In these cases, the lived body is “subjectively felt as ‘melting’ or being at one with the instrument” (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, 472). Incorporation also occurs when an expert tennis player is perceiving “an approaching ball” and the ball evokes a specific motor response from her (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, 472). In other words, incorporation is a process of establishing sensorimotor patterns and global dynamic systems with one’s own environment.

According to Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009), a shared state presupposes the mutual incorporation of the subjects involved. It is consistent with Fuchs and De Jaegher’s own emphasis on self-other differentiation and the phenomenological framework they rely upon, to assume that this mutual incorporation entails for each subject the non-original presentation of experiential components, i.e., the presentation of certain components as the individual contributions of a subject different from the self. Just as the components of individual mental states need to have something in common in order to be taken as components of unitary individual mental states, so the contributions of different individuals need to have features in common in order to be experienced as components of a unitary shared state. In the case of emotion sharing between infant and caregiver, the pivotal features are intermodal, rhythmic, melodic, vocal, facial, and gestural aspects common to the behaviour of self and other. “These intermodal characters and contours are among the main bridges of mutual incorporation and, with it, of primary empathic understanding” (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, 478).

When emotions, attention, and action are “truly joint” (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, 476), exclusively focusing on the individual (originally given) components and declaring that they constitute the experience that a participant is having seems to be a relatively arbitrary act of reflection based on Cartesian assumptions. This merely individual unity does not pre-reflectively present itself as a unity to a participant. *Rather, for each participant, what is pre-reflectively prominent is the overarching process.* “The ‘in-between’ becomes the source of the operative intentionality of both partners” (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, 476).

A prototypical example of a “truly joint” state is the “dyadic state of consciousness” shared by infant and caregiver. On this matter, Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009, 479) accept the straightforward analysis offered by Tronick et al. (1998). It is then time to turn to these developmentalists.

### 2.4.3 *A Developmental Account*

For Tronick et al. (1998, 295, 296), a dyadic state of consciousness is a unitary state that an infant achieves through social interaction and that “incorporates elements of the state of consciousness of the other”. What occurs in infant-caregiver interaction is...

The creation of a singular dyadic state of organization. This dyadic state organization has more components – the infant and the mother – than the infant’s (or mother’s) own self-organized state. [...] At the moment when the dyadic system is created both partners experience an expansion of their own state of consciousness.

(Tronick et al. 1998, 295–296)

The idea that each participant experiences that her consciousness expands “to incorporate elements of consciousness of the other in a new and more coherent form” (Tronick et al. 1998, 296) neatly converges with the phenomenological descriptions of the previous sections: the transition from individual to dyadic experience is a transition from a life of consciousness where the experiential unities that present themselves pre-reflectively to the individual are unities of originally given components – all experiential components belong to the self – to a “*decentring*” of experience where the experiential unity that presents itself pre-reflectively to the individual includes experiential elements that are non-originally given, i.e., elements that belong to another person. In fact, Tronick et al. (1998, 297) do not neglect to indicate that intersubjective encounters are always in some sense “asymmetrical” (the partners are different people, behave differently in many respects, and have a different history). Thus, the self- and other-components that are experienced to be part of a dyadic state are always somehow differentiated.

The process that brings about dyadic states is not a special process that functions in the case of dyadic states alone. Individual states of an infant – e.g., non-shared emotions – are already “exquisite [organized] configurations of face, voice, gaze, posture, and gesture” (Tronick et al. 1998, 293). From the general point of view of systems theory, organisms have a fundamental tendency to gain “greater complexity and coherence” and this tendency underpins the formation of both individual and shared states (Tronick et al. 1998, 296). However, shared states generally allow individuals to acquire greater complexity and coherence than individual states and this is why individuals strongly seek them. For example, a mother-held infant is able to produce “an action – [a certain kind of] gesturing – that [...] could not occur unless the infant and mother were related to the other as components of a single dyadic system” (Tronick et al. 1998, 296).

According to Tronick et al. (1998, 298), “all humans are able to achieve dyadic states of consciousness” and the dyadic state between patient and therapist is the other case that they discuss in view of the practical goals of their profession. The human tendency to seek dyadic states as states of greater complexity and coherence is such that an infant of a depressed mother may even be inclined to join negative – sad or even adverse – dyadic states with the mother rather than experiencing no dyadic states at all. In general, developing humans learn from their participation in dyadic states how to play their role in such states. *They then seek and expect these kinds of intersubjective states in later encounters with others* (Tronick et al. 1998, 298–299; Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, 481; cf. Section 2.2).

#### *2.4.4 The Convergence with Social Psychology*

In Section 2.2, I referred to social-psychological studies corroborating the importance and the pervasiveness of sharing in human life, including its relevance to empathy. In this final subsection, I briefly return to these studies in order to suggest that they support the interactionist solution to the empathy-sharing conundrum.

The conceptual framework used in the socio-psychological literature can significantly converge with the one employed by the advocates of the straightforward view. Cialdini et al.’s (1997, 483) “feeling of oneness” happens to be an accurate translation of the expression (*Einsfühlen*) with which Stein (1917, 16–18) designated the sharing of “strictly the self-same feeling” [*streng dasselbe Gefühl*] among different individuals. Cialdini et al. (1997, 482) clarify that in the oneness, or merging, of self and other there is no loss of self-other differentiation:

What is merged is conceptual, not physical. We are not suggesting that individuals with overlapping identities confuse their physical beings or situations with those of the other. [...] [I]t is conceptual identities that are merged, not physical identities or situational circumstances.

Analogously, Stein (1917, 18) indicates that the plural subject of a shared experience does not simply coincide with the individuals, who – by themselves – could have no relationship with each other, but rather with the individuals insofar as they interact and constitute a phenomenological unity: it is an experience that *we* are having (cf. Carr 1986a–b). The “we” as the phenomenological unity described by Stein seems to coincide with the social “conceptual identity” investigated by Cialdini et al.

In this connection, one should also consider the position of Miyazono and Inarimori (2021, 5), who carry out an extensive review of the social-psychological literature and posit “self-other merging as the process in which self and other merge into *one* group”. Evidently, merging “into *one*

group” does not entail a loss of self-other differentiation because a group is precisely not an individual, but a unity of distinct individuals. Thus, Miyazono and Inarimori’s (2021) review suggests that the social-psychological literature is consistent with the straightforward view (cf. Krueger 2016, 263).

## 2.5 Conclusion

A recent development in interactionist approaches to social cognition, the pairing account of infant social perception provides a preliminary basis for a solution to the empathy-sharing conundrum, i.e., the differentiation between individual experiences had by self and other. “Pairing” implies the applicability of sensorimotor schemas across self and other, which has been argued to be a precondition for social cognition (Avramides 2001; Satne 2021). Nevertheless, pairing also emphasizes self-other differentiation as an equally essential condition: an experience of the self is given in the most direct way in which an individual experience can be given, i.e., “originally” (although in a possibly fallible manner); an experience of the other is given “non-originally” (Husserl 1999; Stein 1917; Vincini and Gallagher 2021; Zahavi 2014). Since it explains how self-other differentiation originates very early in development from embodied spatial constraints, the pairing hypothesis ensures that we can assume self-other differentiation to be in place in ordinary social interaction.

Contrary to Cartesian eliminativism, however, individual experiences are not the only kind of experiences that exist. There are also shared or communal experiences/mental processes and the language that refers to them is not illusory or merely metaphorical. This is the straightforward view of shared intentionality, which has been advocated in recent interactionist accounts of social cognition. The straightforward view offers a solution to the empathy-sharing conundrum based on a general theory of the individuation of experiences. Just like an individual experience is a unity of distinct temporal perspectives on the whole of the experience, otherwise it could not be experienced as a temporally extended whole, so a shared experience is a unity of distinct individual perspectives on the whole, otherwise it could not be experienced as shared.

A shared joy is a unity of differentiated individual experiences, i.e., experiences of the self that are given originally and experiences of other people that are given non-originally. In line with the functioning of domain-general processes of individuation (Vincini 2023), what pre-reflectively presents itself to each participant as the experiential unity she is living through – and, at a later moment, to her reflective grasp in a narrative practice – is the overarching communal emotion that includes the experiences of distinct individuals as its constituents. This is why I can feel “*your joy*” by “*feeling it myself*”, in which case it is *also my joy*” (Maibom

2020, 168). This solution to the empathy-sharing conundrum has been consolidated in this chapter by considering how the straightforward view has been advocated by Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009) and Tronick et al. (1998). Furthermore, it has been shown that the straightforward view is consistent with the social-psychological literature on the feeling of oneness and self-other merging.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

- 1 That “empathy” is also used to refer to situations of sharing can be evinced from an ordinary dictionary. For example, the Cambridge online dictionary defines empathy as “the ability to understand and share other people’s feelings and problems”. Retrieved from: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-german/empathy>
- 2 Recently, a world-religion leader told the victims of the conflict in Congo, “Your pain is my pain”; some time ago, a US Democratic president told a less fortunate interlocutor, “I feel your pain” (Schmid 2009, 75). Contemporary philosophy usually categorizes as empathy situations where the empathizer has not suffered the evil in question in the first-person-singular. However, is this a good reason *to* exclude the possibility that these relatively ordinary expressions may refer to real cases of sharing?
- 3 For a different view in contemporary phenomenology see Zahavi (2014).
- 4 As Slaby (2022) would note, this also means that mental processes like emotions have an enactive aspect; they are something *we make* by taking a certain stance on them. Hence, they are something for which we are at least partially responsible.
- 5 As an American singer-songwriter would put it, “this love is ours”.
- 6 I thank Jan Slaby for formulating the key idea at the origin of this chapter. I am grateful to Jessica Struchhold and the participants in the workshop organized by Christiana Werner and Thomas Petraschka at the University of Duisburg-Essen for their input to earlier versions of the chapter.

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# 3 Seeing Others as Ends in Themselves

## From the Empathic to the Moral Point of View

*Catrin Misselhorn*

### 3.1 The Empathic and the Moral Point of View

Ethical theories based on empathy have often been seen as opposed to reason-based Kantian approaches to ethics (Slote 2007, 7). Some recent accounts attempt to integrate empathy into a Kantian account, for instance in the context of animal ethics (Korsgaard 2018). In this chapter, I will argue that empathy can contribute to a broadly Kantian conception of the moral point of view. The term “broadly Kantian” is meant to indicate that considering others as ends in themselves is the basic concept of this type of moral theory, without being committed to other central tenets of Kant’s ethics, such as his focus on principles, duty, or the purely rational character of ethics. If we take the notion of a point of view seriously, the moral point of view can be characterized as involving seeing others as ends in themselves. Empathy is one way of seeing others as ends in themselves; we can call this the *empathic point of view*. This is to say that empathy is not just an epistemic tool but that it is morally imbued all the way through.

The aim of this chapter is to explain why it makes sense to assume that the empathic point of view is morally permeated. Despite the close connection between the empathic and the moral point of view, I do not claim that they are identical. Empathy provides a route to morality, but the moral point of view goes beyond the empathic point of view. This view occupies middle ground in between the claim that empathy has no moral relevance (or a negative one) and the one that empathy is “tantamount to assuming the equal worth of all persons” (Garrett and Graham 2014, 130).

The latter generalization does not follow directly from the empathic point of view as understood here, but a reflective form of empathy may presumably get us there. However, even if that is the case, this form of empathy is not in my focus of interest; nor do I assume that empathy is a necessary or constitutive condition of the moral point of view. For this reason, much of the criticism that has been levelled against the moral relevance of empathy does not strike my main thesis. This holds, for instance, for most of the objections against empathy in Prinz (2011). It should also be noted that this chapter is a study in moral psychology that is more interested in developing

a coherent view of the connection between the empathic and the moral point of view than with rejecting alternative approaches to morality.

The first part of the chapter develops the concept of the empathic point of view as seeing others as ends in themselves and relates it to the moral point of view. The second part aims to clarify the concept of empathy and explain how it works on a functional and neuroanatomical level. Based on this view of empathy, the third part shows in detail that in particular perceptual pain empathy plays a role in moral judgment, motivation, and moral development.

Let us begin with a characterization of the moral point of view. According to Kurt Baier (1954, 123), we adopt the moral point of view

if we regard the rules belonging to the morality of the group as designed to regulate the behavior of people all of whom are to be treated as equally important ‘centres’ of cravings, impulses, desires, needs, aims and aspirations; as people with ends of their own which are entitled *prima facie*, to be attained.

The empathic point of view differs from Baier’s description of the moral point of view in a number of ways. First, Baier is concerned with rules that belong to the morality of a group. The empathic point of view is, in contrast, concerned with individuals; groups and rules of groups come into play only at a later stage.

The passage in the quote that most touches on the empathic point of view says that the moral point of view involves treating people as equally important “‘centres’ of cravings, impulses, desires, needs, aims and aspirations”. This formulation points in the direction of what Rawls (1993, 72) calls “self-authenticating sources of valid claims”; as such, they should be treated as ends in themselves. Robert Audi (2016, 85) contrasts the notion of treating someone as an end with instrumental treatment and relates it to altruism: “treating a person as an end is governed by [...] intrinsic caring about their good, it cannot be merely instrumental. [...]. Positively, end-regarding treatment implies some measure of altruism”.

However, whereas Audi is concerned with *treating* people as ends in themselves, the empathic point of view involves first of all *seeing* others as ends in themselves, although this also motivates agents to treat them as such as we will later see. According to Audi (2016, 85), “[t]reating someone as an end in the sense just indicated surely embodies *caring*”. One way to understand the notion of caring is to empathically see others as ends in themselves. *Seeing* others as ends in themselves is, therefore, more fundamental than *treating* them as such.

The moral point of view, hence, incorporates the empathic view, although it goes beyond it. Empathy need not, strictly speaking, be a

constitutive element of the moral point of view, but the idea is appealing that there are situations in which “[w]ithout empathy we are likely to miss [...] the moral point of view” (Laskey 1987, 309). That is, empathy makes us more sensitive to moral claims and more inclined to see and treat others as ends in themselves.

If this is true, then the moral point of view is not the point of view of a “detached, rational and impartial” moral *observer*; it is the point of view of a moral *agent* who is “concerned and involved” (Laskey 1987, 299). Thus, the moral point of view is not to be identified with a merely impartial point of view, although it should, of course, not be biased or prejudiced (Andrews and Gruen 2014, 207).

It is, however, a well-established fact that empathy is susceptible to various kinds of bias. This fact has been used to dispute the moral relevance of empathy in general (Prinz 2011; Bloom 2016). These arguments rely, however, on conceptual confusions and the empirical evidence does not suffice to support the strong claims derived from it, viz. that empathy is morally no good but even harmful. I agree with those who do not find the arguments against the moral relevance of empathy conclusive (Passos-Ferreira 2015; Barish 2021) but I do not want to review the arguments of both sides in detail.

I do, however, want to point out that what is at stake is not just the moral relevance of empathy but the bigger picture of morality. Prinz’s criticism of empathy is part and parcel of his own brand of moral sentimentalism, which leads to a strong version of moral relativism. For him, morality always is an in-group matter based on “grounding norms” which trace back to emotional reactions about which no rational dispute is possible (Prinz 2007, 125).

Apart from this, it seems to me that his approach to morality fundamentally misses what is crucial about the moral point of view. This gets manifest, for instance, in the fact that he considers sexual taboos as a paradigmatic type of moral norms (Prinz 2007, 70). If it is correct that sexual taboos are no moral norms at all, then his view does not possess the resources to account for the moral point of view properly.

Given this result, there is good reason to come back to empathy as a central concept in moral theory and to try to deal with its shortcomings. This holds particularly if one shares his conviction that emotions have an pivotal role to play in morality. Against this background, the attempt to establish a connection between the empathic and the moral point of view without equating the two seems still promising.

In contrast to Bloom, I have not as much confidence in reason alone with regard to moral issues. From my point of view, empathy and reason are capacities that can and should complement each other. Reason can compensate for the weaknesses of empathy, in particular its tendency to

focus on the near and dear. However, reason is not beyond moral error, too, and sometimes needs empathy as a corrective, as I will argue later in more detail.

### 3.2 What is Empathy?

Ideally, a definition specifies individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a concept. I will attempt such a definition of the concept of empathy, although it is well known that it is difficult to establish necessary and sufficient conditions even for seemingly simple concepts like knowledge. However, I believe that my definition captures the core of the concept of empathy and is apt to distinguish it from other related phenomena that do not count as empathy.

A definition that understands empathy as a distinctly affective phenomenon serves these purposes best. I suggest that empathy consists in a representation of another individual's feeling that satisfies three conditions: (1) congruence, (2) asymmetry, and (3) other-awareness. The term 'feeling' is used broadly. It includes emotions in the narrow sense of the term, such as anger, happiness, or sadness, as well as moods or affective states, such as pleasure and displeasure. In general, I assume that all feelings have a phenomenal quality, and that some of them, notably emotions, have an intentional object. This definition does not commit me to representationalism with respect to all mental phenomena, but it does imply that empathy is representational.

One might ask whether the feeling has to be actually instantiated in the target or whether empathy may also involve an anticipation of a feeling that the individual does not (yet) have. One example could be that I empathically feel the grief of a colleague who, as I know, just lost a beloved person in an accident even if she has not yet learned about it and, hence, does not grieve. The concession that the definition captures only the core of the concept of empathy may allow for some vague boundaries such as in this case.

The congruence criterion (1) distinguishes empathy from other ways of understanding feelings (Eisenberg and Fabes 1990; Hoffman 2000; Nickerson et al. 2009; de Vignemont and Singer 2006 speak of isomorphism). It requires that an individual who feels empathy with another one must have the same feeling as the individual who is the target of empathy. However, congruence refers just to the type of feeling. It need not encompass every nuance of it. The congruent feeling is also not simply duplicated in the empathizing individual since it acquires a different intentional object, as will be explained below.

Moreover, empathy involves, in contrast to the target's original feeling, asymmetry and other-awareness. (2) *Asymmetry* means that the

empathizing individual only has the feeling because the target has it and that it is more appropriate to the target's situation. (3) *Other-awareness* requires that there must be at least a rudimentary awareness of the fact that the empathic feeling is the target's feeling and not one's own. Because of the asymmetry and the other-awareness condition, it makes sense to call empathy a vicarious feeling.

The explanation of empathy often refers to what is known in psychology and philosophy as Theory of mind (ToM), i.e., the capacity to understand and predict other people's behaviour by ascribing mental states to them. Yet, the term ToM should be applied with caution to empathy. Although empathy plays a role in attributing mental states to other individuals and in predicting their behaviour, it does not literally involve any kind of theory in the sense of a set of propositions or beliefs.

The adequacy of this definition can be tested by comparing empathy with a number of related but distinct phenomena. First, empathy must be distinguished from the rational understanding of feelings. It is possible to understand the feelings of another person rationally without having a congruent feeling, for instance, by inference from the other's behaviour. However, if there is no congruence, then it makes no sense to ask for asymmetry. The other-awareness condition is trivially satisfied, since the feeling that one is trying to understand rationally is not one's own feeling. To be sure, one might also aim at rationally understanding one's own feelings in certain situations, for instance, if one concludes from one's behaviour that one must be jealous. However, in these cases one is taking the stance of an external observer from the third-person perspective toward one's own feelings.

Empathy is also not just emotional contagion, a spontaneous spread of feelings from one individual to another, or in a larger group. An example of emotional contagion are children who start to cry in pain when they see or hear another child crying painfully. In cases of emotional contagion, there is congruence and asymmetry. The children share an emotion that they have, in fact, only because another child has it, and it is more appropriate to the other child's situation. Yet, this is not a case of genuine empathy because the other-awareness condition is not met. The children are not aware that the pain that they are feeling is the pain of another child.

Although empathy involves congruence of feelings, it is not just a case of shared feelings. In shared feelings, there is congruence but there is neither asymmetry nor necessarily other-awareness. One individual does not have the feeling simply because the other one has it, and it is appropriate to each individual's situation. For example, parents share the emotion of being proud of their child's cognitive progress without there being asymmetry. There might be the awareness that the other parent is feeling in the same way, but other-awareness is not compulsory for shared feelings.

Empathy is also not the same as sympathy, although the latter term was used before the nineteenth century, for instance, by David Hume and Adam Smith to refer to what we now call empathy. Today, the term ‘sympathy’ refers to a concern with the well-being of another individual. Sympathy involves the third-person perspective, whereas the first-person perspective is constitutive for empathy (Darwall 1998, 261). Ultimately, none of the three conditions applies to sympathy. There is neither congruence, nor asymmetry or other-awareness. Take the example of a friend who, out of enthusiasm for a guru’s teachings, intends to give her entire fortune to him. I do not share her enthusiasm, but I may feel sympathy for her and try to prevent her from doing mischief.

The comparison of empathy with similar, but distinct affective phenomena shows that (1) congruence, (2) asymmetry, and (3) other-awareness can be used to define empathy. However, the concept of empathy calls for a more fine-grained analysis. There are two types of empathy (Stueber 2006, 20–21): *basic or perceptual empathy*, on the one hand, and the cognitively more demanding *perspective-taking*, also called *reenactive* or *projective empathy*, on the other.

Perceptual empathy is a passive, perception-like process; one experiences empathy because one perceives that someone else is undergoing a certain feeling. I assume that this is not just an automatic mechanism occurring at the neuronal level but that it is phenomenally conscious. Reenactive empathy in contrast requires actively putting oneself in the shoes of the target; it arises from imagining oneself in the same situation or place as another individual. There is some evidence that perceptual and reenactive empathy are based on functionally and neuroanatomically distinct mechanisms (Goldman 2011), but it seems as well plausible to suppose that the different kinds of empathy have evolved in layers comparable to the nested dolls of a matryoshka (De Waal and Preston 2017).

Although it makes sense to assume that some kind of perspective-taking, role-reversal or imagining “what it would be like to be in the other person’s predicament” (Laskey 1987, 299) is important for moral deliberation, I want to focus on perceptual empathy. The reason for this choice is that perceptual empathy is more fundamental than reenactive empathy. To begin the process of perspective-taking, one must already recognize the other individual as a “‘centre’ of cravings, impulses, desires, needs, aims and aspirations” to take up Baier’s formulation again. Perceptual empathy, in contrast, does not depend on this presupposition but can lead to recognizing other individuals as centres or sources of value in the first place.

Before turning to the justification of this claim, it is necessary to explain the concept of representation that appears in the definition of empathy. The suggested explanation borrows from Dretske’s representationalism,

even though I am not committed to all of his claims, especially not to the one that all mental states or events have to be representational or directed at something. In fact, my account entails that empathy is necessarily representational, but the basic argument of this chapter can be made using diverging theoretical frameworks. The Dretskean explanation may, hence, lend explanatory plausibility to the suggested view, but it is not essential to the main line of argument.

For Dretske, the content of a mental representation is determined by an evolutionary function that involves carrying information by tracking certain objects. Fear, for instance, would be an indicator of danger. In contrast, the representations involved in empathic feelings do not primarily carry information about the original objects that caused them in the target. They are recalibrated to track the feelings of others, and they fulfil this function by way of producing a congruent feeling in the observer accompanied by asymmetry and other-awareness. The example of a pressure gauge can help to illustrate the process of recalibration. The function of a pressure gauge is originally to provide information about pressure. However, it can also function as an altimeter by recalibrating the instrument's display. The pointer positions of the device would then (also) represent altitude.

Dretske (1995, 20) uses the concept of recalibration for example to explain how we can learn to distinguish words from hearing sounds: "We still hear sounds, of course, but, after learning, after the kind of calibration occurs that is involved in language learning, experiences acquire an added representational dimension". Prinz (2004, 158) applies the concept of recalibration to explain how more complex emotions evolve from basic emotions. A similar process arguably occurs (contrary to Prinz's view) in empathy: If perceiving an individual that is experiencing a particular feeling reliably produces a congruent feeling in the observer, then this vicarious feeling is recalibrated to represent the target's feeling. The recalibrated feeling is distinguished from the original feeling by asymmetry and other-awareness. The original intentional object of the feeling is still present (if one exists), because it is needed to individuate the target's feeling. However, the original intentional object is bracketed in empathy because the recalibrated vicarious feeling has the primary function of tracking the target's feelings. The intentional object of the empathic representation is thus not the original intentional object of the target's feeling, but it is the target's feeling that is being represented. This shift of the intentional object of empathy is one reason why the presented view is strictly speaking not a simulation theory, although it bears some resemblance to it, particularly the congruence of feelings.

Looking for the neuroanatomical correlate of this type of representation, one obvious theoretical choice is that perceptual empathy is rooted in mechanisms of inner imitation or resonance, which allow us to perceive



the feelings of other sentient beings without using theoretical assumptions or inferences. Some non-human animals may also possess this ability (De Waal and Preston 2017). These mechanisms of inner imitation can be explained by mirroring processes.

Mirror neurons were originally discovered in the brain of monkeys (Gallese et al. 1996); these are nerve cells that become activated when monkeys perform an action and when they observe a similar action in another monkey or in a human experimenter. They have also been found in the human brain (Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004; Mukamel et al. 2010). Mirroring arguably also plays a role in empathy (Debes 2017). Using fMRI, it has been shown that overlapping brain areas are activated when experiencing pain and when perceiving others in pain (Jackson et al. 2005; Lamm and Majdandžić 2015; Zaki et al. 2016). There is a distinction between the affective and the sensorimotor aspect of pain empathy. Although recent studies suggest that empathy also involves sensorimotor processes (Riečanský and Lamm 2019), this assumption is not strictly necessary for the argument pursued here.

However, the original definition of mirror neurons needs to be modified to account for empathy. One has to overcome the restriction of mirror neurons to actions and consider larger areas of the brain. In addition, the class of triggering stimuli has to be defined more broadly (Goldman 2009). Perceptual empathy would accordingly arise if someone perceived signs that the target is experiencing a feeling and the corresponding mirror neuron system was activated leading to a congruent feeling.

Signs that can activate the mirror neuron system for empathy could be a characteristic behavioural manifestation of the feeling, the facial expression that is typically associated with it, and the stimuli that predictably elicit that type of feeling. The mirror neuron system for pain, for instance, might be activated by seeing a child reaching for a hot stove, the facial expression contorted with pain, and the hand withdrawn in pain.

Although the resonance mechanisms from which perceptual empathy evolves seem to be innate, social aspects may have an influence on how these mechanisms are formed and exercised. It may be necessary to attune mirror neuron systems to their social function in empathy. This would happen in the process of recalibration described above. Other contextual aspects may also influence the arousal of perceptual empathy to varying degrees. Basic emotions are more likely to trigger the mirror neuron system than more complex social emotions. The expression of the target's feeling probably also affects the occurrence of perceptual empathy: the more obviously and intensely a feeling is displayed, the more likely it is to elicit empathy.

Similarity or familiarity with the target will also have an impact on perceptual empathy, and the situation and social setting may facilitate or hamper its occurrence. Being confronted with several people displaying different feelings at the same time may make it harder to develop empathy. Mood, arousal level, personality, gender, age, emotional repertoire, and the ability

to regulate emotions also influence the capacity to empathize (De Vignemont and Singer 2006). It is a stereotype that women are more empathic than men, although some studies show that the differences are not as pronounced as these stereotypes suggest and that they also depend on how empathy is operationalized and measured (Löffler and Greitemeyer 2021).

Perceptual empathy gives us, despite these constraints, an understanding of the inner life of others; it makes their feelings accessible to us and helps us to understand them and predict their behaviour. Empathy might not be the only way to understand the feelings of others; nor does it have to be infallible. Nevertheless, perceptual empathy, in particular, allows us to quickly assess and react to others' feelings using sparse and easily accessible information as input. Since it does not depend on extensive deliberative processes, it does not require many cognitive resources. Thus, perceptual empathy can be thought of as a kind of fast and frugal heuristics (Gigerenzer et al. 1999; Spaulding 2017) for grasping what is going on in other individuals' minds. In addition to these epistemic aspects, perceptual empathy also plays an important role in moral judgment, motivation, and development.

### 3.3 From Pain Empathy to Morality

It seems to be hard to doubt that empathy somehow contributes to our moral practice, even if it is not necessary or constitutive for it (Kauppinen 2014; Maibom 2014). The fact that it is common to teach children what is morally wrong by inducing empathy in them for the victims of wrongdoing supports the significance of empathy for moral development. The empathic perception of pain has a peculiar role to play in this context. For this reason, the following section will focus on perceptual pain empathy and attempt to explicate its moral implications. The aim of moral psychology is to explain the psychological mechanisms that give rise to moral judgment, motivation, and moral development. In order to understand the role of perceptual pain empathy in these mechanisms, the causal cum logical pathway that leads from perceptual pain empathy to moral judgment and moral motivation will be described.

The following schema illustrates the steps along this path. Steps (1) to (8) describe how empathy leads to moral judgment, whereas steps (9) to (10) show how moral motivation arises from this process. The term "causal cum logical" means that these steps are causally related to each other and that there is a logical relationship between the content of these propositions, which are going to be explained and motivated below:

- (1) Being in pain feels bad.
- (2) If we observe signs that another individual is in pain, we feel their pain empathically.
- (3) The empathically felt pain feels bad.

- (4) If a bad feeling is directed at an object, it amounts to a negative affective evaluation of this object.
- (5) Empathically felt pain is directed at another individual's pain.
- (6) Empathically felt pain, therefore, amounts to a negative affective evaluation of the other individual's pain.
- (7) The negative affective evaluation of the other individual's pain is a (proto-)moral evaluation.
- (8) This (proto-)moral evaluation is the basis for more general moral judgments.
- (9) A negative affective evaluation leads to the disposition to do something about the negatively evaluated fact or event.
- (10) The empathically felt pain leads to the disposition to do something about the other individual's pain.

The schema starts with proposition (1) that being in pain feels bad, which is based on the phenomenology of pain. (2) states that, when we observe signs that another individual is in pain, we empathically feel their pain. This follows from the above characterization of perceptual empathy. (3) That the empathically felt pain feels bad results from the definition of empathy as a congruent feeling and the phenomenology of pain. Proposition (4) asserts: if a bad feeling is directed at an object, it amounts to a negative affective evaluation of that object. This is a general assumption about the nature of feelings with an intentional object. This is not to say that every feeling has an intentional object, but if a feeling has one, the fact that it feels bad amounts to a negative affective evaluation of that object. Feelings of this kind involve "a sense of how things are going – whether well or poorly" as Helm (2002, 16) puts it.

It is controversial whether pain has an intentional object (Aydede 2019), but let us assume for the sake of argument that it does. This is not strictly necessary for the pursued line of argument. Although the claim that pain empathy is necessarily intentional falls out of the definition of empathy, this is not true for the view that the target's original feeling has to be intentional. Still, making my view about the representational content of pain explicit might allow a more comprehensive grasp of the larger theoretical framework in which it is situated.

A common characterization of the intentional object of pain as "tissue damage" seems to be too narrow, since psychological conditions may also cause pain (Aydede 2019). To take into account the different entities that are able to elicit pain, it is useful to follow Kenny (1963/2003, 132f.) in discriminating between the formal and a particular object of an emotion: the particular object consists in the concrete event that causes the emotion and the formal object is the property in virtue of which the particular event elicits the emotion.

Take the example of fear. Quite different particular objects such as dogs, exams, or the climate crisis can cause fear. However, these objects share a property in virtue of which they evoke fear: they are dangerous. This is the formal object of fear. The formal object is a generic property that helps to individuate the corresponding emotion and to assess its appropriateness (Mulligan 2006). If the particular object of an instance of fear (e.g. a spider) is not really dangerous, the emotion is not appropriate.

What could the formal object of pain be? It should apply to various cases of bodily as well as psychological pain. One candidate for fulfilling this role is harm. Whereas the formal object of fear is danger, i.e., the future prospect of harm, the formal object of pain is actual harm. This is true even when there is no actual harm, such as in phantom limb pain. In such cases, pain still has harm as its formal object, even though it is not instantiated as a particular object in the limb. Therefore, the feeling of pain is not appropriate, even though one cannot help but suffer from it.

Individuating pain in terms of its formal object has the advantage that we do not have to identify certain bodily sensations with pain. Consider, for instance, a gentle touch that gives pleasure when performed by a lover but causes mental pain, when performed by a rapist. In this case, the harm is not a bodily injury, but the psychological harm caused by approaching someone sexually without consent, even if it is done gently.

It is important to remember, however, that we are not dealing with plain pain, but with empathically felt pain. As (5) makes clear, the intentional object of empathically felt pain cannot simply be identified with the object of the target's pain. This turn distinguishes the approach advocated here from other views of vicarious pain (e.g. De Vignemont and Jacob 2012). The shift of the intentional object is, however, essential for distinguishing empathic pain from vicarious distress, which is, from my point of view, a form of emotional contagion, i.e., a distinct type of congruent emotional response to another individual in pain. Bloom's criticism, for instance, does not affect my account of the moral relevance of empathy, because he does not distinguish clearly between empathy and vicarious distress.

As explicated above, empathic pain is recalibrated to represent another individual's pain. Therefore, it is not directed at the particular harmful object of the target's pain, but harm is still present as formal object in the embedded pain state. This allows empathic pain to be distinguished from other empathic feelings such as empathic fear. (6) follows from the previous propositions and says that empathically felt pain amounts to a negative affective evaluation of the other individual's pain.

A crucial transition in the schema is (7), which states that the negative affective evaluation of the other individual's pain is a (proto-)moral evaluation. The reason for this claim is that affective evaluations are "feelings of positive or negative import where such feelings are modes

of caring about something” (Helm 2002, 19). Pain empathy consists in a negative affective evaluation of the target’s pain. This evaluation is moral in a very basic sense since it is concerned with the well-being of another individual, not with one’s own. It, therefore, involves a non-instrumental concern for another individual. Yet, this is precisely how seeing somebody as an end in itself was defined in the first section. According to the broadly Kantian view suggested here, this is a nucleus of the moral point of view. This amounts to affirming that empathic pain involves a moral evaluation.

However, empathic pain does not yet amount to a moral judgment (at least not in propositional form). Particularly if one believes that moral capacities necessarily involve some “heavy-duty conceptual mastery of moral notions or principles” (Isserow 2015, 598), one might not be willing to speak of morality proper at that stage. I do not endorse such a strong cognitivist view of morality; those who do could use the term ‘proto-moral’ instead of ‘moral’ at that stage.

Step (8) is supposed to bridge the gap between empathy and moral judgment. The negative affective evaluation can become the basis for general moral judgments, such as the following: “It is wrong to inflict pain on someone intentionally and without good reason”. There are different accounts of this transition. Adam Smith, for instance, suggests that most of our moral judgments are not derived from principles but result from empathy (Smith 1853/1966, 377). Although one need not share Smith’s reservation about principles, one can learn from him how the process leading from empathy to moral judgment might work.

He proposes that general moral rules are inductively gained from experiences of empathy. In this process, wrong-making features are extracted from empathic experiences, which can then be used to form beliefs about which types of action are morally wrong (Kauppinen 2014, 111). In propositional moral judgment, the wrongness of a particular action can then be inferred from a belief about the instantiated act-type together with a belief about which act-types are wrong-making which was inductively gained from empathy.

Empathy, hence, has a twofold function in moral judgment: it makes another individual’s pain epistemically accessible, and the affective evaluation involved in pain empathy is a way of viewing others as ends in themselves. Audi (2016, 89) calls pain normative in upshot (although not in content) because it

cries out for a palliative response: it makes such response – and indeed end-regarding treatment – fitting and it often both fully justifies that kind of response and highlights the fittingness of end-regarding treatment. On this second count, as a clear and a priori contributor to

justification for palliative acts, pain is moral, hence normative, in upshot.

However, it seems to be not the other's pain as such that urges such a palliative response; rather it is the *awareness* of the other's pain, and pain empathy is a way of becoming aware of another individual's pain, although it might not be the only one.

The quote from Audi already marks the transition to moral motivation that takes place in (9). There has been a great deal of research regarding the relationship between empathy and moral motivation in experimental moral psychology (Batson 1991, 2011, 2012). At the heart of these studies is the so-called empathy-altruism hypothesis, which claims that "empathic feeling for a person in need increases altruistic motivation to have that person's need relieved" (Batson 1991, 72).

In recent work, Batson distinguishes strictly between altruistic and moral motivation. He claims that empathic motivation for altruistic behaviour is neither moral nor immoral, but rather amoral, because he takes it that moral motivation has to arise from moral principles, standards or ideals (Batson 2014, 46). A moral action must not just be consistent with a moral principle, it must be carried out in order "to promote the principle" (Batson 2014, 54)

Batson argues for the distinction between altruistic and moral motivations with the help of studies that are supposed to show that empathically motivated altruistic behaviour may be immoral. The point of these studies is that empathy can motivate individuals to violate certain moral standards when the empathic motivation is stronger than the motivation to act according to moral principles. Yet, even if this is right, the crucial question is whether the moral principles ought to have taken precedence by the experimental subject's own lights in these situations; there is reason to doubt that this holds in these cases (Isserow 2015, 601).

Generally, it seems right that empathy can motivate individuals to act in ways that they might consider wrong on reflection upon principles but this at best shows that empathy does not provide infallible moral motivation. However, the same holds for moral principles in relation to empathy. Sometimes, it seems to be morally preferable to follow the empathic feelings rather than to adhere strictly to one's moral principles.

One example stems from Mark Twain's fictional character Huckleberry Finn who is empathically motivated to help his friend Jim to escape from slavery. Yet, he feels guilty at the same time since, as a matter of principle, Huck Finn endorses the moral standards that most members of his community accepted at the time including the legitimacy of slavery. Still, it seems that he did the right thing from the moral point of view by following his empathic feelings instead of strictly following his moral principles;

rather, his empathic reaction gives him reason to reconsider his principles. An account that only regards motivation based on principles as genuinely moral, therefore, seems too narrow and does not correspond to moral phenomenology.

As with moral judgment, I do not want to claim that empathy is necessary or constitutive for moral motivation; there are certainly other sources of moral motivation. It should also be noted that (9) does not depend on an explicit propositional moral judgment being formed. Rather, (9) formulates a general assumption about the motivational force of affective states that already follows from (7). This assumption results from the view that pain empathy involves an affective evaluation.

In the case of empathically felt pain, the negatively evaluated fact or event is the pain of the other individual. If we add the general assumption about the motivational force of affective evaluations, (10) can be derived from these steps. That is, the empathically felt pain leads to a disposition to do something about the other individual's pain. Yet, this disposition does not necessarily become effective if there is a defeater. Take, for instance, a patient undergoing emergency surgery without anaesthesia. We would not consider this as morally wrong if we understood that the surgery was performed for the patient's benefit, and would not try to stop the operation.

We also have to take into account that there are two basic types of affective motivation: negative and positive affective motivation. The motivational force of negative affective evaluations is based on negative feelings (i.e., it feels bad), whereas the motivation that stems from positive affective evaluations is based on positive feelings (i.e., it feels good). Essentially, the motivational force of negative affective evaluations is something like "stop this"; the motivational force of positive affective evaluations has the character of "more of this". Since having empathy with another individual's pain feels bad, we are only concerned with negative affective motivation.

Because negative affective evaluations feel bad, they have a rather direct impact on behaviour in order to make the negative feeling disappear. However, different kinds of behaviour can be used to achieve this result. You can stop the fact or event that has been evaluated as bad, leave the place where it happens, or attempt to stop the feeling by distracting or distancing oneself. The question is, why does empathy usually lead us to do something about the target's pain?

The answer is that pain empathy is essentially a representation of another individual's feelings, sharing their negative phenomenal quality. The negative evaluation is directed at the other individual's feeling, not at one's own feeling. Although the action is induced by one's own negative feeling, it is the function of affective evaluations to change the negatively evaluated state or event, not just the negative feeling as such. Take fear as another example. Fear also involves a negative affective evaluation,

which, in non-pathological cases, requires coping with the dangerous situation and not taking sedatives. Analogously, pain empathy compels us to relieve the pain of the other individual. This is most effectively done by removing the harm that is the cause and intentional object of the other's pain.

The type of motivation that arises also depends on the stance one adopts toward the individual in pain. If one is the aggressor causing the pain, one must stop hurting the victim; as an innocent bystander, one must come to the victim's aid. Although both types of motivation ground in negative affective evaluations, they are not equivalent and, presumably, involve different motivational mechanisms. In the case of the aggressor, the motivation consists in a kind of inhibition (i.e., the interruption of an ongoing activity). The behaviour of the observer, in contrast, requires a kind of activation (i.e., the impulse to start a new activity).

There are reasons to believe that inhibition is stronger and more fundamental than activation. First, inhibition appears to be causally more immediate, as Michael Slote (2007, 44) observed:

We emotionally flinch from causing or inflicting pain in a way, or to an extent, that we don't flinch from (merely) allowing pain, and I want to say that pain or harm that we (may) cause has, therefore, a greater causal immediacy for us than pain or harm that we (may) merely allow.

Second, the inhibitory motivational effects of empathy may be due to an evolutionarily basic mechanism. One hypothesis is that inhibiting motivation draws on a violence-inhibition mechanism (VIM) in humans – an idea based on work in ethology (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1970; Lorenz 1966). Dogs and other social animals withdraw during acts of aggression when the victim displays submission cues, such as baring their throat. A similar mechanism may be responsible for the well-established fact that healthy humans become emotionally distressed when they see others in distress, i.e., suffering from physical or psychological pain. This vicarious response is present even in young infants, but it does not seem to function properly in individuals with psychopathy whose capacity for empathy is often thought to be impaired as well (Blair 1995; 2005).

The perception of signs of distress then triggers perceptual empathy, leading to the inhibition of aggressive behaviour. Such a violence-inhibition mechanism would be a good explanation for the inhibitory effect of empathizing with individuals in pain. It would also predict that the positive, activating motivation to help someone is less strong and not as fundamental from an evolutionary perspective.



We have now gone through all the steps that lead from perceptual pain empathy to moral judgment and motivation. Given this connection, it makes sense to assume that perceptual pain empathy also plays an important role in moral development. Empathy may not only be used to predict the behaviour of others and to determine how one's own behaviour affects them. It involves perceiving the target as a source of value that is independent of oneself. The empathic point of view is, therefore, a way of seeing others as ends in themselves, and motivates non-instrumental treatment. Assuming that this is a key aspect of morality, then empathy is one root for developing the moral point of view and can contribute to forming an understanding of the concept of morality.

Thus, the empathic point of view paves the way for the moral point of view, although it might not strictly speaking be impossible to get there without the capacity for empathy. Despite this positive connection between the empathic and the moral point of view, empathy is not a perfect guide to morality. We might rely on reason to correct some of the errors to which empathy is prone (e.g., in-group biases). Reason, on the other hand, sometimes needs empathy as a corrective, since it is susceptible to its own kinds of distortions, which manifest themselves in our readiness to rationalize immoral or morally indifferent behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

## Note

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# 4 Experience and Understanding in Response to Holocaust Testimony

*Anja Berninger*

## 4.1 Introduction

In recent years, philosophers interested in empathy and imagination have discussed whether and to what extent we can come to understand experiences and experiential perspectives different from our own (Cath 2019; Kind 2021; Wiltsher 2021; Vendrell Ferran 2023; Werner 2023). Can we, for instance, come to know what it is like to go to war? Can we, to give another example, come to know what it is like to be physically assaulted? And, more importantly, can we come to know this *without* having gone through the experience ourselves? Many authors have offered optimistic answers to these questions. They have suggested that *in many cases* our imaginative and empathic capabilities will allow us to gain *some* understanding of what it is like to undergo such experiences (Cath 2019; Kind 2020, 2021; Vendrell Ferran 2023). They suggest that by listening closely to an experiencer's description and imaginatively putting ourselves in their shoes, we can see what their experiences are like. According to these authors, empathic imagination is thus a central source of knowledge about what some sort of experience is like. Other scholars, however, have remained sceptical, suggesting that one's own experience is decisive for gaining such knowledge (Paul 2014).

The main focus of the debate has been on the *in-principle* possibility of acquiring phenomenal knowledge through testimony. Authors have thus been primarily concerned with the question of whether there are any cases at all in which we can acquire such knowledge. Less emphasis has been placed on providing in-depth analyses of individual cases in which we might be able to gain such knowledge or fail to do so. I say '*less emphasis*' because there is at least one important exception here. Thus, Wiltsher has recently offered a thorough account of whether we can understand what it is like to be (dis-)privileged, and what exactly that understanding amounts to (Wiltsher 2021). I take such case studies to be important additions to the debate. When done well, they can significantly deepen our understanding by providing us with real-life material and alerting us to the potential boundaries of our abilities to acquire the sort of phenomenal knowledge

we are after. As such, they can provide important input to the more general discussions about ‘in-principle’ possibility.

The aim of my chapter is partially to add to this literature by discussing a further case in which it is debatable whether we can gain knowledge of what things were like by listening to the testimony of others. The case I want to focus on is the testimony of Holocaust survivors. There has been a long debate in Holocaust studies about the question of whether we can come to know what their experiences were like. Thus, some Holocaust witnesses, such as Elie Wiesel, have suggested that it is impossible for the survivors to convey the true horrors of what they have been through and that those who were not there at the time can never come to understand what it was like. Thus, Wiesel (1983) writes in a newspaper article on artworks and the Holocaust: “Those who never lived at that time of death will never be able to grasp its magnitude of horror. Only survivors of Auschwitz know what it meant to be in Auschwitz”. Other authors (and witnesses) have suggested that, while it is certainly difficult, there still is a way to convey the horrors to others and thus transmit, to some extent at least, what things were like back then (for two diverse accounts of the possibility of understanding from the perspective of Holocaust studies see Langer 1991; Weissman 2004).

Lawrence Langer quotes two witnesses who express similar scepticism to Wiesel’s. The first of these is worried that his testimony might be called into question quite generally because what he describes is so extreme. Thus he suggests that “if he tried to sit with his daughter today to explain what his life was like between 1939 and 1946, she would say to him ‘Daddy, you are making all that up’” (Langer 1991, 22). Another witness explains: “you’re trying to understand me, but I don’t think you could. I don’t think so” (Langer 1991, xiv). The woman then goes on to explain that to truly understand her, one would have had to go through the same experience oneself, thus expressing a thought very similar to Wiesel’s.

My efforts to understand whether we can come to know what things were like are situated not primarily within Holocaust studies, but rather within a (broadly) analytic tradition of philosophy. Within this field of study, there have only been relatively few efforts to engage with Holocaust testimony, although philosophical interest in the matter has recently increased (Margalit 2002; Blustein 2008; Kusch 2017). Furthermore, there have been very valuable efforts to combine reflections on testimony from both the analytic and continental traditions (Krämer and Weigel 2017; van der Heiden 2022). Despite the growing interest, it seems fair to say that engagement with Holocaust testimony is still very much a niche topic within this branch of philosophy. I take this to be a mistake. In my view, engagement with Holocaust testimonies is valuable in its own right. I also

believe that analytic philosophy can and should contribute to this literature. This is a further reason for me to reflect on this case specifically.

To conclude this brief introduction, I would like to draw attention to one last concern that is not the main focus of this chapter but nevertheless hovers in the background and thus deserves to be mentioned. Recently, there have been concerns (also taken up in the media) that our whole way of remembering the Holocaust will change significantly once the last witnesses of the event have died.<sup>1</sup> Some historians have tended to reject this claim because they think that we have such a wealth of archived material that we can draw on. Based on this observation they suggest that our perspective is unlikely to change dramatically through the deaths of the last direct witnesses.<sup>2</sup> As will become clear towards the end of the chapter, I think that direct confrontation with Holocaust survivors and the related experience that they are our contemporaries is the foundation of a special form of historical understanding that is of critical importance. Therefore, in my view, there is reason to think that something relevant to our relation to the past is likely to change in the upcoming years.

#### 4.2 Gaining Phenomenal Knowledge through Testimony

I would like to begin by giving the reader some background information on the philosophical debate about testimony and the acquisition of phenomenal knowledge. The central question, around which this debate is framed, is whether we can gather phenomenal knowledge through testimony. To see why this might be worthy of philosophical discussion, we need to take a step back and briefly look at the way in which testimony is usually portrayed in philosophy more generally speaking.

When talking about testimony, analytic philosophers have generally focused on the question of how (and if) knowledge can be transmitted from one person to another. Take the following example: I wonder what the weather is like in Helsinki and phone a friend (who is currently there) to find out. The friend tells me that it is around 20°C, sunny, and almost windless. I consider the friend in question to be reliable and competent when it comes to describing current weather conditions. I thus go on to believe that it is around 20°C, almost windless, and sunny in Helsinki, and (assuming I am not grossly mistaken concerning the friend's competence) I will also be justified in my belief. Thus, I will have acquired knowledge concerning the current weather in Helsinki that I did not have before our phone call.<sup>3</sup>

There is a relatively broad (though certainly not universal) agreement that propositional knowledge about the subject-external world can be gained in this way. Through testimony we can clearly come to know that the sun is currently shining in Helsinki, that WWII started in 1939, or that

a friend is currently in a state of fear. But it is much less clear whether this is also true of knowledge concerning the *phenomenal properties* of experiences. It seems at least questionable whether we can come to know through testimony what some experience is like. To see this, consider the following example (taken from Paul 2014 and Kind 2020): you go on a trip to Asia and taste durian for the first time. Afterwards, I (who has never tasted durian) ask you what it was like, and you try to describe the flavour to me. The question is: have I acquired knowledge of what it is like through your testimony? And if so, have I acquired it *in just the same way* as I acquired knowledge of the weather in Helsinki in the first example?

Intuitively, scepticism seems apt in response to these questions. I cannot come to know what durian tastes like (one might think) just through your telling me that it has a slight vanilla taste to it. It seems that there is room for surprises for me in tasting durian, even after you have told me that it has a slight vanilla taste. So, after tasting it myself, I can say that this is not at all what I expected it to be like. In contrast (and again speaking from intuition), the weather in Helsinki does not seem to offer the same scope for surprises for me. This reflection might lead one to think that to *truly come* to know what an experience (such as tasting durian) is like, we need to go through it ourselves. This would suggest that it is impossible to acquire phenomenal knowledge through testimony.<sup>4</sup>

But even if knowledge is not transmitted *in the same way* in the durian case, this does not mean that *no* knowledge is transmitted whatsoever. Thus, as Cath has stressed in a recent paper, there is something I can come to know through your telling me about your experience of eating durian that I did not know before. The same is also true for more complex experiences – such as, to cite a frequently discussed example, the experience of going to war or (much less extreme) the experience of moving to a new country. Cath's central point is that knowledge with respect to experiences may come in degrees.<sup>5</sup> For instance, I may not come to know *exactly* what durian tastes like, but I may, all the same, develop some degree of knowledge concerning its flavour (Cath 2019).

Cath (2019) suggests that in some cases the knowledge we gain will be *phenomenal* in nature. When you for instance tell me what it was like to move to Japan, you may mention the fact that you did not know anyone at first and that you felt very awkward because your command of Japanese was so poor at the beginning. Even though I have never lived in Japan, I may have had some experiences (such as loneliness or lack of language skills) that are at least somewhat similar to the experiences you describe. By drawing on these experiences and recombining them in my imagination, I can come to imagine what it is like to go through the experience you have been through. According to this approach, I engage in a form of empathic imagining here. That is, in trying to find out what



things are like for you, I may imaginatively place myself in your position and use my imaginative reaction to that situation as a sample for yours. The important thing to notice here is that there is a phenomenal dimension to my experience. I do not just have some abstract concept, but rather I am acquainted with what things are like. Cath calls the knowledge that results from this form of imaginative perspective taking “silver-standard knowledge of experience” (Cath 2019, 113). The feelings I imaginatively experience may not be a complete replica of your feelings (indeed, it seems unlikely that the two sets of experiences will match perfectly). Nevertheless, ideally there will be a relatively high degree of similarity between them. Note also that this silver-standard knowledge allows for several degrees. Thus, my imagined experienced may be *more or less* similar to the actual experience of moving to Japan. How close the match is will probably depend on several different factors, such as the experiences that I have (or have not) had myself and that my imagination can draw on (Cath 2019, 115).

Despite this leeway, it will often be very difficult to acquire silver-standard knowledge of experience. To imagine what it is like to move to Japan, for instance, we need to know a lot of details about life in Japan and how it differs from life in the relevant home country. We also need information about the stress of starting a new life, about the social issues connected to not speaking the language of the country where one lives adequately and so on.<sup>6</sup> It also seems clear that we can make gross mistakes if we do not take the time to think about the details of a situation. We may indeed end up imagining something which is not even remotely similar to the actual experience, and so we may end up not knowing at all what a given situation is like for the person in question.

Silver-standard knowledge is not on par with the sort of knowledge gained through going through the experience oneself (“gold-standard knowledge” as Cath calls it), but it is still *phenomenal knowledge* of some sort. In this, it differs from the third category Cath mentions (“bronze-standard knowledge”) which consists in having some form of non-phenomenal understanding of the experience in question. An example of this form of knowledge would be if someone were to tell me that durian tastes a bit like dragon fruit (when I have tasted neither of them). Here, I can have some form of knowledge, but there are no phenomenal properties that I can draw on and thus my knowledge is different in kind (and arguably inferior) to both silver and gold standard knowledge (Cath 2019, 114).

Overall, Cath suggests that there is a way of knowing what a given experience was like without going through that experience oneself, and that testimony as well as (empathic) imagination play a central part in this. Although the argument suggests that this form of gaining knowledge is possible in principle, it does not as such tell us much about the limitations

of the options for gaining such knowledge. This is an aspect that I will turn to in the next part of this chapter, when I look more closely at Holocaust testimony and the question of what sort of knowledge it can produce.

### 4.3 Phenomenal Knowledge and Holocaust Testimony

I would now like to turn to the case of Holocaust testimony and to the question of whether it can bring about any form of knowledge about what things were like. Before I delve into the details of these cases, however, I would briefly like to spend some thought on why anyone might be interested in gaining this kind of knowledge in the first place. It seems to me that several motivations are at play here, all of which demand the acquisition of slightly different forms of phenomenal knowledge. For this chapter, I will mention only two of them.<sup>7</sup>

The first motivation is relational. Family members of Holocaust survivors, for example, may want to gain some understanding of what their loved ones have gone through. At the heart of the matter here may lie a wish to better understand a person that one loves. Or, perhaps, they simply take interest in all important moments and experiences in this person's life, independent of whether these experiences were pleasant, neutral, or even traumatic. Because the focus is on understanding a particular person, the process of coming to know what it was like will also be aimed at coming to see how they experienced the event in question and how it is still relevant to them today.

Second, listening to Holocaust testimony can be motivated by the wish to gain a better understanding of the Holocaust as a *historical event*, an aspect that has been highlighted by Gary Weissman. He stresses that coming to know what it was like is "the unspoken desire of many people who have no direct experience of the Holocaust but are deeply interested in studying, remembering, and memorializing it" (Weissman 2004, 4). The problem these people face, according to Weissman, is that the Holocaust feels strangely abstract and removed from them. While their interest in knowing what it is like may sometimes take problematic turns as a form of "morbid curiosity" (Weissman 2004, 23), this does not always need to be the case. Rather, at least in part, the impulse may be motivated by the desire to face the horrors rather than allow them to stay abstract. The individuals thus refuse to simply dodge the call to engage with these horrific events because it would be disturbing (Weissman 2004, 23). In this sense, there is a desire to come to know what it was like that is rooted not in sensationalism. Rather, the aim is to better understand the events that took place.<sup>8</sup>

Using the philosophical terminology introduced in the last section, one can describe the situation as follows: Weissman's analysis suggests that

those listening to Holocaust testimonies want to acquire a form of *phenomenal* knowledge. They want to get closer to the event through imaginatively engaging with the experiences of the Holocaust survivors. Their resulting experience is not supposed to be an *exact* replication of the witness' original experience. Rather, the listeners want to experience something similar or vaguely related to what the witnesses went through. Using the terminology introduced in the last section, we can thus suggest that the audience is aiming for a form of silver-standard knowledge of what it was like.

Weissman's reflections bring up several questions of philosophical interest: First of all, it seems plausible that we can only move away from abstraction by gaining some form of phenomenal knowledge of what things were like. And, with that, we need to ask the question of whether gaining such knowledge is at all possible. This is also the case because (as cited in the introduction) witnesses of the Holocaust have uttered the claim that those who did not go through these experiences themselves cannot understand what things were like.

There is a second, slightly different question involved: Weissman suggests that especially those interested in studying the Holocaust might also be concerned with what things were like. They seemed to be motivated by the hope that they will gain some understanding of the event that is otherwise not open to them. But the question is whether that is possible by looking at the experiences of individual survivors. The Holocaust is an event that is characterized by the horror of individual experiences, but also, it seems, through its dimensions. Not just a few individuals, but millions of people perished. When people suggest that the Holocaust is far removed and abstract, the difficulty may lie in just this fact: We may have difficulties grasping the *scale of the event*. And this is different from the fact that we may also find it difficult to imagine the individual experiences connected to it.<sup>9</sup> If this is true, then we have reason to think that to combat the feeling of abstraction, it is not sufficient to engage with the experience of any single Holocaust survivor. Rather, one must engage with many testimonials to understand both the individual experience as well as grasp the scale of the event.

Let me turn back to the first question mentioned. Can we gain some form of phenomenal knowledge through listening to the testimony of Holocaust survivors? Two conditions would have to be fulfilled for this to be possible: First, Holocaust survivors would need to inform us about what it was like for them. Second, based on these descriptions and drawing on our own past experiences, we would need to try to imagine what things were like for them. If we manage to imagine this "from the inside", and what we imagine is relevantly similar to the original experiences, then it would be fair to say that we have at least some form of knowledge of what it was like to go through that experience.

Let us look at the first condition in more detail. Do we have reason to think that Holocaust survivors can tell us what things were like for them? As a response to this question, we need to say that giving testimony is no easy feat. Ruth Wajnryb has highlighted how, often, survivors themselves *choose* not to recount the story of what they have been through, or to tell it only in part. Thus, the failure of transmission can in some cases rest on there being silence on part of the witness that makes it difficult for the audience to fully grasp what happened to them. The psychological reasons for making this choice are varied. Wajnryb suggests that they may often have to do with the fact that any form of retelling forces the witnesses to relive the trauma of the original event and that this might simply be too difficult to face. Furthermore, witnesses might also to some extent follow an impulse to protect their audience from coming to see all of the horrors and therefore hold back. This is also the case, because in many cases, the audience will not be some anonymous group, but rather the survivor's immediate family (Wajnryb 2001, 86–90).

Wajnryb also suggests that there is a dearth of appropriate public settings within which survivors could recount their tales outside of the family. She suggests that settings such as lecture halls seem unfit to offer the necessary intimacy and rather foster a more abstract way of engaging with what has happened. And again, this may lead the survivors to not fully recount their tales as they would do in more adequate surroundings (Wajnryb 2001, 95–100).

There is no doubt that these aspects are important. They give us an indication of why the transmission of phenomenal knowledge frequently fails when it comes to Holocaust testimony, and why some testimonies may seem strangely incomplete. However, as Wajnryb also mentions, nothing suggests that there is an 'in-principle' failure involved here. Rather, the indications are that there are very real barriers to the transmission of phenomenal knowledge, but that does not make gaining such knowledge impossible. Nor are the barriers listed specific to phenomenal knowledge. If witnesses do not recount their stories, we may also fail to gain non-phenomenal knowledge about what happened. The resulting question then is whether there are also reasons to think that coming to know what it was like through testimony might not just be difficult, but actually impossible.<sup>10</sup>

One aspect that has been frequently mentioned in the literature, and analyzed in detail by Kusch, is the issues Holocaust survivors often face in trying to find the right words for their experiences. As Kusch suggests (drawing on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*), these issues may partially have to do with the certainties which shape our everyday use of language (and thus the meaning of the words we employ) not holding anymore in the surroundings the witnesses encountered. For example, the certainty that doctors aim at healing their patients does not hold in a concentration camp.

Therefore, the word “doctor” takes on a different meaning here than it does in everyday life (Kusch 2017, 148). This may lead one to think that those giving testimony might be *unable* to give an account of their plight because what they have experienced is not expressible using the language of our everyday interactions. Does this further linguistic complication mean then that we cannot gain phenomenal knowledge of these experiences because they are not describable using everyday language?

In response, we need to differentiate between something being *difficult to describe* and something being *impossible to describe*<sup>11</sup>. In my view, we should assert the first of these claims, but not the second. This is the case, first of all, because we have further forms of description at our disposal. Thus, Holocaust survivors can explain (and have explained) *why* they take the words in question to be unfitting and try to make clear to us how those words were used in the settings they want to describe. Second, there are further ways of description that go over and above our everyday use of language. While the direct description may fail in these cases, there might be artistic ways of language use that might extend the boundaries of what is communicable (Weissman 2004, 69; Wajnryb 2001, 86). Thus, while non-artistic forms of communication might not be able to transmit the phenomenal knowledge in question, artistic forms such as works of literature might be able to do just that. These works often involve the skilful use of stylistic devices such as metaphors and similes. And these in turn may also help towards communicating across the linguistic boundaries highlighted by Kusch. This suggests that perhaps not all Holocaust survivors will be able to describe their experiences equally well. Rather, perhaps only those that are particularly adept at using language may be able to do so (as Wajnryb 2001 also highlights). Third, we have to bear in mind that (as stated before) we are not after a complete replication of experiences. We are seeking descriptions that are precise enough to allow us to imagine a similar sort of state through drawing on our own related experiences. This suggests that there is at least some leeway in how far words have to fit their subject matter.

Let me now turn to the audience’s role. Assuming Holocaust survivors can indeed describe what they experienced, will the audience then be able to gain phenomenal knowledge of this experience? In my view, here we do face certain barriers that point us towards thinking that gaining this form of knowledge is impossible *in principle*. Briefly put, the nature of the experience that Holocaust survivors have been through may be too far removed from the sorts of experience the audience can draw on in trying to imagine what things were like.

As Amy Kind has discussed in a recent paper, when we claim that some experience or experiential perspective is too far removed from our own to be known, we are relying on two further claims. First of all, we need to

assume that we access another's experience (i.e. coming to know what it was like for that person) can only be done via imaginative access, but this access crucially relies on our past experiences as material. This is all very well when our experiences are similar. But, when experiences are vastly different, this becomes problematic, because the material we can draw on will prove insufficient to actually grasp the experiences of the person in question (Kind 2021, 245–246). In her analysis, Kind suggests that there has been a tendency to overuse this argument, in the sense that too many perspectives have been declared as being too far removed from our own to be understood. However, it is also important to note that she is careful in her analysis and makes it clear that she does *not* mean to suggest that there simply *cannot* be such cases (Kind 2021, 252).

This implies that we should not simply assume that experiences are too different to be understood. Rather, we need some additional reasons to back up the claim that this is the case. There is reason to think that the experiences of Holocaust survivors indeed present us with a case where the 'Too Big a Gulf argument' (Kind 2021, 240) seems fitting. Even if we think that experiences do not have to match exactly to achieve knowledge of what it is like, we still need to have reason to think that they are *similar enough* to still assign knowledge of some sort.

The question, of course, is what the conditions are for two experiences being similar enough to talk of knowledge. At first glance, one might think that the condition is met when the two experiences are roughly of the same kind. For example, I might be able to see what your loneliness when moving to Japan was like, if I think of a situation where I have felt lonely in the past. So, as a first approximation, we might say that two experiences are similar enough if we are talking of experiences of the *same kind*.

However, I think that there is a further complication here that might make things a bit more difficult. This has to do with the *intensity* of experiences. That is, I want to suggest that not all experiences of the same kind are relevantly similar. Rather, when experiences differ too much in terms of intensity, they may be too different to claim that one of them somehow grants us insight into the other.

Take the example of hunger. In the past, I have experienced mild pangs of hunger now and then. I may have been forced to skip breakfast or put myself on a diet. Can I thus conclude that I can imagine what hunger is like in every kind of situation? Far from it. It seems that my experiences of hunger allow me to imagine other experiences of hunger (and the grumpiness and irritability that comes with it). But, I have no idea what it is like to be on the brink of starvation. From what I have read, I can gather that intense states of hunger will involve hallucinations as well as complete apathy – none of which I have experienced in the past. So, in this case, it seems

that my feelings of hunger do not give me a good indication at all of what these stages of extreme hunger are like. The intensity of my experience is so far removed from the more intense cases that the phenomenality of the experience does not bear any resemblance.

The writer and Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo (2003, 47) explicitly addresses such issues when she talks of the thirst she experienced in the concentration camps and the sort of thirst she experiences now:

Deep memory preserves sensations, physical imprints. It is the memory of the senses. For it isn't words that are swollen with emotional charge. Otherwise, someone who has been tortured by thirst for weeks on end could never again say "I'm thirsty. How about a cup of tea". This word has also split in two. Thirst has turned back into a word for commonplace use. But if I dream of the thirst I suffered in Birkenau, I once again see the person I was, haggard, halfway crazed, near to collapse; I physically feel that real thirst and it is an atrocious nightmare.

Often, we seem to assume that we can imagine what an experience was like – the only difference being that our imagined experience is somewhat less intense than the original one. Our assumption then is that the experiences will be of the same kind. But Delbo's description suggests that this approach only makes sense up to a certain degree. With some experiences at least the quality of the experience itself seems to change dramatically once it passes a certain threshold.<sup>12</sup>

Holocaust survivors have been through severe suffering that seems very far removed from the sorts of experiences most audiences will have had in their life, partly because of these very large differences in intensity. This will concern various aspects of their experience: feelings of hunger and thirst, helplessness, hopelessness, loneliness to name just some further feelings that immediately come to mind and for which the difference in intensity is likely to be equally extreme. So we can see that there is a gap concerning the intensity of experiences that seems too big to bridge simply by drawing on the far less intense experiences most of us have had and recombining them.

If these remarks are along the right lines, then we have reason to think that the "Too Big a Gulf argument" holds for most audiences in these cases. Such audiences cannot gain *phenomenal* knowledge of the experience the witnesses have been through by drawing on testimony and their own past experiences. This is because the victims' experiences simply are too far removed from the imaginative material most audiences can draw on and thus any form of empathic or imaginative understanding must fail. This makes it impossible to gain phenomenal knowledge. Furthermore, the whole idea of a less intense experience that still gives us an idea of

what it was like seems wrong-headed here. It seems that in these cases we either match the intensity of the original experience, or we do not gain any understanding of it at all.

It is important to note that this does not apply equally to all audiences. One might think that an audience made up of people who have experienced extreme deprivation would have a very different set of experiences to draw on in their empathic imagination. For example, someone who has been on the brink of starvation because of a famine may be better situated to understand some of the experiences of Holocaust survivors. The same might also be true of people who have been unlawfully imprisoned or subjected to inhumane treatment. It seems possible that people who have been through these kinds of extreme experiences may be able to acquire silver-standard knowledge concerning certain aspects of the experience of Holocaust survivors. They will still not know exactly what it was like, but they will at least gain some phenomenal understanding of the situation.

There is a further argument also indicating that we cannot imagine the experience involved that I now want to briefly explore. I want to call this the “argument from perspective”. The suggestion I want to make is that the perspective we have on the experiences will be different in important ways from that of the Holocaust victims, and that this makes a phenomenal difference. The first of these differences has to do with the fact that the form of empathic imagining we engage in does not involve complete merging with the person whose experience we imagine. When we try to work out what it was like, we imaginatively put ourselves in the victim’s position. But it does not involve us taking these imaginings for real or taking ourselves to be the victim. The border between oneself and the other still is firmly in place. This suggests that there is some awareness (even as we imagine the experiences) that we are engaging in an act of imagination. This is not some special feature of this act of imagination, but rather a general feature of our imaginative abilities. It matters for the case of Holocaust testimony, however, because one feature of the experience survivors tell us about is their inability to escape the situation they were caught in any other way than through death. The element of inescapability and hopelessness, I want to suggest, cannot really be caught through an act of imagination when this also involves being aware *that* this is an act of imagination and thus something that (to some degree at least) is under our control.

Furthermore, we come to hear of the experiences in question through listening to the testimony of those who survived the Holocaust. We hear their descriptions of suffering, but we also know (in listening to their testimony) that this suffering ended at some point. This knowledge may well influence our imaginative act. When we engage with these testimonies, we are imagining a form of suffering that has an endpoint. However, for the witnesses themselves the suffering unfolded as something that seemed



inescapable and without an endpoint. In addition to these differences, our acts of imagination are relatively short. We do not spend years imagining what some experiences are like. And this, in turn, is likely to make a difference for the quality of the experience itself.<sup>13</sup> Again, it seems that our perspective will be very different as a result, and this will influence the experience itself.

Both the argument from intensity and the argument from perspective would need to be worked out in more detail. But, as things stand, they give us good reason to believe that we cannot gain the sort of phenomenal knowledge that we are after *pace* Weissman. That is, those of us who have not lived through mass atrocities ourselves will not be able to gain a phenomenal understanding of the experience of Holocaust survivors. Thus, the fear expressed by some witnesses that those who weren't there will never understand seems to be well-founded. There really is a sense in which we cannot understand. Phenomenal knowledge cannot be transmitted through Holocaust testimony, because our imaginative response will be too different to the original experience to still be declared as relevantly similar.

This does not indicate, of course, that it is totally impossible to gain *any form* of understanding of what things were like. We can build a non-phenomenal understanding of the experiences of Holocaust survivors by listening to their testimonies. But this cannot result in the form of understanding we are after. The Holocaust will not seem any less abstract because we have some sort of purely cognitive information about what things were like. It seems that this less abstract understanding is something which would need to build on a form of phenomenal knowledge and the direct acquaintance that comes with it. And this, I have argued, is impossible to gain.

#### 4.4 How Failure of Transmission Generates Understanding

Overall, we can see that there is no way in which listening to the testimony of Holocaust survivors can allow us to (a) come to know what things were like for these individuals; (b) come to see the Holocaust not as some abstract event but as something that we can experience or have some form of direct acquaintance with. Rather, we experience ourselves as trying to see what things were like and failing in our efforts to understand.

The fact that we may try but will ultimately fail to empathically imagine the situation that these individuals have been through, may seem frustrating to us. Failing in our cognitive endeavours often has this quality. But there are further feelings involved which may affect us more deeply. As Kusch has highlighted, listening to the testimony of Holocaust survivors forces us to confront the fact that these individuals are not very different from us at all. Their motives and feelings are not alien to us. We live as

contemporaries sharing the same temporal and social space. According to Kusch (2017, 151) this results in an emotionally difficult situation for the listener:

The difficulty of receiving Holocaust testimony in the right way is that it triggers incompatible responses in us, the audience. The sheer unimaginable brutality of the concentration camps tempts us to place the Holocaust world at an almost infinite distance from us. And our endless commonalities with both victims and perpetrators force us to accept that the Holocaust testimony comes not from afar, but very much from the core of our own culture. There is no easy way out of this tension.<sup>14</sup>

I want to suggest that this tension is not just difficult for us as the audience of these testimonies. Rather, it can also serve a specific epistemic function. Namely, the tension in question can lead us to form a specific kind of historical and (ultimately) a kind of moral understanding.

To see this, I need to make some brief remarks on the tension involved. The tension we experience, I think, is there in the first place, because of a problematic assumption we tend to make. As explained in the introduction, Holocaust survivors often worry that their tales seem so far out of the ordinary that they will not be believed. And, indeed, there is some empirical evidence suggesting that we base our estimates of the likelihood of an event occurring, partially on the ease with which we can imagine it.<sup>15</sup> Our confrontation with Holocaust survivors shatters this connection. We are confronted with an event and connected experiences that may at first seem unimaginable and thus highly unlikely or perhaps even impossible. Yet, we are at the same time forced to accept that these witnesses are telling us that the event in question did indeed occur and that they went through these experiences. What this gives us is the certainty that this event occurred and that these experiences were made even though they seem out of the question for us. This is, first of all, a historical form of understanding. We understand the Holocaust through the lens of the horrors that it entailed for individual people, individuals much like us. But we also understand a more general point about the fact that there is no naturally given safeguard against such acts of brutality and the suffering that they cause. Atrocities such as these can occur in societies much like ours and anyone can be their victim even if we feel that all of this is unlikely or out of the question.<sup>16</sup>

This also gives us a preliminary understanding of what may be lost when the last survivors of the Holocaust have died and can thus not give testimony anymore. Much has been done to preserve testimonies through video interviews and other forms of documentation. It seems fair to say that no other historical event has been recorded in such detail. Yet, there is an impression that will be lost all the same. We will not experience

the tension of someone being our contemporary and having gone through experiences so horrific that they elude our empathic understanding. This impression is likely to vanish once we only have archival material to draw on. So, there is reason to think that our historical understanding is likely to change once all that we are left with is recorded material.

There is a second form of understanding that can develop from the historical understanding in question. This understanding is moral in nature. As I explained above, the tension we are confronted with in listening to Holocaust testimony is likely to cause feelings of discomfort in many of the listeners. The Holocaust remains strangely removed from us, yet in listening to testimony we are directly confronted with its survivors and with the impact the suffering endured had and still has. We would like to understand the event better, to remove it from abstraction, but we fail. Drawing on Alison Hills' reflections on moral understanding and moral propagation (Hills 2020), I would like to suggest that the resulting feelings of discomfort can themselves be a motivating force. In having these feelings, we may be motivated to think deeper about the atrocities committed and the impact they have had on the survivors' lives. We are likely to engage with the stories more deeply than we probably would without this tension. Through this engagement, we are likely to gain a deeper understanding not only of the past, but also of the moral features of the situations in question. We do not simply take away the moral knowledge that "this was wrong". The cognitive and emotional impact of our engagement is more complex. We are more likely to engage in further moral reasoning, to draw moral conclusions and to react with heightened moral sensitivity when confronted with other acts of brutality and inhumanity. For example, we may also come to grasp why it is of central importance that we undertake steps suited to prevent these sorts of atrocities from happening again and work towards actually undertaking these steps. In this way, failing to gain knowledge of what it was like and the tensions that this causes, can indirectly promote a form of moral understanding.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

As I have suggested at the beginning of the chapter, there is philosophical value in not just focusing on the big-picture question of whether it is *ever* possible to acquire phenomenal knowledge through testimony. Rather, it makes sense to *also* explore individual cases in more detail. I have tried to add to this discussion with my case study of Holocaust testimony. Concerning these cases, I have stressed, first of all, that what audiences will be after is often a specific form of phenomenal knowledge. This form is demanding in several respects: It endeavours to take the experiences of the individuals into account, but it also aims at tying the acquired knowledge

of what these experiences were like together with the more high-level goal of thus making the Holocaust as a historical event seem less abstract and somehow “more real” to us.

I also think that there is value in looking very closely at cases where the transmission of phenomenal knowledge fails and asking why this is the case. I take Holocaust testimonies to be just such a case in hand. They draw our attention to the fact that there are certain differences in the intensity of experiences as well as the perspective we have on the experience in question that cannot be easily bridged.

I take it to be equally important to see that our inability to (empathically) imagine what Holocaust survivors have been through, also opens the doors to a different form of understanding. This is a form of understanding that does not make the Holocaust experienceable or that removes it from the realm of abstraction. Rather, we come to grasp the event as being abstract and removed, as being linked to suffering on an unimaginable scale and as this happening to people that are not far removed from us, but rather inhabit the same social and temporal space as we do. This in turn, I have suggested, paves the way for a different kind of historical and moral understanding that can be of greater value than just making the Holocaust experientable in some sense.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

- 1 For a good example of the media debate see e.g., Schellen, 2021.
- 2 Annette Wieviorka (2006) has highlighted the sheer volume of material collected and the issues that arise for historians because of this.
- 3 The literature on the epistemology of testimony is vast and in giving this rough and ready account I am skimming over a whole set of further complications. To highlight just one aspect, I am simply ignoring the question of whether testimony itself is the basic source of justification. Alternatively, it might be the case that other sources such as memory, perception etc. are actually doing the work here in terms of justification. For an overview of these questions see the Stanford Encyclopaedia entry on testimony (Leonard 2021).
- 4 For such a sceptical position see Paul 2014.
- 5 A similar observation has also been brought forward by Amy Kind. She suggests that we should speak of *understanding* here instead of knowledge because understanding is generally seen as allowing for different degrees (see Kind 2021). Note, however, that it is disputed whether this really is a central difference between knowledge and understanding. For some sceptical remarks on this form of differentiation between knowledge and understanding see Pritchard (2009).
- 6 The importance of knowing such details and how failing to know these facts impedes our imaginative understanding has been highlighted forcefully by Nomy Arpaly (2020, 124).
- 7 An issue central to the literature that I ignore here are the therapeutic and psychoanalytic contexts of listening to testimony. Such cases have been discussed at length by Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman (1992).

- 8 Note that Weissman here does not want to claim that this form of knowledge is achievable. He simply wants to highlight that there is this sort of desire. Furthermore, it should be noted that Weissman is primarily talking of the situation in the US here. In using his position as a starting point, I am assuming that the desire generalizes across geographical boundaries.
- 9 This aspect as well as some further complications are discussed by Waxman (2008, 156–160). Her analysis suggests that the witnesses can in a sense only recount their subjective, individual experiences. Yet, at the same time, their testimonies also form part of collective memory (stretching across different individuals) and, as such, there is a push towards homogenization of the testimonies themselves.
- 10 One further issue that I ignore here concerns the trustworthiness of memory. Of course, there have been cases where the memories of survivors have proved to be false (for examples of this see Felman and Laub 1992; Wieviorka 2006). Again, I do not take this to be an in-principle issue. The fact that survivors may get some details wrong, does not imply that their memories are completely unreliable or that they have no correct understanding of what things were like back then. As Waxmann (2008, 156) has highlighted, this can also be true despite the traumatic nature of many of their experiences.
- 11 Kusch is very careful to differentiate between these cases in his analysis. He also stresses that he mainly wants to highlight the difficulty, not the impossibility of giving Holocaust testimony. My analysis should therefore not be read as a direct criticism of his account.
- 12 The central question at issue here is, of course, when we can say that an experience is of the same or different in kind. The difficulties in drawing clear boundaries here have also been highlighted by Amy Kind (2020).
- 13 Thanks are owed to Christiana Werner for making me aware of this further temporal aspect.
- 14 Van der Heiden also mentions this aspect in his discussion of Holocaust testimony (drawing on the work of Felman). He suggests that listening to Holocaust testimony also involves “encountering strangeness” and explicates this by highlighting that the “subject matters of these particular testimonies overthrow or breakdown that which counts as normal or common in the world and in human experience” (van der Heiden 2022, 317).
- 15 There is some empirical evidence that we judge the likelihood of certain events happening (such as contracting an illness with certain symptoms) based on the ease of imagining that event (i.e., imagining having the symptoms in question) (see Sherman et al. 1985).
- 16 I base my reflections here on Elgin’s in-depth analysis of historical understanding and in particular her example of Goya’s *The Disasters of War* (Elgin 2017, 283).
- 17 Acknowledgement: work on this chapter was financed through the project “Interpersonales Verstehen und Affekt” financed by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Lower Saxony (Niedersächsisches Ministerium für Wissenschaft und Kultur; Pro\*Niedersachsen Forschungsprojekt). Thanks are also owed to Christiana Werner and Thomas Petraschka for insightful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

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# 5 Murdochian Self-Empathy

*Eva-Maria Düringer*

Attempts at moral improvement seem to require self-knowledge. In order to get better at making the right decisions, at becoming more generous and good-willed, at keeping vanity and idleness at bay, we must understand how we tick: how do we come to give weight to one issue but not another, why do we not see the claims of others, do I give myself undue distinction? The ancient Greeks told us to “know thyself!”, Aristotle emphasized the importance of the relationship with ourselves, Kant stressed that moral self-knowledge helps to make our will more dutiful. Iris Murdoch, however, insists that the wish to understand ourselves hardly ever leads to moral improvement. On the contrary, more often than not it reinforces our deep interest in ourselves alone: it feeds selfishness, ignorance of others, and a distorted vision of the world. We had better not pursue it.

In this chapter I will examine Murdoch’s view on cognitive self-empathy, i.e. the undertaking of gaining understanding of our own mental states and conditions, and ask whether there must not be exceptions to the rule of leaving it be altogether. Surely there are some circumstances in which even Murdoch must admit that it is not only ethically permissible, but even ethically demanded that we know where we stand? I will first make Murdoch’s position clearer by embedding it briefly in the wider context of her moral philosophy, before introducing Silvia Caprioglio Panizza’s four ways of gaining self-knowledge that Murdoch can easily permit. I will then demonstrate that these four ways indeed seem to provide sufficient self-knowledge when we need to reflect on our moral failures, and keep us safe from self-obsession and what Murdoch calls sadomasochism at the same time. In what follows I will introduce some doubts as to whether the four ways are really sufficient for gaining all the self-knowledge that it is advisable to possess. We might think that it is a good idea to get clear about our commitments, ideals, and values: that we have reason to seek to understand our practical identity. I will argue, with Murdoch, that we do not – hence we do not need any introspective types of enquiry into these matters. Are there any other aspects of the self that are worth knowing? I will argue that there are, and that in order sufficiently to understand them we need a special kind of introspection. Sometimes we have very good



reason, and are indeed ethically required, to look into our basic needs and the extent to which they are met, as well as into our general capabilities and the extent to which we might be straining them. In order to avoid self-obsession, I will sketch a kind of filter we should use when introspecting into these issues: the filter of second and third personal loving attention.

### 5.1 The Moral Dangers of Self-knowledge

Murdoch's moral philosophy has two major goals: one is to show the ways in which popular approaches to morality are misguided, and the other is to develop an alternative approach. Understanding the first will help us understand the second. Murdoch's major targets at the time she wrote were the works of philosophers like Ayer, Hare, Ryle, and Sartre. Even though their theories are perhaps no longer the central focus of moral philosophy today, two of their main assumptions are still going very strong: one is that morality is mainly to do with principled decision-making, and the other is that the world we live in is, in and of itself, devoid of value.

Murdoch thinks these assumptions are misguided because they are empirically and ethically wrong: our experiences do not confirm that morality is like this, nor is there ethical reason to think it should be like this. If we think about what moral improvement is like, Murdoch claims, we realize that it is not really a matter of thinking long and hard about the facts surrounding A and B and then employing some principle to make the right decision between them. Rather, it is a matter of patiently looking at things, honestly, with justice and goodwill, of holding our gaze and letting ourselves be moved by what we see. And this, our experience of what moral improvement is like, lets us see what morality should be like: it's a matter of looking at things the right way, of practising loving attention. If we manage to do this, we will see what is to be done. We will see instances of injustice, unkindness, neediness, as well as of care, solidarity, and friendship. These value manifestations are there in the world, plain for us to see. The real and truly difficult task is to bear seeing them and to bear the demands of what we see. The plausibility of Murdoch's view can perhaps be illustrated by pointing to moral failure. Our moral failure in not donating more to the World Food Programme does not consist in our failure to form factually correct beliefs or to make the correct decision – our failure lies in our not holding our gaze. We look away, we don't want to see, hence we're not affected, hence we never even ask ourselves whether we should give more. If we do look and let ourselves be affected, then the decision won't be a very difficult one. It's clear to see what we should do.

But, one might ask, if it is clear for us to see, why should looking be so difficult? If it's so easy, why aren't we better people already? The answer is that it is not easy, and this is because our self is in the way. Our self, or, as Murdoch (2014, 51) puts it in quasi Freudian terms, our "fat relentless

ego”. While Murdoch is no adherent of Freud or psychoanalysis, she credits Freud with having put his finger on the major human flaw, the secular original sin, which is egocentricity, selfishness, and the consequent tendency to see the world in a way that suits ourselves best. That nearly all of us possess this flaw, she takes as a fact: “That human beings are naturally selfish, seems true on the evidence, whenever and wherever we look at them, in spite of a very small number of apparent exceptions” (Murdoch 2014, 76). And this flaw cannot be overcome by an ethic that focuses on making fairer decisions that consider all the people affected by a potential action – because our selfishness prevents us from seeing justly the way in which other people are affected. So the first thing we need to work on is seeing people justly, and when we get better at doing that, Murdoch doubts that there is very much left for decision-making to determine. What we see will tell us what to do.

I do not want to discuss the plausibility of Murdoch’s moral outlook, but will take it as given. The question I want to address is, assuming Murdoch’s moral view is generally correct, do we not, sometimes at least, need to inquire into our own motives, thoughts and intentions in order to get better at seeing people justly? The general advice Murdoch (2014, 65–66) gives is very cautious:

In such a picture [her moral view] sincerity and self-knowledge, those popular merits, seem less important. It is an attachment to what lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not a scrutiny of the mechanism itself, that liberates. Close scrutiny of the mechanism often merely strengthens its power. “Self-knowledge”, in the sense of a minute understanding of one’s own machinery, seems to me, except at a fairly simple level, usually a delusion. A sense of such self-knowledge may of course be induced in analysis for therapeutic reasons, but “the cure” does not prove the alleged knowledge genuine. Self is as hard to see justly as other things, and when clear vision has been achieved, self is a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object.

We should note that Murdoch does not tell us never to try to understand ourselves. But self-knowledge, on her view, is “less important”, it is not what liberates. Instead, it often backfires in that the attempt to gain self-knowledge can contribute to our being even more obsessed with ourselves than previously, and it is “usually a delusion”. The general direction of moral improvement is clear: it is away from ourselves. “Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself” (Murdoch 2014, 91). Rather than by seeing ourselves clearly, we can hope to become better people by seeing clearly everything but ourselves. To do this, we should engage in a process of “unselfing” (Murdoch 2014, 82), of minimizing the influence of our ego on our vision. Nevertheless, Murdoch implies that the self *can*

be looked at justly. When “clear vision has been achieved”, we are able to gain self-knowledge, but we will come to see that our self is a “smaller and less interesting” object than we thought. Can we say more about which are the “smaller and less interesting” areas of the self that might be worth being understood better, and more about the means by which such an understanding can safely be gained?

## 5.2 Four Allowable Ways of Gaining Self-knowledge

That Murdoch does not condemn all kinds of self-knowledge is suggested by her famous example of a mother-in-law, M, who is trying to do justice to her daughter-in-law, D. M has no very high opinion of D, but because she’s an intelligent, kindly, and just person, she says to herself “I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again” (Murdoch 2014, 17). She does look again and finds D’s qualities to be much more positive than she hitherto believed. Given that M starts her journey of moral improvement with an instance of self-knowledge, with the insight that she has predispositions that are likely to cloud her judgement, we have good reason to believe that some self-knowledge is commendable, even from a Murdochian perspective. How should we best go about gaining it?

Silvia Caprioglio Panizza argues that Murdoch can allow for four ways in which we may, or even should, fairly safely look at ourselves in order to become better people: (1) we can observe our “publicly available self” (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 116), (2) we can try “seeing ourselves through others” (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 117), (3) we can compare our perceptions with other people’s perceptions, and (4) we can learn about ourselves while our attention is directed away from ourselves due to the transparency of mental states. In the following I will refer to these as “the four ways”.

(1) is an important technique if we want to get a good idea about our behaviour and how it affects others. Caprioglio Panizza points out that even though Murdoch is very outspoken against behaviourist moral philosophy, this does not commit her to a denial of there being observable patterns of behaviour that are worth studying. All that Murdoch explicitly denies is that these observable patterns are *all* that moral philosophers should study, that they are all they *can* study. But if I reflect on, say, the things I said to my co-worker in a team meeting and how she was upset afterwards, then this is certainly a recommendable activity. (2) requires us to look at ourselves from another’s perspective. This is difficult, because of course we can easily become obsessed by the need to know what others think of us and the urgent desire to be thought of highly by everyone. So we need to look at ourselves through other people’s eyes sparingly but carefully. It is ethically necessary for at least two reasons: our potential

importance to others, and the fact that others can detect tendencies in our character to which we are blind. We can be important to others in a variety of ways. Others may depend on our judgement and guidance, or they may need our presence, well-being and care to be well themselves. And other people often have a clearer view on our patterns of judging than we do ourselves. If a good friend tells you that she thinks you're being a bit unfair in an assessment of a certain situation, then you will reconsider, even if a bit unwillingly at first. But we rightly tend to trust people who know us well, and who we know to be well-meaning, generally fair-minded and alert. If they were to tell us that we're judging our sibling's new partner too harshly because they suspect we feel a high degree of loyalty to their ex-partner, then there's probably some truth in this that should make us "look again". And not only should we look again at our sibling's new partner, but at ourselves – from our friend's perspective. We will then see that our loyalty to and empathy for our sibling's ex-partner have blinded us to some extent, have made us unkind.

So much for the first two permissible kinds of self-scrutiny. The second two kinds are perhaps less close to our everyday experience and hence need more elaboration. What can we learn about ourselves when we (3) compare our perceptions with other people's perceptions? Caprioglio Panizza refers here to Murdoch's remarks about the way in which we broaden our evaluative understanding when we are standing around an object with other people, and especially with other people who are experts with regard to the object concerned. Murdoch's concrete example is about an art-work that we look at in the presence and under the guidance of an art critic, but the point she wants to make is clearly more general than that. Throughout our life, ideally, we are engaged in a "process of deepening and complicating" (Murdoch 2014, 30) our concepts, especially our moral concepts. We have a different idea of kindness in childhood to when we are middle-aged. This process of deepening and complicating our concepts happens to some degree in private, as it does in the example of the mother-in-law. We learn by looking, and looking again. But it also happens in public, as when we have an instance of kindness before us and talk to others about what was particularly kind here. How does this relate to the gaining of self-knowledge? When we talk to others about an instance of kindness, we compare our perceptions, our impressions, our interpretations. Others may point out aspects of the situations that we had not noticed, they may offer descriptions that would not have occurred to us, and we might offer a very just interpretation that the others would otherwise have missed. Engagements like these certainly help me to get a clearer idea about my moral progress. Am I generally the one who needs to be pointed in the right direction, do I suffer from certain biases, could it be that I have a pretty good idea of some moral concepts but rather hazy ones of others?

Also, engagements like these help me to grasp the reality of the object – they draw me out of myself, demonstrate to me that the existence and character of the object in front of me is not at the mercy of my mind, and my mind only. It does not vanish when I cease to look at it, and it may well prove to be not as undemanding as I like to think it is. So talking with others about a common object can tell me something about my tendencies to “take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal” (Murdoch 2014, 87), which, according to Murdoch, constitute our major moral flaw and need continuous work to be overcome.

Finally, Caprioglio Panizza claims (4) that we learn something about ourselves because of the transparency of mental states. Referring to work by Gareth Evans and Richard Moran, Caprioglio Panizza argues that quite generally we find out what we believe not by introspection, by looking inwards, but rather by looking at the propositional contents of our beliefs. I find out whether I believe that *p* by asking whether *p* is true. Do I believe that the earth is flat? Well, is it true that the earth is flat? No, there’s sufficient evidence that the earth is not flat. Hence, I know that I believe that the earth isn’t flat without having taken any recourse to introspection. A similar line of thought is pursued by Christopher Mole, who identifies this form of self-knowledge as the main solution to seemingly overwhelming self-denial:

In trying to act well we must ask [...] questions about our character, but this does not commit us to problematically self-directed attention because these are not questions that can be answered by directing attention onto oneself. To know whether one’s character is virtuous is to know one’s mode of attentive engagement with the world, and this cannot be known by looking inwards.

(Mole 2007, 82–83)

This means, I think, that if I want to improve morally and get an idea of the main areas in which I need to try harder, I will need to know how I attend, and I find that out by looking directly at what and who I attend to. Let us imagine a work colleague with whom I am only very loosely acquainted. He’s very quiet, often downcast, avoids people in the tea kitchen, but he seems to be getting on with his work reasonably well. If he needed help, he’d probably ask. I think he’s got some family somewhere, who would surely be there for him if he really were in trouble. I’ve got a lot on my plate at the moment, otherwise I’d ask him if he wanted to go for a coffee.

Let us compare this case to the flat earth case. When I realize that there is sufficient evidence for the proposition that the earth is not flat, I can implicitly or explicitly deduce that I believe that the earth is not flat. My deduction follows something like this pattern: (i) I believe all and only that which is supported by sufficient evidence or analytically true, (ii) *p* is supported by sufficient evidence, hence (iii) I believe that *p*. The implicit or

explicit deduction that takes place in questions about our moral character is of a similar nature. Am I kind enough to my work colleague? I attend to him in the way described above. The deduction then looks something like this: (i) One is kind to another when one attends with goodwill and patience to them, including seeing those aspects of their life that might make demands on one, (ii) my work colleague looks downcast, avoids company, but is probably alright, (iii) (ii) is not likely to be what a person attending to another in the kind way stipulated in (i) sees, hence (iv) I am likely not being kind to my work colleague.

What is very noteworthy is that the four ways of gaining self-knowledge all avoid straightforward introspection. As Caprioglio Panizza (2022, 114) says, “what is problematic, and what cannot be done, is not self-knowledge, but self-knowledge through introspection”. So when I wonder whether I am kind enough, I ought not to turn my attention inwards, to my own mind, examine the feelings, motives, and thoughts to which I introspectively have direct access. If I want to be on the safe side, I should turn my attention outwards instead: to (1) my publicly observable behaviour, to (2) other people’s perspectives on me, to (3) an object I can discuss with others, or to (4) the object of my kindness, whose situation, as I perceive it, I compare to the situation that a truly kind person would likely perceive.

In the following I’m going to do three things: first, I will illustrate the kind of situations the four ways of gaining self-knowledge handle well and how they keep us safe from the dangers of self-obsession. Second, I will ask whether there may not be further instances in which we have reason to seek to understand ourselves – instances that do require introspection. Understanding what is most important to us, I will argue, is not one of them. Third, I will show that understanding our basic needs and capabilities is one of them and that introspection, with a filter of second and third personal loving attention, is a safe way to gain such an understanding.

### 5.3 Where the Four Ways Work

We often are, or should be, unsure as to what is morally required of us. Should I apologize for what I said? Could I really have known that doing what I did would hurt someone? My motive certainly wasn’t to hurt anyone. Should I really have thought of the other person more when I was tempted to do what I did? Am I to blame for her hurt feelings? To have an example before us, let us look at Jane Austen’s *Emma*. Emma, who is used to being the most admired woman in any social gathering, is bothered by the lengthy visit of Jane Fairfax to her aunts. Jane, though lower in rank and poor, is a superior pianist and arguably more elegant and refined than Emma. Luckily, not only Jane has come for a visit, but also Frank Churchill, the step-son of her former governess whom she is very much predisposed to like. Emma finds great relief in gossiping with Frank. Does

he not think that the husband of Jane's best friend is likely to be in love with Jane, that the very expensive pianoforte Jane has recently received from a secret well-wisher is very likely to be a gift from him, that Jane is wrong in accepting it, etc.? Frank readily agrees, but for reasons unknown to Emma: he is secretly engaged to Jane but as yet, due to his dependencies, unable to make it public. Flirting with Emma and appearing to dislike Jane is the perfect cover-up. A few weeks later everything comes out and Emma is devastated. How could she have acted so horribly to Jane, been so grossly lacking in female solidarity, been so driven by jealousy and vanity?

Presumably most of us have been in situations similar to Emma's. We've all been confidential where we perhaps should have been discreet, we've been gleeful and unjust, vain and envious and consequently said things about other people which we shouldn't have said. It is very easy, when we finally come to realize all this, to beat ourselves up: should I have known this, should I have considered that, how could I have acted that way, what should I do now? Introspective questions such as these are natural and have the appearance of being ethically praiseworthy. Don't they lead to reflections about our behaviour that can guard us from similar mistakes in the future? Murdoch (2014, 66) is very worried that they lead to something else, something she calls sadomasochism:

A chief enemy to such clarity of vision, whether in art or morals, is the system to which the technical name of sado-masochism has been given. It is the peculiar subtlety of this system that, while constantly leading attention and energy back into the self, it can produce, almost all the way as it were to the summit, plausible imitations of what is good. Refined sado-masochism can ruin art which is too good to be ruined by the cruder vulgarities of self-indulgence. One's self is interesting, so one's motives are interesting, and the unworthiness of one's motives is interesting. Fascinating too is the alleged relation of master to slave, of the good self to the bad self which, oddly enough, ends in such curious compromises. (Kafka's struggle with the devil which ends up in bed.) The bad self is prepared to suffer but not to obey until the two selves are friends and obedience has become reasonably easy or at least amusing. In reality the good self is very small indeed, and most of what appears good is not. The truly good is not a friendly tyrant to the bad, it is its deadly foe.

Let us try to work through Murdoch's caution here with Emma's example before us. Emma could, and for some time does indeed, beat herself up about her indiscretions and wrongdoings. At first sight we might think of this as morally praiseworthy behaviour, as it shows that Emma possesses moral sensibility, that she can clearly see where she took wrong steps. But if she kept indulging in introspective questions of the above mentioned

kind (how could I, why did I, what should I have done, what could I have done, etc.), she would be doing what Murdoch calls “constantly leading attention and energy back to the self”. Emma would channel her initially praiseworthy moral sensibility into the wrong direction; she would use it to inflict harm on herself and run the danger of producing “plausible imitations of what is good” – e.g. her ongoing dwelling on her own shortcomings could wrongly make it seem to her that qualities such as timidity, constant neutrality on all matters, or a general depreciation of oneself are among the highest virtues we can aim for.

By engaging in self-flagellation of this kind we are not only creating misleading imitations of what is good, we also keep our ego firmly in charge of our vision. We might think of it as an attempt to keep the ego at bay, as punishing it in the hope that it will not blind our vision to a similar degree again, but what Murdoch warns us of is the power of our self to fascinate us, even – or especially – in its wrongdoings. We may secretly revel in our naughtiness, or become addicted to disciplining ourselves, perhaps become enamoured with our “good self” that takes so much time and energy to tell the “bad self” off, bathe ourselves in our apparent moral righteousness. Here there are further “imitations of what is good”.

I think it is clear where the dangers of introspective self-scrutiny of this kind lie. The four ways are designed to bypass these dangers, and in Emma’s case they successfully do so. Emma manages to refrain from dwelling on introspective questions, which are pressing and very hard to resist, and restricts herself mostly to the four ways. She (1) looks at what she has in fact said, she (2) sees her flirtatious behaviour from Jane’s perspective, she (3) discusses Jane’s deserts with well-meaning, well-informed people who know Jane well, and she (4) comes to understand that she has not been kind in her behaviour to Jane for a long time by understanding that her focus on the supposedly negative aspects of Jane’s character were the results of an ungenerous and envious mindset. The four ways ensure that we do not make morally tricky situations, as we are so often prone to do, “about us”. They lead our attention to where it should be: on the people affected, on the havoc caused.

#### **5.4 What is Important to Us**

Even if we agree with all the points made so far, we might harbour some doubts about the complete abandonment of introspection. Murdoch might be making an important point about situations of moral tension in which we are involved: maybe here indeed it is best to focus on the situation, to reflect on it and one’s own involvement via the safe means of the four ways. But it seems there are other and very ordinary situations in which we need to ask questions that can be answered only via introspection. When we’re about to finish school, we should ask ourselves about our interests



before we choose the career path we'd like to pursue; when we have time on our hands and want to spend it in a meaningful way, we should ask us what we care about most; when we can no longer afford to pursue both of our two favourite hobbies, we should figure out the one we are more committed to. In these cases, it does not seem sufficient to employ the four ways, to concentrate on public behaviour or objects, on other people's perspectives and comparisons – we must look inwards.

Jordan MacKenzie (2018, 245) has recently argued that we should try to attain something like “substantial self-knowledge”: “Substantial self-knowledge is self-knowledge that pertains to facts about what makes us happy, what we value, what our characters are like, where our abilities and aptitudes lie, how we feel emotionally, and what we believe”. Samantha Vice takes a similar route in her interpretation of a Murdochian kind of self-concern. She tries to identify a part of the self that is worth being enquired into thus:

“self” is best taken to capture two aspects of being: firstly, the complex, contentless subjectivity or background “hum” of existence – what Murdoch, I think, calls “consciousness”, and secondly, the particular identity or substantive content that individuates persons – our identity, not in the formal sense common to discussions of personal identity over time, but in the sense, relevant to ethics, of who we take ourselves most fundamentally to be. Knowing ourselves in this way requires knowing what is important to us, knowing what moves us and what we stand for.

(Vice 2007, 66)

Some of these aspects we can know by employing the four ways: as outlined above, we can know what we believe by simply thinking about evidence for propositions, and it would seem that we can know about our character and abilities by reflecting on our performances in various areas. About our “abilities and aptitudes” I will say more in the next section. But what about “what is important to us and what we stand for”? Are these really aspects a Murdochian is required to look into via introspection?

I think it will help to get a better grasp of Murdoch's position here by comparing it to Harry Frankfurt's. Frankfurt argues (2004) that it is very advisable to get clear about what we care about most, ideally to such an extent that we can pursue the objects of our deepest cares in a consistent, wholehearted manner. We may need some introspection in order to get clear about what means most to us, what we feel most strongly about, what we are most deeply committed to, but our main focus is on these objects and how best to cherish them. Is not this a kind of self-knowledge

that it is desirable to have, and one that is safe because the main focus is directed outwards?

It is not. The problem with Frankfurt's account, from a Murdochian perspective, is that questions such as "what means most to us" are indeed irrelevant. Frankfurt is an anti-realist about values, Murdoch a realist. This means that for Murdoch consistency in our evaluative attitudes is not something that generates value and that should, for this reason, be sought. Instead, values are there in the world: there are truly kind people, there is good art, there are the wonders of nature, and they should be appreciated properly. This does not mean that the feeling that something is important to us is negligible. But it is a starting point for loving properly, not the final level. The cares and concerns we happen to have may cover a very narrow range of what is actually valuable or may even be directed at what is outright bad. The things we typically care about tend to be very close to our ego: the lover who flatters us, the children we identify with, the relatives who share our ancestry, the hobby in which we imagine we'll one day excel, and objects that are trivial or fantasy ridden. Frankfurtian self-love provides no moral guidance and is too self-contented.

Murdoch, on the contrary, takes it that our thinking about values contains pointers that direct us to an idea of perfection and that it is our job to make out these pointers and collectively try to follow them. Figuring out whether something is better than something else is not a matter of trying to understand what I care about more, but whether it is actually better – for which I do indeed need love, but not a Frankfurtian self-love. I need the love that is "the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real" (Murdoch 1999, 215), a love that manifests in a close, just and well-meaning attention to what is. Thus, when we find ourselves thinking about career paths, meaningful ways to spend our time and which hobby to give up, the answers are most safely found by looking outwards, by letting ourselves be guided by the pointers we can make out.

### 5.5 Needs and Capabilities

The aspects of the self that are worth inquiring into are fewer, then, than MacKenzie and Vice suggest. What we value and what is important to us do not standardly belong to them. What does belong to them, I think, are our basic needs and capabilities. We do sometimes have good reason to look at our basic needs and the extent to which they are met, and our capabilities and the extent to which we are under- or overemploying them. For example, we do need to ask ourselves questions such as: "Can I continue working in this job or will I end up with burnout?"; "Should I stay in this living arrangement or will I ultimately feel crushed and unhappy?"; "Am I capable of caring for my elderly relative or do

I need to ask for help?”. It seems unwise to shy away from these questions because one is worried to lose oneself in wrongful self-indulgence. Indeed, it’s probably not only unwise but morally bad, an instance of wilful blindness and negligence. Furthermore, it does not seem like the four ways will help us much when it comes to answering these questions. To know whether I am exceeding my strength, whether I am healthily coping, often cannot be done by looking at my public performance or at myself through the eyes of others. I may be functioning perfectly in the public eye. The problem lies within the inner, and to see it, I need to turn my attention inwards.

I would like to give an example from one of Murdoch’s novels to illustrate the kinds of basic needs and capabilities we have very good reason to seek to understand, and highlight some of the problems that surround such attempts at understanding. In the next section I will look at some possible, albeit very difficult ways of employing introspection in a constructive and safe manner. The example is from *The Italian Girl*. The central character, Edmund, visits his remote childhood home on the death of his mother. It is his first visit in many years and he finds the people who live there burdened with problems. Isabel, his sister-in-law, has suffered for a long time from the tyranny of Edmund’s mother, from her husband’s infidelity, and from the feeling of wasting her life away. She spends almost all of her time in her room, which is overcrowded and boasts a massive open fire which she’s used to keeping just to annoy her mother-in-law, and she wears overly thick layers of make-up on her face. Towards the end of the novel a disaster happens which shakes everybody up. Isabel, like the others, is catapulted out of her moanful, inactive self-pity. She stops seeking false consolation in the knick-knacks cluttering her room, in trying to seek revenge, and in hiding her feelings behind a mask. Her gaze is turned outwards, away from the self, towards reality at large. She understands what she needs to do: leave her husband, leave, for now, her grown-up daughter, with whom she cannot yet rebuild a relationship, and raise the child she is currently pregnant with in her childhood home, where her elderly father, who needs her, still lives. When she is about to leave for good, she has this conversation with Edmund:

*“You seem happy”, I said almost accusingly.*

*“No, just real. I can see. That is why you can see me”.*

*“Couldn’t you see before?”*

*“No. I was living with a black veil tied round my head. Look here, look out of the window”.*

*I went to her and together we looked out at a yard of black coal-like earth with a few patches of very green weeds. Two cars were parked. A tabby cat emerged from under one of the cars and lounged to rub itself against a corner of red brick.*

“Can you see that cat?”

“Yes, of course”.

“Well, until lately I couldn’t have seen it at all. Now it exists, it’s there, and while it’s there I’m not, I just see it and let it be. Do you remember that bit in the *Ancient Mariner* where he sees the water snakes? ‘Oh happy living things, no tongue their beauty might declare!’ That’s what it’s like, suddenly to be able to see the world and to love it, to be let out of oneself –”

(Murdoch 2000, 162)

Much can be drawn from Isabel’s story in general and this passage in particular, I think. First, we can observe that the aspects of herself that Isabel has very good reason to seek to understand are basic ones: her marriage, living arrangements, and parental duties have been more than she has been able to handle. Her need for truthful, trusting social relationships has not been met for a long time and cannot be met if she continues to live where and with whom she currently lives – her capacities reach their limit here. She needs to distance herself from the people she’s been with, not without the hope that a more positive relationship can later be rebuilt. Second, if we take Murdoch’s fiction here to contain some of her philosophical convictions, we may conclude that liberation from one’s ego is an essential component of well-being. Even though Isabel doesn’t describe herself as happy, she says that she is real, that she is suddenly able to see the world and love it. She has found a way to open herself up to reality, where – though not everything is easy, pleasant, and enjoyable – good things may be found: trusting relationships, good people, beautiful art and nature. We may say, with Murdoch, that we all have a basic need for reality, even when we ourselves do everything in our power to keep it from being satisfied. Third, because she can see, she can be seen. Perhaps we can say that it is a necessary, though not sufficient condition for visibility that one can see oneself. The ego does not only cloud one’s vision, it clouds one’s visibility. And visibility is a basic human need – to be seen, acknowledged, accepted, taken seriously, to be looked after.

We have now made some progress with the “smaller and less interesting object”, with the self that a Murdochian would consider worthy of being enquired into – sometimes at least, under certain conditions. It is not what I might have thought and actually desired, it is not the ideals and values I identify with, but basic needs such as the needs for visibility, a connection with reality and trusting social relationships, and capabilities such as maintaining relationships in a healthy way, enduring neglect, and being a responsible parent. Of course these are only a few examples of what should be classified under the label “basic needs and capabilities”, but I hope it suffices to give us a general idea. Now I would like to return to

the question of how to enquire into basic needs and capabilities. The four ways can certainly tell us a lot: answers to the questions of how I am acting and behaving, of how others see me, can give me a good (albeit rough) idea about whether my basic needs are being met and whether I am acting within the scope of my capabilities. But situations like Isabel's illustrate that they may not be enough. You may live so secluded and quiet a life that not much can be drawn from observing your public self. Or you may see to the chores of your everyday life just as efficiently as usual, but with a growing feeling of demotivation, exhaustion, and sadness on the inside. You may be surrounded mainly by cold, unfeeling people and taking up their perspective on yourself might do more damage than good. Isabel has to rely on a disaster to gain the self-knowledge required, but surely this is not the only way to gain it. It must be possible that we take a look inside to check on ourselves. How can a Murdochian do it safely?

### 5.6 Seeing Needs and Capabilities

Egos are not only in the way when we try to see our own basic needs and capabilities, but also when we try to see the basic needs and capabilities of others. As we have seen with Isabel, egos cloud not only vision, but visibility. Before answering the question of how to see if we are okay, let us look at how we manage to see if others are okay.

That egos cloud visibility is an everyday occurrence. We are easily led by an overconfident friend's estimation of her abilities in our own perception of them, or by the assurances of a shy friend in our judgement about whether she's doing okay. What does it take not to be misled by egos in our perception of others? Murdoch gives us a sketch of the people who manage, and who we can take as role models – people who she calls “saints”. Who are such saints, typically? How do they go about looking at people? “The contingently existing saint [...] might be some quiet unpretentious worker, a schoolteacher or a mother, or better still an aunt. Mothers have many egoistic satisfactions and much power. The aunt may be the selfless unrewarded doer of good. I have known such aunts” (Murdoch 2003, 429). Let us think about what it is about the aunt that potentially makes her a good observer of others' needs and capabilities: aunts often possess strong goodwill towards their nieces and nephews, without either identifying themselves too closely with them or feeling too responsible for their actions; without either taking a potentially distorting pride in their accomplishments or feeling personally ashamed at their wrongdoings. And it is this perfect balance between loving interest and suitable emotional distance to someone that is a necessary condition for practising cognitive empathy successfully, I think. My interest in another will give me a strong motivation really to understand them, not to be misled by outer appearances or

their own make-believe fantasies, and my emotional distance will keep me safe from intertwining my ego with theirs. In addition to this, I also need practice in patiently attending, in focussing on something. I can gain this practice by focussing on all kinds of things. Simone Weil, by whom Murdoch is heavily influenced in her account of loving attention, stresses the importance of learning how to focus on a task for schoolchildren (2009/1951, 57–58). The subject matter is very secondary here – it can be Latin grammar, geometry, a natural phenomenon, or anything else that is real. What is important is that we practise, ideally from an early age, to hold our attention, not to prejudge its object quickly and lose interest, to adopt a waiting attitude, one that patiently lingers until the object fills our mind with an understanding of how it works.

I would like to suggest that we need this way of looking at others, this combination of good-willed interest, emotional distance and trained, patient focus, when we try to understand our own needs and capabilities. We need what is ordinarily a gaze on second or third personal objects and turn it on ourselves. One might feel reminded here of the second of Caprioglio Panizza's four ways, but there is a crucial difference: the suggestion is not that we look at ourselves from the perspective of another. The suggestion is that we look at ourselves in the way that *we* look at another, when we look at them with goodwill, distance, and patience. We use something like a second or third personal filter when we introspect. This might sound odd, especially if we take what Schwitzgebel (2019) calls the first-person-condition to be a necessary condition for introspection. But the thought is not that introspection is no longer first personal – I do turn my attention inwards, towards my mental states and conditions. But in order to avoid the many side-trackings, the many distractions that the ego is only too ready to tempt me into, it can help significantly if I adopt a particular way of looking inwards. Nancy Sherman (2014, 229) describes this technique of self-empathy as a “derivative notion”: “It is a first personal stance in which the paradigm is the second personal case [...] he or she may [...] internalize the stance that she or he takes toward others”. If we manage then to turn this internalized stance, ideally a well-practised loving attention on others, to ourselves, our attempt at gaining a fair insight into our needs and capabilities, our capacities, and limits, into how we fare, has as good a chance of success as might be hoped for.

This way of gaining self-knowledge is, I think, a useful addition to the four ways suggested by Caprioglio Panizza. There are occasions when we need to ask ourselves whether some of our most basic needs might be regularly dissatisfied, whether we have taken on more responsibilities than we are capable of living up to without deteriorating in bodily and mental health. And on such occasions the four ways, precisely because they deny us direct access to our own mental states and conditions, are insufficient.

In order to avoid getting into the hive of muddles readily created by vanity, fear, and sadomasochism, my suggestion is that we use a filter: the filter of our perspective on second and third personal objects as we employ it when we attend lovingly to others. In order to get the filter right, it helps of course to think about the perspectives on second or third personal objects in which we are best able to attend lovingly: perhaps it is our perspective as an aunt or uncle, perhaps it is our perspective as a grandmother or grandfather, perhaps it is our perspective as a caring and fair schoolteacher, perhaps it is our perspective as an observational and well-meaning team leader, etc. Undoubtedly, practising this kind of introspection is hard and probably best done sparingly. But we need it to get at the information that lies hidden even to the most observant and kindest of our friends, that doesn't manifest in overt actions and patterns of behaviour. There are states of needfulness, of exhaustion, of commitment and determination that only introspection can get at. We should not avoid trying to get at them because we worry about self-obsession. Our best kind of loving attention, tried and tested on people we are well disposed towards, but suitably emotionally distanced from, should help us understand the aspects of ourselves that, sometimes at least, need to be understood.

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# 6 The Structure of Rational Agency and the Phenomenal Dimensions of Empathic Understanding

*Karsten R. Stueber*

## 6.1 Introduction

One of the great advantages of empathy, or so we are told, consists in providing us with an understanding of other minds from the inside (Goldie 2000; Heal 2003) rather than merely allowing us to grasp the musings, sentiments, and thoughts of others from a detached and theoretical spectator perspective. In empathizing with persons in distress we not merely know abstractly that other persons are in distress but also bring their distress home to ourselves in a feeling sort of way, by being able to vicariously feel their emotions, feel with them and for them (see also Maibom 2017). Empathy then is particularly suited to making it possible for us to access another person's mental life in its full phenomenal richness and understand what it is like to be or to act as the other person. It is for that very reason that empathy has often also been associated with essentially possessing an affective dimension (Coplan 2011; Werner in this volume). It has been understood as providing us with a "hot methodology" for knowing other minds (Gordon 1998), and some researchers have even regarded the primary epistemic function of empathy to consist in allowing us to "know how others feel" (Smith 2017) rather than merely enabling us to know what they feel, or what they think or how they reason.

The above conception of empathy is certainly mirrored in ordinary language where we would find it rather strange to talk about empathizing with another person if such empathy would not involve some phenomenal dimension. From this perspective, an exclusively cognitive form of empathy seems to be too cold-hearted to be properly called empathy. Yet scholars distinguish between purely cognitive forms of empathy and affective empathy or what some researchers also refer as the distinction between affect sharing and perspective-taking. Moreover, within the context of the philosophy of the social sciences and the philosophy of history, where empathy has been understood as imaginative and reenactive perspective-taking, the affective dimension of another person's mental life – the what it is like-to-be-a-bat aspect – has never been the sole focus of investigative concern. Particularly R.G. Collingwood has argued that empathy is the



unique method for grasping minded persons' inner lives. As he claimed, it is only in this manner that we can find their actions in their cultural and social environment to be intelligible as the behaviour of rational agents for whom there are, from their subjective perspectives, considerations that speak for their actions. Given the influence of Donald Davidson in contemporary philosophy of mind, that claim has been often understood as implying that empathy contributes to understanding how belief and desire pairs can function as an agent's reasons and reveal him in his role as a rational animal. Beliefs and desires, however, are the mental states that seem to have the least phenomenal depth compared to other states in our mental repertoire. Collingwood (1946, 296) is also quite explicit in maintaining that our empathic ability to grasp the rationality of thought processes excludes a phenomenal dimension because "we shall never know how the flowers smelt in the garden of Epicurus or how Nietzsche felt the wind in his hair as he walked on the mountains". Notice though that Collingwood does not deny the existence of phenomenal states. Rather he did not seem to think that phenomenal knowledge could contribute to grasping the intelligibility of rational agency. Their subjectivity is for him irreducibly tied to the fleeting moment of different time-space points. Even with the most sublime of empathic abilities we are epistemically closed from recovering any intersubjectively accessible phenomenal feature of mental states.

I have originally developed my own understanding of the concept of empathy while investigating the question of how we know other minds taking my inspiration from simulation theorists (especially Jane Heal) within the context of the theory of mind debate and from figures such as R.G. Collingwood and Theodor Lipps (Stueber 2006). More specifically, I have conceived of empathy as a mental resonance phenomenon of different levels of cognitive complexity, distinguishing between basic and reenactive empathy.<sup>1</sup> Basic empathy, which in contrast to reenactive empathy does not involve imaginative perspective-taking, is a developmentally early and non-conceptual ability to experience others as minded creatures. It enables us to grasp their bodily movements as possessing a *de re* intentionality and as being directed towards objects in their environment or allows us to recognize the emotional expressivity of their facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice. I view basic empathy as being mediated on the neuronal level by so-called mirror neurons, that is, mediated by a neuronal resonance phenomenon that involves a significant overlap in the excitation of neurons associated with both the execution and the observation of a behaviour or expressed emotion. Accordingly, it also does not provide us with much of an *explanatory* understanding of another person's agency addressing pertinent why-questions. It provides us only with an objectual understanding of primitive mindedness in the mode of a like-me familiarity. We become aware in a non-conceptual and quasi-perceptual manner

that the movement of grasping the cup is something that feels familiar to me and that is in my bodily repertoire in the same manner that the emotion expressed in another person's face is something that feels familiar to me or that I recognize as something that I can experience (Stueber 2012a). To explain and understand why somebody did what he did or why somebody reacts the way that he did we ordinarily appeal to folk psychological categories that we assume express a person's reasons for acting. It is exactly in this respect that I regard the explanatory framework of folk psychology to be very different from the more theoretical perspectives that we adopt to understand inanimate nature (see Stueber 2012b). I claim that the use of our reenactive empathic capacities is epistemically essential for grasping how an attributed mental state can be a person's subjective reason for acting.

Given my explicit reference to Collingwood, and my general positive attitude towards the Davidsonian framework of thinking about action explanation (for my take on Davidson see Stueber 2006, 2019), it is maybe not surprising that my conception of reenactive empathy has been criticized for seriously underestimating the phenomenal or the experiential dimension for understanding human agency. According to this line of critique, reenactive empathy is providing an insufficient grasp of the phenomenal interiority of the mind. Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo (2021) suggest, for instance, that it needs to be supplemented by experiential empathy. It is only in light of such experiential empathy, or so they claim, that reenactive empathy can be "epistemically successful" since in order to explain an agent's action we do not merely need to understand an agent's reasons for acting, we also need to understand their motivating strength (Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo 2021, 7108–7109). In addition, it is only with the help of experiential empathy that we fully understand all features of a person's perspective, some of which seem to be independent of his reasons for acting. In this manner, experiential empathy allows us also to gain phenomenal insights into aspects of a person's motivational structure in case of arational behaviour or his general existential outlook onto the world given a variety of moods that a person might experience.

While I ultimately regard the above critique as misguided, it does raise interesting questions for my position of how exactly I feel about the phenomenal dimension of other minds, about the importance of grasping it to gain an *explanatory* understanding of other agents and what this all has to do with reenactive empathy. I plan to address these questions in the following by first expressing some scepticism about the viability of the common distinction between affective and cognitive empathy and/or between affect sharing and perspective-taking (for instance Bloom 2016; Decety and Cowell 2015), which is mirrored by Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo with their differentiation between agential and experiential empathy. Often – at

least when we look at some of the more complex emotions – emotion sharing or empathy in the affective sense is accomplished only when we share at least aspects of the other person’s broader perspective on life and understand their culturally embedded reasons for acting. As already Adam Smith suggested, we do not really grasp the phenomenal dimension of a person’s emotion without understanding how it constitutes an appropriate response to aspects of the situation that the person encounters. In the second section, I will then more fully explore how my distinction between basic and reenactive empathy allows me to acknowledge the affective dimension of empathy and, most importantly, how I regard reenactive empathy as at times including a phenomenal dimension. When we look more closely at the structure of rational agency, mental states can be grasped as reasons for actions only if they are recognized to be fittingly integrated into a complex web of our other mental states and only insofar as they are ultimately related to what we care about. Accordingly, grasping another person’s reasons with the help of reenactive empathy has potentially an affective dimension. It is important however to distinguish between different levels and intensity of empathic engagement. Whether reenactive empathy realizes its potential phenomenal dimension also depends on how intensely we activate our imagination and whether the reasons we are concerned with are closely related to what agents care about. Lastly, I would like to suggest that that even if we acknowledge a form of purely experiential or affective empathy, such empathy does not possess any uniquely explanatory value. From the explanatory point of view its value is merely heuristic by suggesting a mental cause (independent of those causes also being a reason) that manifests itself from the first-person perspective in a phenomenal manner. It has, however, a practical value in that it provides emotional support to another person.

## 6.2 How Distinct are Affective and Cognitive Empathy? An Anthropological Case Study

I would like to start my exploration by emphasizing that I regard the embodied and situated individual who is in some sense attuned to his situation and who acts for reasons as the primary object of mature empathic understanding. Empathy thus concerns the whole range of mental phenomena that constitute a person’s mental life and perspective and in light of which he or she can be understood as having reasons for acting. I also do not agree with Collingwood that empathy cannot in principle recover the phenomenal aspects of another person’s mental life. Why should we not be able to imagine how the flowers smelt for Epicurus in his garden given the fact that all humans share similar sensory systems? For such reconstruction we, of course, need to have additional information about

the kind of flowers Epicurus encountered, about the exact time of year, and other relevant facts. Moreover, while my main philosophical concern has been focused on establishing the centrality of reenactive empathy for understanding rational agency, I do regard basic empathy to be a capacity that mediates every face-to-face encounter with other humans. If we assume that basic empathy supervenes on neuronal mirroring mechanisms allowing us to resonate with some of their basic emotions such as sadness, anger, or even happiness, we also grasp something of the phenomenal dimension of some of our mental states. Such resonance will furthermore inform our grasp of other people's states of mind with the help of reenactive empathy.

Yet even the level of basic empathy does not provide us with a pure kind of affective empathy, which researchers distinguish from perspective-taking. First, basic empathy is not restricted to merely affective mental states but also concerns another agent's intentional (at least in the *de re* sense) orientation towards his or her environment. In most circumstances when we encounter another person as adults or adolescents, we know perfectly well why it is that the person feels what she feels since we encounter her in a specific environment such as attending a funeral, having received an exciting job offer or a fellowship, or having just experienced the birth of her child. In those situations, we are perfectly clear about what else a person might be thinking, what she is valuing and so on. We normally do not merely look at the faces of people. These are just things we agree to do when practising psychologists in the laboratory ask us to identify emotions by merely looking at photographs of a person's facial expressions. Moreover, when we resonate with another person's basic emotions such as joy or grief, already Adam Smith quite rightly remarked, we share these emotions by also understanding that something good or bad must have happened to that person (Smith 1759, 11–12). In cases of more complex emotions, it is even more important that we appreciate the circumstances that give rise to them since we need to grasp how they are responses to and how they attune us to features of the environment. We do not merely share anger, we share the anger insofar as we understand that a person is angry about an injustice, about an instance of police brutality, for instance. Accordingly, we share a person's affects by always already making assumptions about what else people are thinking and care about in their lives. In ordinary circumstances such a grasp of another person's perspective – at least in a partial sense – does not require much effort, because we do not need to worry about relevant differences between us and the other person. In some sense we might be inclined to say that ordinarily we do not actively take another person's perspective. Nevertheless, we would have to say that emotion sharing or empathy in the affective sense is accomplished only in that we share at least aspects of the other person's broader perspective on life.

These claims become more obvious when we turn our attention to the difficulty in understanding the phenomenal interiority of culturally very distant people, an exercise in radical interpretation regarding phenomenal mental states so to speak. I will have a closer look at Renato Rosaldo's well-known essay *Grief and a Headhunter's Rage*, in which he claims that he could fully make sense of the cultural practice of headhunting among the Ilongot, an egalitarian hunter-gatherer tribe from the Philippines, only by sharing their affective states after his wife's tragic and untimely death. *A fortiori*, Rosaldo seems to be a proponent of a pure form of affective empathy as a unique and distinct means for gaining explanatory understanding of members of a culturally very distant tribe whom Renato Rosaldo and his wife Michelle Rosaldo studied and lived with in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Particularly puzzling from their perspective was the Ilongot's practice of engaging in various raids where they ambushed people from a variety of groups with whom they were in conflict, killing them, and cutting off their heads. Such headhunting rituals cannot simply be identified with normal, albeit for our taste somewhat strange, funeral practices, since they happen only from time to time depending on external circumstances (see Rosaldo 1980). They also involve only men of different ages and generations. In some sense headhunting is something that Ilongot men just do from time to time because that is what it means to be an Ilongot man.

Interestingly, the Ilongot did not take heads as trophies but rather tossed them away. In being asked to explain their practices they did not provide a cosmological account such as that they cut off heads to acquire some "soul substance" (Rosaldo 1980). Rather their explication was purely psychological in that they explained it as a way of relieving some mental anguish due to anger, rage, or grief. Accordingly, Renato Rosaldo (1980, 140) interprets headhunting as a "piacular sacrifice" that "involves the taking of a human life with a view toward cleansing the participants of the contaminating burdens of their own lives". Yet, and in this respect even Rosaldo struggled to come up with an answer, what exactly motivates the individual Ilongot to participate in such a ritual? According to Rosaldo, if asked, older Ilongot men just say that the urge to kill another human being by cutting off their heads is due to "rage, born of grief" or that for the Ilongot "grief, rage, and headhunting go together in a self-evident manner" (Rosaldo 1993, 1). Yet how can we understand the urge for headhunting as being grounded in our grief for a loved one and how could that be a reason for killing others? Renato Rosaldo claims that he only started to grasp the Ilongot's account when his own wife, Michelle Rosaldo, tragically and unexpectedly died at a rather young age in an accident during another of their anthropological field trips to the Philippines, in 1981, this time studying the Ifugaos. This new life experience supposedly enabled him to empathize with the older Ilongot men and acquire an explanatory

understanding of the reasons of why they engaged in such practice, since his own grief was filled with rage (see also Vielmetter 1998, 329–333).

There are, however, reasons to be sceptical about this claim. It is understandable that Rosaldo's grief was filled with rage at the untimely death of his wife. Who would not feel like raging against such cosmological injustice? Yet even if one grants all of that, our grief does not always include rage. More often, one tends to reluctantly accept the demise of one's older relatives even if one's psyche is feeling heavy under the burden of sadness. It would thus remain a mystery why the Ilongot – and in this case only Ilongot men – would always feel enraged by their grief. In addition, Rosaldo admits, his rage did not make him want to kill somebody who had absolutely nothing to do with the death of his wife. *A fortiori*, the experience of such grieving rage alone does not provide him with any explanatory understanding of the reasons for headhunting. Why should we then even assume that he shares the affective states of the Ilongot?

Accordingly, I am prepared to argue that even sharing an emotion that constitutes a sharing of a mental state that provides us at the same time with a reason for acting, presupposes that we share a wider conceptual and value-laden perspective on the world. In cases of large cultural differences emotional affect sharing cannot proceed independently of perspective-taking. It requires situating the headhunting practice within a larger cultural context and a grasp of the general worldview of the Ilongot, something that Rosaldo himself has elaborated on in his earlier work. (For a good discussion of these issues see particularly Robarcheck and Robarcheck 2005.) Michelle Rosaldo's work proves to be particularly insightful since she articulates the psychological attunement and cultural significance of headhunting for the Ilongot in a much more fine-grained manner. As she tells the story, among men headhunting is an intergenerational exercise in that such raids are planned and guided by men of the older generation for the benefit of the younger one. Younger men are eager to hunt heads because for them it is an initiation exercise that allows them to wear "red hornbill earrings". More specifically they are granted the honour when they throw away the separated heads, which permits them to claim credit for having successfully completed a headhunt. In addition, such an "accomplishment" enables them to marry more easily. Younger men are thus not only driven by anger or rage but also by envy towards those who already have taken head. For the older generation it seems at times a way of reconnecting "with the energy" and vitality of their youth (Rosaldo 1980, 14). In this manner they seem to release grief, rage, or anger, and other psychological burdens of their soul that they have acquired while growing older and becoming less energetic. From a Western perspective, one might think about headhunting excursions as intergenerational hunting or boy scouts' expeditions. Moreover, as the successful expedition ends with a

celebration involving a lot of singing (Rosaldo 1980, 54–60), headhunting practices seem to be akin to sporting competitions, including elements of wild college parties, which seem to function as a form of stress relief. That such stress relief is associated with headhunting is certainly a historically and culturally contingent fact. An anthropologist from Mars might similarly wonder about why we celebrate the win of our favourite football or soccer teams and wonder why it is that there are huge viewing parties all over Europe when the various national teams compete for the world championship. To make a long story short, being able to reliably share or empathize with a feeling or an emotion with another so that we are confident that such empathy provides us with explanatory understanding of potential reasons for acting involves perspective-taking. It requires us to situate an emotion within a complex web of another person's belief, desires, values, and normative commitments while at the same time being aware of the relevant differences between us and them. To think of affective or experiential empathy as a distinct empathic capacity which also uniquely contributes to our explanatory understanding of another person's agency independently from perspective-taking or what I call reenactive empathy is thus implausible. It is much better to conceive of reenactive empathy itself as at times also involving a phenomenal dimension.

### **6.3 Reenactive Empathy, Rational Agency, and the Phenomenal Dimension of Our Minds**

Reenactive empathy as I understand it is a form of imaginative perspective-taking whereby I try to adopt another person's point of view and his stance on his environment. Of course, for such reenactment to be reliable I have to be aware of any relevant differences in our perspectives, and imaginatively adopt another person's thoughts and sentiments that I do not share with him and quarantine my own beliefs, desires, and normative commitment that he does not share with me from my reenactment.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly I regard the explanatory framework of folk psychology as being epistemically dependent on our capacity for reenactive empathy, since the primary purpose of attributing mental states within this framework consists in providing us not merely with knowledge of the subjective reasons for which an agent acted and not merely knowledge of some inner causes. To provide a flavour of the argument for the above claim, and to help with understanding how reenactive empathy might involve a phenomenal dimension, we have to remember that individual mental states constitute reasons for acting only if they are at the same time holistically integrated in a fitting manner with a whole set of an agent's other beliefs, desires, values, and normative commitments. In ordinary run-of-the-mill explanations such as he went to the fridge to get a beer, or he went to the store in order

to buy his favourite ice-cream that fact can easily be overlooked. It can be overlooked because we presuppose a vast network of culturally shared background assumptions between the interpreter and the interpretee. In ordinary circumstances – that is, in explaining behaviour within a shared culture – grasping the cited beliefs and desires as a person's reasons proceeds effortlessly since we share a vast set of background assumptions. I can understand them as reasons for going to the fridge, since given the fact of our shared background they could also constitute *my reasons* for acting in the same manner. The very fact that those shared assumptions are ordinarily in the background might also have contributed to the idea that grasping the explanatory power of folk psychological explanations depends merely on folk psychological generalizations that we implicitly appeal to. If this were so, however, we should have no difficulties in grasping the explanatory force of “unusual” belief/desire explanations. Take, for example, the attempt to explain why somebody tries to stand on his left leg for two days because that is just what he desired to do. It seems that without further explication and information of how the other person's perspective differs from ours and why from his perspective such a desire could be seen as a reason for engaging in such a “useless” endeavour we would be reluctant to accept such “explanation”. It certainly could not be my reason for acting nor could I imagine circumstances in which I would have such a desire.

Once the information about relevant differences is provided (such as that the person intended to be mentioned in the Guinness Book of World Record or he wanted to win a bet involving large sums of money) we often grasp effortlessly how such a thought fits in with other thoughts and how they can therefore be his reason for acting.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, we need to notice the potential magnitude of this task, that is, of how to appropriately integrate a mental state with all of our other mental attitudes. If we would indeed have to consider all of them in their totality for that very purpose it seems we would never be able to accomplish this task, or at least not very quickly, given our limited cognitive capacities. We thus must somehow determine a smaller subset among the vast set of our mental states that is relevant to consider in a particular context. To solve the problem of relevance means to solve what is commonly referred to as the frame-problem. To use Fodor's terminology, to identify the relevant aspects of our belief set means to be able to put a frame around them. Yet where to put the “frame” seems to be an irreducibly open-ended and contextual affair, not an activity that can be conceived of as the application of a theory or a theoretical algorithm, and certainly not a theory articulated in folk psychological terminology (see also Henderson and Horgan 2000; Stueber 2017). Ordinarily we do possess the practical capacities and the cognitive know-how and solve such problems on an everyday basis in making up our mind



about what to do in specific circumstances. Accordingly, we also must rely on such practical capacities in grasping how other people think, deliberate, and decide. But that is only possible by using our own cognitive resources in empathically imagining another person's perspective, a capacity that I have referred to as reenactive empathy.

More importantly, reenactive empathy is also involved, if one is to trust the considerations of the prior section, in grasping the phenomenal salience of emotions insofar as they are our reasons for acting. They can be grasped as reasons, like less phenomenally salient states such as beliefs or standing desires, only if we recognize how they relate to a person's web of relevant mental states and to the relevant features of the environment so that we can understand how they constitute a somewhat reasonable, appropriate, or fitting response. One additional consideration should help us recognize that phenomenal states, particularly emotions, are squarely within the scope of reenactive empathy. As Harry Frankfurt (1998, 85) pointed out, at the heart of reflective and rational agency lies something that agents care about, "a complex set of cognitive, affective, and volitional dispositions and states", which in some sense constitutes an agent's identity. For Frankfurt, rational agents are persons who are not merely driven by their desires to act but who can also occupy a more reflective stance. They are not merely driven to act on their strongest desire but can deliberate and decide which one of their many desires they want to be their will or which of their desires they want to identify with as agents. Answers to such questions are grounded in what G.E.M. Anscombe ([1957] 2000, 72) refers to as a "desirability characterization" of the objects of our desires, considerations about how well the satisfaction of a desire fits in with other desires we would like to satisfy, our long-term plans, our beliefs about the world and also how well our actions conform to the standards and rules of conduct to which we are committed.

Yet at each stage of our deliberation, we might further reflect upon – because of self-doubt or because one is challenged by others to further justify one's choices – why it is that we regard specific considerations as our reasons for acting. We could, for instance, after choosing to apply to graduate school in philosophy, explain why we regard gaining a philosophical education to be important to us and why we think that various philosophical areas offered by a graduate school are central for this purpose. Accordingly, our reasons for acting are integrated into a complex and hierarchical web of mental attitudes in light of which agents take ownership of their reasons for acting. It has to be admitted however, that our reflective capacity and our willingness to take a reflective and critical stance towards our own reasons tend to be finite and has to proceed in a piecemeal fashion. After all, in reflecting on the validity of some of our reasons we always presuppose some criteria for such an evaluation. The process of justifying reasons as reasons

can also not go on forever since in this case, we would lose our ability to regard anything as a reason in the first place. Practically speaking we stop the regress by declaring that we just care about certain things more than about other things. We might just declare that we care more about working in academia rather than getting a real job that might make us rich. Other people might not agree with what we care about, yet our caring for certain projects and values makes us the persons we are. In this manner, merely possible reasons for acting (such as becoming an academic vs. getting a job that would make us rich) become reasons with which agents can identify.<sup>4</sup>

Here is not the place for an extensive discussion of Frankfurt. Yet regardless of whether we agree with all aspects of Frankfurt's account of the person I think he is right in asserting that what we care about constitutes an important aspect of our personhood. Accordingly, a full-bodied rational agent's reasons can possess an affective dimension, whose intensity depends on how central they are for or how far removed they are from what the agent really cares about. Ordinary run-of-the-mill reasons for going to the grocery store or for studying for an exam do not have much of an affective dimension, as this is normally not something that we care much about as far as our identity is concerned. These are just some of the things that we must do to keep on living and, in our society, at least before COVID, tend to take for granted. Similarly, what agents care about is something that they bring with them in reenacting the reasons of other people. In reenacting the reasons of members of our in-group we can assume that what we care about overlaps to a large extent. For that very reason, such reenactment also resonates affectively with us. Just think about reenacting the excitement of another soccer fan watching a game if we also care about soccer. Yet, as Adam Smith already pointed out in talking about conditional empathy (Smith 1759, 17–18), we might not always have the time or energy to use the full force of our imaginative powers to engage with the other person. We nevertheless understand a person's reasons as reasons that we could act on in light of our knowledge of how we would feel in such situations and how others have felt with whom we have empathized on other occasions. We do understand what is going on with our children watching soccer, even if we do not actually reenact their perspective in all of its phenomenal richness at this very moment. Our understanding of their reasons however is conditioned on having the option to do so if we were to spend the time and effort for a more intense imaginative engagement. Actual affective resonance with every one of another person's emotional fibres is thus not a necessary requirement for understanding his reasons.

It becomes a bit more complicated if our structure of care differs from what other persons care about. It is particularly in this context that we at times encounter a certain degree of imaginative resistance in reenacting

another person's reasons for acting and we have difficulties understanding how it is that another person cares about such things because we have difficulty imagining how we could care about it. Within the political realm we currently encounter such polarizing disagreements between the adherents of different parties that we seem to have a tough time understanding why they feel so strongly about their reasons. We certainly are somewhat capable of grasping that vaccine deniers have their reasons for refusing to take the vaccine, in the same manner that we understand that if we accept specific premises, it follows logically that one should not take the vaccine. Yet why anybody would adopt such "absurd" premises in the first place is something that "enlightened liberals" have a hard time grasping. After all, for us "enlightened liberals", who know something about how science works and who also generally still trust public health officials, the evidence clearly supports the claim that vaccines help avoiding terrible suffering for many people with only a few side effects. Accordingly, we might want to say that we cannot really take the perspective of the other person since we ultimately do not find a way of adjusting our perspective in order to integrate those beliefs with any of our other beliefs and epistemic procedures, which I do care about following. The stubborn insistence that we have the right to refuse the vaccine seems to be more like the behaviour of four-year-old children or even worse the behaviour of children during their terrible twos. Nevertheless, we still might want to say that we possess an extremely thin form of understanding – for lack of a better word – that is sufficient for predictive purposes. Such understanding is analogous to understanding how a conclusion logically follows from specific premises, regardless of the epistemic status of the premises. Yet such "understanding" does not suffice for explanatory purposes since I am unable to take the perspective of the other person and fail to grasp how those reasons could potentially be my reasons for acting. I cannot see how I could care about what the other person seems to care about. Ultimately, we understand the other person only in a very attenuated sense and remain in some sense still puzzled.

It is however important to emphasize that such puzzlement belongs as much to the human condition as our ability to easily resonate with other people who are members of our cultural in-group. Under the condition of modernity and the increased encounter between different cultures such puzzlement has certainly become more widespread. For that reason, we should distinguish between different degrees of empathic understanding dependent on the intensity of imaginative perspective-taking that we are able to engage in. In this respect, empathic understanding differs in no way from other forms of understanding such as for example scientific understanding. For instance, knowing that smoking causes lung cancer provides us with some understanding of the cause for lung cancer. Nevertheless, a person who has a more comprehensive knowledge of the underlying causal

mechanism mediating this causal relation possesses a deeper understanding. As far as empathic understanding is concerned one might similarly regard the ability to resonate with the phenomenal dimension of another person's thoughts as a deepening of our grasp of the reasons of another person insofar as it allows us to bring home to ourselves how exactly they relate to what an agent might be caring about. It is exactly in this respect that our understanding of persons from a different culture tends to deepen through familiarizing and immersing ourselves in their various social practices. In this manner we gain an understanding of the other person that utilizes additional sources, or if you want to put it that way, embodied information, that we acquire through interacting face to face with people within a culture, an interaction that also activates various mechanisms of basic empathy. To just give a mundane example, after immigrating to the US I understood American football and baseball only on a very superficial level. I also understood only vaguely why people enjoyed watching the game. I brought their case home to myself in thinking of them in analogy of sports that I was familiar with. They were just like soccer fans (but of course no European soccer fan would find much to like about American football and baseball). Yet having my own sons become interested in American football (explaining the game to me and seeing and feeling them being excited about it) and watching them play baseball provided me with a much better understanding of the games since I developed an appreciation for their concrete particularity. It allowed me to understand how difficult it is to hit a baseball thrown at you at rather high speed and thus allowed me to better understand the fans' enjoyment of the game. It all started slowly making sense to me since I also had become more familiar with the social practices within which these games are so important. However, no unique kind of affective empathy besides basic empathy and reenactive empathy is needed since the phenomenal aspect of the other person's perspective cannot be neatly separated from an agent's "rational" persona and his conception of the world.

Nevertheless, one might still have the nagging feeling that this conclusion is contradicted by the obvious fact that having had similar life experiences makes it so much easier to understand why another person behaves in a particular manner. It seems to be easier because in this case one knows exactly what it feels like for that person from the inside – what it feels like to be a woman or a member of an oppressed group, for instance. We understand the reasons of another agent more effortlessly, it seems, solely because of our grasp of the phenomenal quality of the other person's experience, based on something like affective empathy.<sup>5</sup> I do not want to doubt the intuition expressed in these remarks. One could indeed say that I understand my father who suffered from arthritis in his hips and needed a hip replacement years ago better now since I suffered from the same affliction

and more recently got a hip replacement. It seems I understand him because I am more like him, and I now know how arthritis pain in the hip feels. At the very least one would have to say that I understand him differently compared to my understanding years ago. Yet we must here proceed with care. It is important to remind ourselves that understanding another person cannot be identified with becoming the other person (see also Maibom 2022). Empathic understanding is always an “encapsulated” one (Collingwood 1939, 114) since in reenacting another person’s thought I am at the same time aware that I differ in some respect from the other person.<sup>6</sup> So even if I share more experiences with my father than before, they are still not the same experiences. Less intrusive surgical procedures have been developed and I also did not let my hip deteriorate as much before deciding to have the surgery, for instance. Moreover, I did sense what my father went through already years ago, even if I at that time lacked similar experiences. Everybody meeting him at this stage could easily make out that he was in pain. Mechanisms of basic empathy allow us to grasp that fact. Most importantly, one should not give in to the temptation of contemporary philosophy of mind and identify knowing what it feels like with grasping an isolated phenomenal quale. Rather, knowing what it feels like to live with arthritis is also understanding the challenges that the world poses to people with arthritis in their hips. For “hip-challenged” persons the world provides very different affordances compared to an “able-bodied” person. They tend to view stairs in a very different manner, for instance. Stairs no longer constitute mere challenges or objects that allow us to exercise but they constitute real annoying hindrances, something to avoid and they provide very strong reasons for looking for the next elevator. Having certain life experience then changes our own perspective (it might also change what we care about) and, for that very reason, it changes what differences between me and the person I empathize with are relevant and how exactly I must adjust my perspective in order to imaginatively adopt another person’s perspective. Similarly, I would like to argue that grasping what it is like to be a person from a different class, gender, or race means understanding that aspects of the social world might provide very different affordances and challenges. How easily we can recognize this fact obviously depends on our life experiences. To use a worn-out example, being stopped by a police car if one is an African American or a white person obviously “feels” differently, because for African Americans it is perceived to constitute very distinct dangers. Without doubt for a white person to understand the different perspective that African Americans have will take a lot of effort. It requires understanding African American history, listening to stories of affected people and so on. Nevertheless, developing such understanding is not in principle impossible, if we keep in mind that understanding another person never means becoming that person.

Most importantly, I would argue that these various attempts to empathize with the other person still constitute different exercises of reenactive empathy. Regarding explanatory understanding, that is understanding why a person acts or even feels the way that she does, there is no need to postulate a special kind of affective empathy. Reenactive empathy itself is open in various degrees to grasping the phenomenal dimension of our minds. Ultimately, we must grasp an agent's reasons viscerally because we must grasp how they relate to the person's care structure and that requires that we also imagine how it could relate to something that we care about.

#### **6.4 Concluding Epilogue: Affective Empathy as Independent of Reenactive Empathy?**

So far, I have only dealt with the question of the contribution of empathy to gaining explanatory understanding of rational agency. More specifically I have argued that it is implausible to strictly distinguish between affective and reenactive empathy since affect sharing presupposes the sharing of a perspective (Section 6.2) and claimed that reenactive empathy itself includes a grasp of the phenomenal features of the mind, if necessary (Section 6.3). Yet I want to acknowledge that certain forms of affective attunement, such as feeling depressed or being anxious, do not neatly fit the picture. In respect to such affective states, I am inclined to admit that a special form of affective empathy enables us to know what it feels like for the other person from the inside. Such phenomenal or purely experiential empathy as some call it (Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo 2021) needs to be distinguished from basic empathy in my sense as it depends on having had specific experiences whose memories are utilized in empathizing with the other person. There certainly is a difference between a clinical psychologist who herself has dealt with clinical depression and a clinical psychologist who is an expert in depression while never herself having experienced what it feels like from the inside. Yet, such a purely experiential form of empathy does not provide us with explanatory insights. From an explanatory point of view both clinical psychologists are on par. They can causally explain why the depressed person does not get out of bed in terms of their theoretical knowledge of depression and not in terms of what depression feels like. Knowing what it feels like to be depressed ultimately does not provide us with access to a reason for staying in bed as such feelings seem to be very much dissociated from the rest of our mental attitudes. From the first-person perspective, all the depressed person can say is that he did not get out of bed because he did not feel like it. This answer does not provide us with a reason for acting but could be seen as a refusal to answer the question of why one did not get out of bed in terms of a reason. One provides an answer in terms of a cause that manifests

itself from the first-person perspective in a specific phenomenal way. As Anscombe quite insightfully remarks “the more the action is described as a mere response, the more inclined one would be to the word ‘cause’; while the more it is described as a response to something having a significance that is dwelt on by the agent in his account, or as a response surrounded with thoughts and questions, the more one would be to use the word ‘reason’” (Anscombe [1957] 2000, 23). Without wanting to enter into the complex discussion about the nature of so-called arational actions – such as kicking in a door out of anger, tearing apart a photo of a person out of hatred, or jumping up and down out of joy (see Scarantino and Nelson 2015) – similar considerations apply to cases where we empathize with somebody being in the grip of an emotion (because we have experienced such grip ourselves). At most it provides us with a grasp of a cause and its manifestation from the first-person perspective. Yet, the explanatory force of accounting for an action in terms of a person being in the grip of an emotion merely depends on the realization that under certain circumstances people just act that way if they are in an emotional state of a specific intensity. As far as I am concerned, the epistemic value of empathy in these contexts is rather limited. Its value seems to be primarily practical in that a clinical psychologist having first-hand experience with depression might better relate to the depressed person and feel with that person. In this manner we might provide the other person with important emotional support giving her the feeling that she is understood by us. It communicates to the person that “You’re not alone in this experience” (Song 2015), a fact that we as essentially social creatures certainly appreciate (see also Betzler 2019; Bailey 2022). Yet it needs to be emphasized that in the above cases of arational action the practical and relational value of empathy is detached from the epistemic function of reenactive empathy that I have emphasized so far. Purely experiential empathy ultimately falls short in making sense of another agent’s point of view since it does not allow us to find his or her actions intelligible by comprehending an agent’s reasons for acting. As far as the epistemic impact of such purely experiential empathy is concerned, it is merely a heuristic means for trying to find generalizations that epistemically support proper causal explanations.<sup>7</sup> On its own, it does not provide us with genuine explanatory understanding. These considerations provide us, however, with an additional practical reason for why it is important to empathically understand how an agent’s reasons relate to what he cares about. If we fail to do so with the help of reenactive empathy – and reenactive empathy is thus unable to allow us to grasp the phenomenal dimension of another person’s rational outlook – we have a more difficult time forming a community with persons of very different structures of care. We at most grasp another person’s reasons in a very attenuated and distant manner. I suspect that the inability among people

in different political communities to reenact each other's reasons by resonating with their reasons phenomenally contributes also to the deepening political polarization in our society.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Both empathic capacities, regardless of their cognitive complexity involve a self-other differentiation and the awareness that in empathizing I am dealing with the sentiments or thoughts of another person. That is, even basic empathy is not merely a form of emotional contagion.
- 2 As my focus here is on the phenomenal dimensions of the mind, I will not address the question of how we might come to know about such differences. I think here some narrative knowledge might indeed come in handy without such narrative knowledge making reenactive empathy superfluous for explanatory purposes. For a discussion see Stueber 2018.
- 3 Here I will not dwell on the difficulties that might arise in attempting to reenact another person's thought processes in case of great cultural and personal differences when we encounter a variety of forms of imaginative resistance. I do acknowledge these difficulties and I also accept that there might be some real limits to empathic understanding. I do however take the existence of such difficulties as further evidence for the fact that folk psychological understanding is mediated by our empathic and imaginative capacities (see Stueber 2006, chapter 6). In some cases (such as in cases of severe depression), our only option consists in appealing to explanatory schemes that are backed up by mere statistical generalizations. Those strategies are however a mere second best. They indicate that we are outside the domain of rational agency.
- 4 This is not to say that I wholeheartedly agree with every aspect of Frankfurt's conception of agency. Most importantly he neither admits that a reasonable discussion about what we most deeply care about is possible nor does he acknowledge that we are necessarily obliged by morality unless we choose to care about it. For an interesting discussion see Wolf (2002) and Korsgaard (2006). I further explore these issues in my forthcoming book *The Moralizing Animal: Empathy and the Foundations of Morality*.
- 5 This paragraph is a response to questions that have been raised in a very constructive discussion of my talk at a workshop on empathy at the University of Essen organized by Christiana Werner and Thomas Petraschka. Particularly Christiana Werner pressed me on this point.
- 6 It thus needs to be admitted that empathic understanding of another person is perspectival in that it always depends on and is coloured by the perspective that we are coming from. My understanding of a deeply religious person as a relatively secular person having grown up in a German Lutheran tradition – as I like to quip, if I were a religious person, I would be a Lutheran – will certainly differ from the understanding that a more religious or spiritual person within the Christian tradition gains. Yet that understanding also differs from the understanding that a religious person from the Buddhist tradition might have and so on and so forth. None of this implies however that understanding is not possible or that it is merely subjective and arbitrary, that is, that it cannot be evaluated as being better and worse. All it means is that understanding another person is always a situated one. We also should not forget that our understanding of another person can be “understood” and compared from a variety of different perspectives. Moreover, as anthropologists are very much aware, their under-



standing of another culture can be “checked” by whether that understanding resonates with members of that culture itself. In this respect empathic understanding could be seen as a potentially open-ended and even as a dialogical process.

- 7 In this respect (but not as far as reenactive empathy is concerned) I would agree with the logical positivists’ evaluation of empathy. Paradigmatically for the logical positivist’s view of empathy see Abel 1948.
- 8 Many thanks to the editors for organizing an enjoyable workshop on the theme of this anthology. I benefited greatly from the discussion of all the papers. I am also grateful for the editors’ comments on the penultimate version of this chapter.

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## Section 2

# Empathy and Understanding Literature and Art



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# 7 Is There a Role for Emotion in Literary Criticism?

*Peter Lamarque*

## 7.1

The literary critic William K. Wimsatt and the philosopher Monroe C. Beardsley co-authored two papers in the 1940s, “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) and “The Affective Fallacy” (1949), which became the intellectual pillars of the New Criticism. The former remains well known and continually debated, while the latter has had less attention, perhaps partially because of its convoluted and digressive style, as well as its preoccupation with local – now forgotten – debates. Nevertheless, the core message of “The Affective Fallacy” strikes me as right and worth heeding. My attempt here is in effect to reformulate it and make it more accessible, hopefully more persuasive.

Wimsatt and Beardsley (1949, 31) describe the Affective Fallacy as “a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*)”, stating that it “begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism”. The authors have two principal targets in mind: the deeply entrenched but, as they saw it, amateurish tendency among ordinary readers to make fundamental appeal to emotion in evaluating works of literature, and a growing but, in their view, misguided movement among some professional critics (including I.A. Richards) to appeal to science, notably psychology, to promote a systematic explanation of the values of affective responses to literature. About the former, they write:

The report of some readers [...] that a poem or story induces in them vivid images, intense feelings, or heightened consciousness, is neither anything which can be refuted nor anything which it is possible for the objective critic to take into account. The purely affective report is either too physiological or it is too vague.

(Wimsatt and Beardsley 1949, 45)

They contrast the second, scientific, approach with a style of criticism that they endorse, based on “classical objectivity”, which “will not talk

of tears, prickles or other physiological symptoms, of feeling angry, joyful, hot, cold, or intense, or of vaguer states of emotional disturbance, but of shades of distinction and relation between objects of emotion". They continue:

It is precisely here that the discerning literary critic has an insuperable advantage over the subject of the laboratory experiment and over the tabulator of the subject's responses. The critic is not a contributor to statistically countable reports about the poem, but a teacher or explicator of meanings. [...] The critic's report will speak of emotions which are not only complex and dependent upon a precise object but also, and for these reasons, stable. [...] It may well be that the contemplation of this object [...] which is the poem, is the ground for some ultimate emotional state which may be termed the aesthetic (some empathy, [...], some objectified feeling of pleasure). It may well be. [...] But it is no concern of criticism.

(Wimsatt and Beardsley 1949, 47–48)

The essay is rooted in the methods and assumptions of New Criticism. But there is still much to admire in the cautious scepticism the authors express about affect-centred criticism. Here are some lessons that I suggest are worth pondering:

- (i) Find a middle path between, on the one hand, pure subjectivity in criticism and, on the other, a non-humanistic scientific approach that issues only in "statistically countable reports". Only then will a true critical "objectivity" emerge.
- (ii) Acknowledge a role for emotion in literary criticism but pursue specificity in place of vagueness: "The more specific the account of the emotion induced by a poem, the more nearly it will be an account of the reasons for emotion, the poem itself, and the more reliable it will be as an account of what the poem is likely to induce in other – sufficiently informed – readers" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1949, 47).
- (iii) Give primary focus to the object of the emotions rather than the emotions themselves. The specificity of the emotions (see ii) derives from the specificity of the objects they are directed to.
- (iv) Avoid reductive, instrumentalist, or purely causal accounts of responses to literature (confusing "the poem and its *results*"). The implied contrast is with what might be called rational or reasoned responses, again as part of an "objective" criticism.

Affective criticism, of the kinds that Wimsatt and Beardsley reject, has never completely gone away. For ordinary readers (even more so, viewers

of film) the appeal to emotion still dominates as an evaluative parameter. At an informal level there can be no objection to that.

The numerous studies on empathy and affect relating to literature have shown increasing sophistication in empirical methods although results have been somewhat mixed (Currie 2020). But affective criticism also reappears in more purely humanistic modes, most notably in works such as Feagin 1996 and Robinson 2005. Also, in the growing body of work, by philosophers, on empathy in literary criticism (Coplan and Goldie 2011; Petraschka and Werner 2021).

## 7.2

My defence of Wimsatt and Beardsley will focus on two notions central to their account: *specificity* and *objectivity*. An important reason why Wimsatt and Beardsley reject talk about “tears, prickles or other physiological symptoms”, however well tabulated such responses might be by psychologists, is that being mere effects of a work they are too loosely and contingently connected to elements of the work itself. As they say, what is needed is something more “specific” and grounded in the “reasons” for the emotions.

As Wimsatt and Beardsley see it, the more specific the connection is between the emotion and its causes, the more likely it is to be an emotion shared by other “sufficiently informed” readers. Tying that down further, one might say that the precise emotion induced by a work (or a passage in a work) will likely either coincide with, or be closely derived from, the precise emotion expressed in the work (or passage), and thus founded on reasoned justification, not mere cause and effect, as is fit for an objective criticism.

Here is an example of affective criticism from Susan Feagin (1996). Referring to a character in George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch*, Feagin (1996, 156) writes:

I was initially attracted to Rosamond Vincy [...] but that attraction eventually turned to suspicion and then to loathing, so that every time she snuck around behind her husband's back, undoing everything he was trying to accomplish, I wanted to throttle her. These feelings reinforced my empathy with Lydgate, her hapless husband, who was initially duped by the same qualities in her that I was.

Although many readers would probably agree with Feagin’s sentiments, it might also seem that her loathing for, and her desire to throttle, Rosamond exemplify what Wimsatt and Beardsley describe as “neither anything which can be refuted nor anything which it is possible for the objective critic to take into account”. Why? Because it is deeply subjective.



Admittedly, Feagin argues that her loathing of Rosamond and her empathy with Lydgate are “warranted” in the light of wider themes in the novel: “[m]y empathy with Lydgate reinforces one of the ‘messages’ of the novel, specifically, that sympathy, or ‘human fellow feeling,’ is at the foundation of civilized society and moral behaviour” (Feagin 1996, 156). But how deep should the empathy with Lydgate run? If it is just the shared feeling of being “duped” by Rosamond, then it seems both superficial and of only marginal critical relevance. Again, what is needed is specificity.

The truth is that George Eliot will never let her readers rest with a merely superficial response to a (major) character. In this case, as with many, she is careful to present a nuanced picture of Lydgate as both admirable in his idealism but also flawed in other respects. Here are two examples of his flaws, emphasized by the author.

First of all, he is conceited: “Lydgate’s conceit was of the arrogant sort, never simpering, never impertinent, but massive in its claims and benevolently contemptuous” (Eliot 1986, 149).

A second flaw lies in his egocentric and unrealistic expectations of “perfect womanhood” or what a man should expect from a devoted wife. This is his attitude to Rosamond:

He thought that after all his wild mistakes and absurd credulity [involving a self-deceived relationship with an actress in Paris], he had found perfect womanhood – felt as if already breathed upon by exquisite wedding affection such as would be bestowed by an accomplished creature who venerated his high musings and momentous labours and would never interfere with them, who would create order in the home and accounts with still magic, yet keep her fingers ready to touch the lute and transform life into romance at any moment; who was instructed to the true womanly limit and not a hair's-breadth beyond – docile, therefore, and ready to carry out behests which came from beyond that limit.

(Eliot 1986, 352)

There is no mistaking the negative (authorial) tone in the presentation of this matrimonial ideal. The intellectual George Eliot has no truck with any “true womanly limit” (for example in education) nor any enforced “docile” behaviour. This counts as a clear mark against Lydgate.

It would seem, in the light of these flaws and others that could be cited, that any empathy felt for Lydgate in being duped by Rosamond’s own shallow and acquisitive nature, itself calls for nuance and specificity. The appropriate emotion must, as Wimsatt and Beardsley imply, be grounded in a proper appreciation of the object of the emotion. Like any tragic hero, Lydgate has serious weaknesses, which cannot be entirely erased by his

far-sighted medical interventions and research. The sympathy felt towards him, as his life and aspirations disintegrate at the hands of the evermore dislikeable Rosamond, never quite attains an unqualified justification when the subtlety of the portrayal is fully appreciated. Suitably tempered emotions are called for. We will return to Lydgate later.

Let us turn to another example, this time from Jenefer Robinson (2005). Part of Robinson's (2005, 122–123) defence of affective criticism identifies emotion as a condition for narrative understanding: "our emotional responses are a vital part of *understanding* a narrative text [...]: if I laugh and cry, shiver, tense, and relax in all the appropriate places, then I can be said to have understood the story".

Robinson discusses a poignant scene in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* where Anna returns in secret to the family home to visit her son Seryozha, bearing presents for his birthday, yet must leave early for fear of being discovered and is unable to hand over the presents, taking them back with her, unopened. Robinson writes this:

we feel an intense urge to help Anna, an intense distress and sorrow at her predicament, an intense desire and hope that her predicament will be resolved. The passage is so poignant indeed that it easily provokes tears and other physiological symptoms of sadness and distress.

(Robinson 2005, 110–111)

The observation emphasizes, deliberately, the affective nature of the response: the distress, sorrow, desire, hope, and, recalling Wimsatt and Beardsley, tears.

Robinson does accept that we must attend to features of the text which both explain our empathetic response but, more importantly, show the respects in which the writing itself can be judged empathetic.

If [...] we experience the passage emotionally in this way, then we are in a good position to try to discover *why* we respond emotionally as we do, and this in turn can lead us to seek in the work the origins of this response. Our emotional response marks this passage as significant in the story: it represents the clearest realisation Anna has yet achieved of how much she has lost in abandoning Karenin and how hopeless the possibility of return has become. [...] Her naiveté together with her suffering combine to give the passage the peculiar poignancy it evokes.

(Robinson 2005, 111)

Robinson is surely right to ask about the origin of the response in the work itself. Yet something seems amiss in her explanation. As she sees it,

it is *through experiencing the empathetic response* that we recognize the “peculiar poignancy” in the passage, or as we might put it, its empathetic character. However, that seems to get the explanation the wrong way round. I suggest that it is precisely through recognizing the poignancy and empathetic character of the scene – i.e., the expressive quality of the writing itself in its context – that our empathetic emotional response is stirred. What could be more empathetic than Tolstoy’s (1971, 566) observation: “She had not had time to undo, and so carried back with her, the parcel of toys she had chosen so sadly and with so much love the day before”. For Robinson it seems that the emotion comes before the understanding. That might be true for certain real encounters with danger, violence, or suffering, where we might experience the emotion even before we grasp what is actually happening. But that cannot be true with literature where some understanding, at least at a textual level, must precede any emotion.<sup>1</sup>

Some years ago, I offered a distinction between fantasy and art, in terms of how we respond:

One difference in modes of imagining is this: sometimes we simply *find ourselves* in a certain state of mind, sometimes we adopt a state of mind because we recognize we are being invited to do so. Fantasy belongs with the former, art with the latter. In the case of works of art, we respond in a certain way to the fictive presentation at least partly because we recognize a reason for doing so, within the structure of the work. In contrast, the imaginings of fantasy are purely manipulative; attitudes and responses are the products of causes, we adopt a point of view, as we might say, *in spite of ourselves*. There is only a minimal awareness of the representational modes in which the fantasy is embodied. In fantasy, then, unlike in art, the internal perspective on an imaginary world overwhelms the external perspective.

(Lamarque 1996, 147)

Finding ourselves in a state of mind highlights the causal aspect, while, in contrast, recognizing a reason for responding as we do highlights the reflective aspect. The external perspective is precisely that from which we attend to the “mode of presentation” of a passage (or work) over and above its mimetic features. We will return to this later.

If we respond in the way that Robinson suggests, spontaneously, as it were, rather than reflectively, there is considerable room for misdirected emotion. We might experience empathy or other heightened sentiment for all the wrong reasons. We’ve been seduced, perhaps, by some sentimental phrase or image; or we have not fully grasped what is going on; or we are blinded by superficial elements or distractions. There is no reason why we should trust our emotions in these circumstances. This makes emotional

responses, conceived purely causally, all the more unstable and unreliable. Careful attention to the “specific” source (and object) of the emotions is a better guarantor of their groundedness or objectivity. That, again, in reinforcing the primacy of reasons over causes, is central to Wimsatt and Beardsley’s argument.<sup>2</sup>

### 7.3

It is time to move from the general scepticism about affective criticism expressed by Wimsatt and Beardsley to more focused attention on one kind of affect, namely empathy. Although some of the earlier examples involved empathy, I made no attempt at that stage to formulate the concept more precisely. Nor will I offer a formal definition now. But I do accept a principle that Ingrid Vendrell Ferran (2021, 233) has nicely called “the alpha and omega of the phenomenon of empathy”, namely that “in empathy, we not only grasp what the target is undergoing but also experience something similar”. Kendall Walton’s (2015, 9–10) indexical account also adopts such a principle: “I propose to define ‘empathy’ as, simply, using some aspect of one’s current mental state as a sample to understand another person, [...] i.e., judging or experiencing the target person to be feeling ‘like this’”.

The importance of this principle is that it rests on a distinction between, on the one hand, merely grasping or understanding another person’s feelings, and, on the other, experiencing something similar oneself in contemplating the other’s feelings. Only the latter is genuine empathy. Merely recognizing that someone is sad is not enough to count as empathizing with them.<sup>3</sup>

Our focus is on empathy and literature where the interaction is not between two persons but between a person and a fictional character. Here new, and perplexing, factors come into play. Nevertheless, I propose that, at least for the time being, we should hold onto something like the empathy principle described, where a reader’s mental state is matched with a state attributed to the character. As Thomas Petraschka (2021) has pointed out, empathizing with a fictional character differs in certain fundamental ways from empathizing with an actual person. One of these differences follows from the fact that fictional characters owe their being and nature to the text in which they are presented. And literary texts are subject to interpretation so, as Petraschka shows, any affective state of a reader directed to a character will itself depend on how the character’s actions and states of mind are interpreted. We have already seen how empathy for Lydgate in *Middlemarch* might be tempered by other, less positive, features in George Eliot’s characterization of him. In general, emotional responses to a fictional character will always be grounded in conceptions of the character given “under an interpretation” and even

well-supported interpretations can conflict. The point is important but as we shall see there are different ways in which character and action are subject to interpretation.

I alluded earlier to a distinction between two perspectives that can be taken to fictional characters: internal and external. This distinction complicates the idea of interpreting a character's actions and states of mind. An internal perspective, taken to broadly realistic and "rounded" characters (as found, paradigmatically, in nineteenth-century realist novels), views the characters as ordinary human beings in a recognizable world. Readers imagine the characters to be actual humans and under this perspective little attention is given to the background understanding that they are in fact mere fictions, created by an author. This perspective involves "immersion" in a world resting on an imaginative involvement that promotes the reconstruction of action and event. Under this perspective we think of Lydgate as being a doctor, a visionary, arrogant, and having made a disastrous marriage to Rosamond.

The external perspective, in contrast, views characters as linguistic artefacts in a designed and aesthetic structure. Under this perspective, we think of Lydgate as a creation of George Eliot's, as symbolizing the hubris of a tragic hero, and as a fine illustration of the subtlety and insight of characterization not untypical of the author. We also think of the role that Lydgate plays in the thematic development of the work, or what wider significance to assign to his actions and thought, or the values he instantiates in relation to other values manifested in the work.<sup>4</sup>

Two points are relevant here. The first is that the internal perspective on a character is not without a reflective aspect. It is a perspective that grows out of an inferential process. Readers use the material of the text to develop an imagining that goes beyond what is explicit in the text and might even, in cases of recognized irony or the unreliability of a character's testimony, contradict what is explicit. Piecing together what is "true in the fiction" can be complex and not always uncontested. It is here that one kind of interpretation takes place, the "reconstruction" of an imaginary world, and in its appeal to evidence (in this case textual evidence against an assumed background) the process has similarities to the search for truth in a real-world setting.

The second point is that affective responses to characters, including empathy, are most likely to arise under the internal perspective. Readers respond to the imagined states of the characters viewed as actual people and in working out what exactly those states are they become involved with the characters to the point perhaps of feeling empathy towards them. The close connection readers feel towards characters they are attracted to arises from the close attention they are prepared to give to the characterization and the inferences it invites.

However, for readers taking an aesthetic interest in a text the external perspective is never entirely absent. And this can have an impact on what might seem the more “innocent” affective responses triggered by the internal perspective. Here the thought that the characters are artefacts in a design becomes salient, where attention is given to the modes of characterization themselves, to questions concerned not just with identifying a character’s thoughts and feelings but also about their significance in the bigger picture, and about the values represented. I suggest that the more a reader’s perspective shifts from internal to external the weaker any initial empathetic response is likely to become.

There are other ramifications from the internal/external distinction. One concerns the explanation of actions in a fictional world. Why did Lydgate marry Rosamond? From an internal perspective the explanation mirrors that of ordinary human action in the real world: largely based on beliefs and desires. Lydgate is looking for a perfect marriage fulfilling the criteria listed earlier, and after some initial doubts he falls in love with Rosamond, believing she satisfies those criteria. In that sense his decision is rational and fully explicable, just as his love is genuine and strongly felt. His position is one that a sensitive reader is likely to be sympathetic to and attracted by.

From the external perspective, however, concerning how his action fits into the design of the work and the role it plays among wider themes, a quite different explanation is forthcoming. Lydgate’s marriage to Rosamond is essential in the novel as it plays a key role in the novel’s moral trajectory and invites an important parallel with the marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon. Both marriages are unsuccessful, both thwart the high ideals and aspirations of the main protagonists, and, looking back, readers come to see that in both cases the failures of the marriages rest not just on bad luck but on bad judgement, arising from blind spots in the characters’ personalities. Lydgate and Dorothea are admirable but flawed characters, and the nature of those flaws, brilliantly drawn, yields some of the deepest insights in the novel. We have already seen that initial or superficial empathy with Lydgate arising from his ill-treatment by Rosamond is tempered when we explore Lydgate’s character more deeply. I suggest further that the more we reflect on Lydgate through the external perspective, including the role the character plays in a literary design, the less likely we are to dwell on empathetic feelings towards him. Our emotional responses will fade in significance as we ponder broader more literary interpretations for what occurs in the work and away from immersion in an imaginary world.

Another related ramification of the internal/external distinction concerns “aboutness”. The question “What is such-and-such a novel about?” again invites different answers from the different perspectives. Internally speaking, a novel is about its immediate subject matter, the story told, the

characters described. *Middlemarch* offers, as its subtitle states, *A Study of Provincial Life*, presenting the ups and downs of its characters and the twists of its plot. Externally speaking, the novel is about wider themes: marriage, idealism, ambition, political reform, the new and the old, a changing cultural landscape. It is a novel of ideas and George Eliot is not reticent in spelling these out when the occasion arises.

The contrast between subject-content and thematic-content seems not unrelated to a distinction drawn by Werner and Lüdtke (2021, 240) between what they call basic and deep understanding of a literary work. Basic understanding involves a reader's grasp of what I have called subject-content and is, they say, a "precondition for a reader's empathy with a character" (Werner and Lüdtke 2021, 240). Deep understanding has some, perhaps not total, affinity to a grasp of thematic-content, involving, for example, "elaborations of different interpretations of nonliteral meanings", "symbolic meanings", etc. (Werner and Lüdtke 2021, 240).

However, the authors propose two general claims about the relation between empathy and understanding that might seem at odds with the relations that intuitively derive from the distinctions I have drawn. Their main proposals are that (a) "High-level empathy cannot play a role in basic understanding" and (b) "High-level empathy plays a contributory role in deep understanding" (Werner and Lüdtke 2021, 240).<sup>5</sup> My own view, tentatively emerging but not yet fully explained, is that high-level empathy, i.e. empathy according to the principle enunciated earlier, can play a role in the understanding of characters from the internal perspective, when suitably grounded in the expressive properties of the text and thus in the reconstruction of subject-content, but that it has little or no role to play in the understanding of character from the external perspective or in the eliciting of thematic-content. In fact, I will make a further suggestion, which I will return to, that the understanding of character from the external perspective, while not itself encouraging an empathetic response, can nevertheless have a contributory role in the justification or grounding of such a response arising from the internal perspective.

So, returning to the point that empathy for fictional characters will depend on how a character's actions and mental states are interpreted, we now see that such interpretation can take radically different forms, when directed at subject-content or thematic-content, with different implications for the possibility of empathy.

#### 7.4

Let me expand on some of these suggestions. To do so I propose two further distinctions, which I believe are useful in this discussion. The first, between "expressed" emotion (emotion expressed specifically *in a*

*text*) and “felt” emotion, has been intimated already, the second has been merely implicit, namely between different kinds of readers of fiction with different kinds of interest.

A felt emotion, simply and obviously, is an emotion experienced by an actual person on an occasion. In this context it is likely to be either the author or a reader of a literary work. An emotion expressed in a text might coincide with a felt emotion (for example of author or reader) but is not identical with it because strictly it is a property of a text (a piece of writing), indeed a text that we might describe as “expressive” (Tormey 1971, 105). In the debate over empathy and literature, most contributors are focused on empathy as a *felt* not merely an *expressed* emotion. That priority might need to be reversed.

The second distinction is between, on the one hand, what we have already called, in characterizing the Affective Fallacy, an “ordinary reader” (OR) and, on the other, modelled perhaps on Wimsatt and Beardsley themselves, a “professional literary critic” (PLC). This refers not to classes of people but to *roles*, such that on a particular occasion a PLC might read as an OR. This in fact is common practice. The categories are not sharply drawn. But an OR typically will adopt what I have called a “transparent” mode of reading, looking (in a sense) through a text at the characters and worlds presented, from an internal perspective, not unduly concerned with literary form or artistry. In contrast a PLC, perhaps a literary scholar, academic, teacher, or reviewer, will engage an “opaque” mode of reading, still engaging imaginatively with the world presented but overtly attending to the external perspective and the artistic or aesthetic achievement (on transparent and opaque modes of reading, see Lamarque 2014).<sup>6</sup>

In a nutshell, my initial, if still unrefined, enlargement on earlier suggestions is this: that an ordinary reader, adopting the internal perspective on a character, imaginatively immersed in the fictional world, is more likely to experience a felt empathetic emotion (or emotions of other kinds), in responding to a character, than the professional literary critic, adopting the external perspective and attending to thematic as well as subject-content, whose interest will be more in expressed than felt emotions.

The first refinement of this suggestion is to soften the sharp divide between readers of these two kinds (which is not to reject but to finesse the categories involved). Many readers attuned to works of literature, without being professionally so, will quite naturally adopt an external as well as internal perspective on characters, at least in the sense of being consciously aware of a work’s *form* as well as its *content*, the way it presents its characters and world as much as what the characters and world are as presented.

Consider this short passage from a distressing scene in Thomas Hardy’s novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891). It occurs after Tess had plucked up courage (with brave resolve replete with anxiety) to tell her newly wedded



husband Angel Clare that she had had a baby, which, as we readers know, resulted from her being raped by Alec d'Urberville. Angel, resolutely and cruelly, refuses to forgive her and the scene ends with him essentially abandoning her.

“I thought, Angel, that you loved me – me, my very self! If it is I you do love, O how can it be that you look and speak so? It frightens me! Having begun to love you, I love you for ever – in all changes, in all disgraces, because you are yourself. I ask no more. Then how can you, O my own husband, stop loving me?”

“I repeat, the woman I have been loving is not you”.

“But who?”

“Another woman in your shape”.

She perceived in his words the realization of her own apprehensive foreboding in former times. He looked upon her as a species of imposter; a guilty woman in the guise of an innocent one. Terror was upon her white face as she saw it; her cheek was flaccid, and her mouth had almost the aspect of a round little hole. The horrible sense of his view of her so deadened her that she staggered, and he stepped forward, thinking she was going to fall.

(Hardy 1979, 192).

The heightened tension in the passage well conveys Tess's terror and despair, in contrast to Angel's deadening lack of sympathy. There can be no doubting that the writing is empathetic in that it expresses a strong fellow feeling towards Tess. Her point of view is vividly drawn, and it draws readers in. No attentive reader will fail to see this. The writing is imbued with emotion. But an attentive reader will notice other features of the passage. The “apprehensive foreboding” that Tess experiences in Angel's attitude recalls her initial reluctance to marry Angel while concealing her past from him. Also, “foreboding” is a powerful theme in the novel, which like a Greek tragedy seems to follow a necessary trajectory towards disaster; thus, the accident, early on in the novel, involving Tess in her horse-drawn cart, where the family's only horse is killed, bears heavy symbolic weight.

Additionally, the sense that she is a “a species of imposter” comes home to her after discovering she is not after all related to the ancient d'Urberville family, with which she had hoped to “claim kin”. Is she not also an imposter as a lowly born country girl marrying into Angel's respectable middle-class clergyman's family? Focus of this kind on wider themes further emphasizes the vulnerability of Tess; Angel's words “the woman I have been loving is not you” challenge her very identity, hurtfully shaking her sense of who she really is. These thematic thoughts arising from

the passage, accessible to any moderately receptive reader, enhance the empathetic quality and poignancy of the writing, and provide a nuanced grounding for an emotional response.

Wimsatt and Beardsley feared that objective criticism is threatened if untethered emotions in readers are given undue weight. For them, very much the professional critics, legitimate emotions must avoid vagueness, strive for “specificity”, and be grounded in “reasons” that can be recognized by other “sufficiently informed” readers. Their worry is of a reader’s imagination running wild, whereby, in our own terms, an “ordinary reader” might get distracted through immersion in an imaginary world, failing to notice that their heated emotions are in fact misplaced or significantly out of step with the world of the work itself.

Ingrid Vendrell Ferran (2021) notices this problem and offers a remedy somewhat reminiscent of Wimsatt and Beardsley’s emphasis on *specificity* and *objectivity*, invoking “accuracy and reflection” in responses to literature.<sup>7</sup> That seems entirely right and offers a convincing bulwark against vagueness and subjectivity in affective response.

Vendrell Ferran (2021, 237) makes a further move against the danger of a reader’s being distracted by a “sensation-seeking attitude”, distinguishing a “practical interest in being moved by the work” and an “intellectual interest in extracting the work’s values”. She recognizes that the practical interest, getting emotionally involved in a work, could distract a reader from attending to the aesthetic values in a work. Hence the need for the intellectual interest that keeps that attention alive: it aims “to experience the character’s way of feeling values embodied in the narrative as a means to extract the aesthetic values of the work” (Vendrell Ferran 2021, 237).

However, it is not clear why an intellectual interest in the aesthetic values of a work should have, as Vendrell Ferran insists, a necessary connection to empathizing (having a *felt* empathy) with a character’s feelings, far less with the character’s “way of feeling values”. After all, a reader, in order to have an experiential grasp of Angel Clare’s values, need not have any empathy with the heartlessness and insensitivity underlying his response to Tess. It might be preferable to remove reference to “the character’s way of feeling values”, thus simplifying the aim of the intellectual interest: “to experience the [...] values embodied in the narrative as a means to extract the aesthetic values of the work”. To experience the values in the passage it would be sufficient to experience the power and poignancy of the writing as well as a natural sympathy for Tess’s predicament and an abhorrence at the unkindness of her husband. The aesthetic value of the passage largely rests on the rhetorical achievement of eliciting that experience. The objective heart of the empathy in the passage lies in the way that Tess’s and Angel’s responses are expressed, within the wider context, rather than in any felt emotion caused in a reader.

## 7.5

Let me marshal some concluding thoughts. First of all, we should return to Wimsatt and Beardsley and the Affective Fallacy. There is much in their paper that seems dated and irrelevant but, in defence of an “objective” criticism, their reservations about the affect-centred approach strike me as both relevant now and as well-founded. Of particular importance is their rejection of reductive cause-effect conceptions of criticism where measurable effects on readers – emotional or otherwise – are thought to be at the foundation of aesthetic or literary value.

Their objection to giving too central a place to affective states brought about by a purely causal mechanism is not just that this can be overly subjective, impressionistic, and liable to error, but that the more we search for the deeper reasons for emotive effects the more we are drawn to analyse features of the work itself. And once we identify those reasons within the work – with the kind of attention that draws on the internal and external perspectives on characters – we find that the emotive effects themselves seem of diminishing importance. Another way of putting the point is that the empathy that matters (at least for an objective criticism) is the empathy found in the work (an expressed empathy) rather than in the vagaries of any felt empathy in readers.

However, a couple of qualifications are called for. One is that not everyone is interested in objective criticism; the other that there might still be a role for felt emotions in an objective criticism.

Ordinary readers, even those especially attentive to works of literature, are not inevitably seeking objectivity in their responses. In fact, spontaneous, maybe visceral, responses can be the source of some of the greatest pleasures in engaging with literature. Spontaneously laughing, crying, groaning, even jumping with terror, are not to be scorned. All that seems right. Nevertheless, the goal of an objective criticism, based not on science but on humanistic values, such as reasoned argument, sensitivity to language, textual analysis, critical acumen, considered aesthetic judgement, and the pursuit of depth, clarity and meaning in a work of art, remains a worthy aspiration.

A second, more nuanced, point is that there might still be a role for felt emotions (including empathy) in an objective criticism. A feeling of empathy – of the kind aroused by the passage from Hardy – might be a legitimate indicator in the identification of expressed empathy. Our actual feelings can reinforce, perhaps constitute, the sense we have of the poignancy of the writing.<sup>8</sup> While this might seem obvious, and readily applicable in many cases, we should always bear in mind the potential pitfalls of a spontaneous response. Could we be mistaken in responding as we do? Is the writing ironic? Or meant in a humorous vein? Have we fully grasped what’s going on? Is the object of our empathy worthy of it? Felt emotions are subject to

norms; they can be appropriate or inappropriate, well grounded in reasons or merely contingent effects. When Oscar Wilde said, “One must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell [in Dickens’s novel *Old Curiosity Shop*] without laughing”, he is making the serious point that the writing is so sentimental and lugubrious that it doesn’t merit a sincere emotional or empathetic response. People who cried over this fictional event (and many did) simply manifest, in Wilde’s view, the shallowness of their emotional sensibility (“heart of stone”). If this is right, we would do well to keep in mind that we should not automatically and unthinkingly trust our emotions in responding to literature. As Wimsatt and Beardsley insist, we need to make sure we have good reason for them.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Robinson might respond by conceding that basic linguistic understanding is indeed required before any emotional reaction but that the emotion itself can help clarify a higher-order understanding, such as a full appreciation of the hopelessness of Anna’s situation and perhaps of the naiveté that led her into that situation. The point is nuanced, and I acknowledge later that there can be a role for felt emotions as indicators of expressed emotions (see also footnote 8). I thank Tom Petraschka for raising the point.
- 2 Gregory Currie (2004) argues that empathy towards certain characters is an important response to Anne Brontë’s novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and “few readers would stay the course without its encouragement” (Currie 2004, 219). But Currie (2004, 221) is at pains to emphasize what he calls the “empathic structure of the work” and the importance of “understanding the mechanisms by which these effects are achieved”. Empathy, he says, is “accompanied and modified by such other reactions as ironic distance from our own emotions, awareness of the author’s manipulation of our response, occasional doubts about plot construction, and dissatisfaction with the use of character and dialogue” (Currie 2004, 220). The point further reinforces the primacy of reasons over causes.
- 3 Werner and Lüdtke (2021, 240) distinguish between “low-level” empathy (“the empathizer ... directly apprehend[s] the target’s mental state”) and “high-level” empathy (“adopting the target’s perspective and ... re-enacting their thoughts and feelings”) so it looks as if for them only the latter satisfies the empathy principle. There might, then, be a question whether “low-level empathy” is really empathy at all, but we should set it aside anyway in this context as the authors admit that “it is not relevant for text comprehension” because it only applies to “face-to-face situations” (Werner and Lüdtke 2021, 240).
- 4 Derek Matravers, in his illuminating chapter in this volume, seeks to play down the differences between responding emotionally to fictions and responding emotionally to non-fictions (e.g. biographies, histories etc.), partly on the grounds that in both cases the responses are to representations. Many of his points are persuasive. It might well be that our emotional responses to a fictional character viewed from the internal perspective (an imaginary person in a world) are not that different from our responses to the subject of a biography. But a character viewed from the external perspective, as a linguistic artefact in an artistic design (i.e., viewed as a representation), is, so I argue, unlikely to

- produce a significant emotional response, and the idea of the fictionality of a character so viewed becomes salient.
- 5 In fact, the authors go on to show that, in the small number of studies addressing the issue, there is no clear empirical evidence in support of (b) and indeed some evidence that seems to challenge (a) (Werner and Lüdtke 2021, 243).
  - 6 In a polemical and eloquently argued book, Peter Kivy (2019) has insisted that the vast majority of people who read novels are interested only in the story told, and that at best a tiny, somewhat eccentric, minority adopt the “opaque” mode of reading. That might be true statistically (although there are probably more professional critics, of different kinds, than Kivy might suppose) but that does not invalidate the readily recognisable distinction being drawn here.
  - 7 “In being accurate, we aim at reconstructing the target’s experience as precisely as possible, taking care to follow the prescriptions to imagine found in the work itself. In being reflective, we subject our engagement to scrutiny and try to avoid projecting elements of our own psychology onto the character’s world” (Vendrell Ferran 2021, 236).
  - 8 This should not be taken to endorse the claim by Robinson (2005), which I discussed earlier, that felt emotions can be a pre-condition of narrative understanding. Only by having some grasp of the emotive expressiveness of a piece of writing will a reader be likely to respond emotionally (the former causing the latter) but a strong felt emotion can be a good indicator of the power of the writing, with the provisos noted.
  - 9 I am most grateful to Christiana Werner and Tom Petraschka for helpful and perceptive comments on an earlier draft and also to participants at the Workshop on Empathetic Understanding in Essen in May 2022.

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# 8 Empathy, Fiction, and Non-Fiction

*Derek Matravers*

## 8.1 Introduction

Can we empathize with fictional characters? Here is a *prima facie* problem: A can only successfully empathize with B if A shares B's mental states. However, if A is a reader and B is a fictional character then this cannot happen as B, being fictional, has no mental states. Although this was once thought to be a problem (see, e.g., Feagin 1996, 83–112) few people seem to worry much about it now. The current view is that the acts of empathizing happen within the scope of imaginatively engaging with the fictional world. That is, in reading *A Study in Scarlet*, I do not imagine that Sherlock Holmes has a fictional psychology, I imagine he has a real psychology. Hence, in as much as any empathizing I do happens within the scope of the imaginative project, I empathize with a real psychology.

I am going to grant, for the sake of argument, that this model is correct. For independent reasons I am suspicious of the term “empathy” and incline to the view that it should be dropped from philosophical discourse. Again, for the sake of argument, I shall put that to one side and allow that the term does pick out some psychological relation. My concern in this chapter is to discover whether there is anything distinctive about our empathy with characters in fictions as opposed to characters in non-fictions. My category of non-fiction is narrower than some; I restrict it to those works that exhibit what John Grierson called “the creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson 1933, 8). This includes most if not all histories, biographies and much of what we find in the newspapers, but excludes annuals, chronicles and factual reports of the sort that stockbrokers might study over breakfast.

That the issue concerns our empathy with characters in fictions is standardly assumed in the philosophical literature (in what follows, all italicization is mine). For example, Jenefer Robinson (2005, 105) says the problem is that of “explaining how our emotional response to novels, plays, and movies help us understand them, to understand characters, and grasp the significance of events in the plot” (her later discussion makes it clear that by “plays and movies” she means *fictional* plays and movies). In his “In

Search of Narrative”, Matthew Kieran (2003, 69–70) discusses the claim that

[w]hen I want to understand the nature of a character’s experience and their attitude toward their own experience (what their character is really like), then I need to simulate [empathize]. A deep understanding of *fictional characters* requires simulation [empathy], though a shallow understanding of them need not.

Kieran eventually rejects the claim. My point, however, is that the claim that he thinks is up for discussion is a claim exclusively about fictional characters (the relevant subsection of the paper is entitled “Empathizing with *fictional characters*”) (Kieran 2003, 83). Similarly, Noël Carroll (2010) entitles his contribution to the debate “On Some Affective Relations between Audiences and the Characters in *Popular Fictions*”. My claim in this chapter is that this is wrong-headed. There is no reason to think there is a difference between our empathy with characters in fictions as opposed to characters in non-fictions, and hence, whatever people take the problem to be, it applies equally to both categories.

Unusually, I will begin with an error theory as to why people might think there is a difference as that will help put the rest of the discussion in context (I shall refer this position as “separatism” and people who support it as “separatists”). I will then give a general reason why there is no difference, before considering three separatist arguments that have been given in the literature and showing why they should all be rejected.

Separatism is grounded in a confusion between two distinctions: that between fiction and non-fiction, and that between representations and face-to-face encounters (I shall call the face-to-face encounters, following earlier work, “confrontations” (Matravers 2014)). This was pointed out in a neglected passage from Kendall Walton’s 1990 book, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*.

Our present concern is not with “fiction” as opposed to “reality”, nor with contrasts between “fiction” and “fact” or “truth” [...]. The difference we are interested in is between *works of fiction* and *works of non-fiction*. The potential for confusion here is considerable and has been amply realized.

(Walton 1990, 73)<sup>1</sup>

The confusion is the error of attempting to explain the distinction between fiction and non-fiction by appealing to the distinction between fiction and reality. This ignores the fact that the contrast between fiction and non-fiction is a contrast *within the broader class of representations*. There is certainly a contrast between it being fictional that I am being attacked by



a dog and it being the case that I am, now, being attacked by a dog. That, however, is unrelated to the distinction between a dog attack in a work of fiction and a dog attack in a work of non-fiction.

This confusion is endemic in the literature. For example, Aaron Meskin and Jonathan Weinberg argue that those subject to fictive affect

Will fail to demonstrate [...] behaviours that would be expected of someone experiencing its nonfictive analogue [...] we do not (generally) find audience members behaving fully as they do when they have emotional responses in ordinary (i.e. non-fictive) life. Horror movie viewers do not typically flee the cinema screaming.

(Meskin and Weinberg 2006, 224)

This is true, of course, but newsreel viewers do not typically flee the cinema screaming either. In general, one does not get further away from what is depicted in a representation by moving away from the representation – whether that representation is fictional or non-fictional. Meskin and Weinberg are attempting to illuminate one distinction (that between fiction and non-fiction) by appeal to an unrelated distinction (that between a representation and a confrontation).

The same confusion underpins the discussion I am considering in this chapter. There are differences between our psychological interactions with represented characters and our psychological interactions with people we meet face-to-face, and, as we shall see, that is often the distinction on which people focus. However, it is unrelated to the distinction in which we are interested: namely, whether there are differences in our psychological interactions with characters met in fictional narratives and characters met in non-fictional narratives.

## 8.2 Represented Characters

I will restrict myself to talking about books rather than other media such as pictures and films although I suspect the account will generalize. My reason for thinking that separatism is false stems from my understanding of what it is to read a book. Fortunately, we do not need to go into great philosophical (or even psychological) depth on this issue. The reader needs to represent the content of the book to him or herself (or, to put it less formally, needs to grasp what is going on in the book). To use the standard vocabulary, the reader forms a “situation model” consisting of the content of the book (Zwaan and Radvansky 1998). The situation model will contain the propositional content of the book which will be some combination of the propositions explicit in the book plus many further propositions either implied by the former or needed to fill in the gaps left

by the former. It will also contain a great deal of non-propositional information. This will include the spatial locations from which the events are “observed”, but also, crucially for the purposes of this chapter, dispositions to various affective reactions to the propositional (and other) content (Gerrig 1993).

Let us take an example. Consider reading a book that has as a protagonist one “Elizabeth”. In the book, Elizabeth meets a man to whom she is attracted, they have a romance of sorts, but somehow it does not work out. In reading the book, the situation model is constructed, including all the reactions of vicarious grief, pity, and admiration. Reading the book might, or will, involve taking on Elizabeth’s perspective (whatever that might mean). All this will take place whether one is reading about Elizabeth Bennett (the heroine of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*) or about Elizabeth 1st (the heroine of countless biographies). In short, when it comes to having psychological interactions with a character, whether that is a character from a fiction or from a non-fiction is irrelevant.

To underline this point let us consider an argument from Jenefer Robinson, a prominent advocate of the role of the emotions in understanding fiction and see if there is anything in that argument that limits to characters in fictions rather than characters in representations more generally. Robinson’s (2005, 125) view is that “responding emotionally is a form of understanding and [...] an interpretation, which claims to give an overall critical reflective understanding of a novel as whole [*sic*], is partly the result of reflection upon our emotional responses to the novel”. Robinson considers responses to the various characters in *Anna Karenina*, *Macbeth*, *The Ambassadors*, and Edith Wharton’s *The Reef*. She claims that one is not able to fully appreciate Anna Karenina’s state of mind when returning to see her son, Seryozha, without engaging our (the readers’) “emotional responses” (Robinson 2005, 108–109).<sup>2</sup>

The claim is that understanding the psychology as depicted (in the case of Anna Karenina, there is no other psychology) sometimes involves being self-conscious about one’s emotional reactions. If this is true, why would it not apply to the depiction of actual psychologies? When we read, our understanding of actual psychologies is through the words in front of us. If emotional reactions have a role in understanding Anna Karenina’s psychology as depicted, what could be the reason for them not having a role in understanding an actual psychology as depicted? In both cases one is feeling one’s way into the mind of a represented character. Separatists who think that understanding a text requires psychological interaction with the characters portrayed therein would have to argue that this applies only to some texts (the fictional ones) and not others (the non-fictional ones) and it is not obvious to me how they would do this.

### 8.3 Three Points of Contention

To force this point home, I shall consider three separatist arguments from a paper by Tom Petraschka: “How Empathy with Fictional Characters Differs from Empathy with Real Persons”. Here is Petraschka’s (2021, 228) first argument.

We have to base our assessment of her affective state on our *interpretation* of the text. And since there are cases where two optimal-yet-contradictory interpretations of a literary text exist, a situation like this can occur: According to optimal interpretation (1), character C is in an affective state a; according to optimal interpretation (2), C is in affective state b. Since no better interpretation (3) exists, I would argue that reader 1 (following interpretation [1]) and reader 2 (following interpretation [2]) are both empathising with C, although their affective states are completely different. Compare this to an analogous case of empathy with a real person, especially one where we, for example, read a factual text about a real person P. In such a case, there is no room for two optimal-yet-contradictory interpretations. There is a simple “fact of the matter” that decides whether empathy with P occurs.

This can be reconstructed as follows.

The following is true of fictional texts and not true of non-fictional texts: (a) when empathizing with a character the reader empathizes with the character’s affective state as represented; (b) how the character’s affective state is represented is a function of how the text is interpreted; (c) there can be equally optimal and incompatible interpretations of the text with respect to that affective state; thus, (d) there can be equally optimal and incompatible representations of a character’s affective state; thus (e) it is possible that there are two readers of whom it is true that they are empathizing with the character, but whose mental states are different.

In a fiction, the psychology of the character is manifest in the depiction and what is manifest constitutes the psychology of the character. Petraschka is surely right that different interpretations can give rise to different psychologies, and hence there is scope for there to be two readers each to empathize with one of the two psychologies. In a non-fiction, the psychology of the character is manifest in the depiction, but that is not what constitutes the psychology of the character. Their psychology is, obviously, something that exists outside of the text and in the actual world. Hence, unlike in the case of fiction, there are (potentially) three options for readers of non-fiction when it comes to empathy. They can (1) empathize with the psychology as depicted; (2) empathize with the individual’s actual psychology; or (3) we can assume that the depiction necessarily tracks the actual psychology, in which case empathizing with the psychology as depicted

will be empathizing with the actual psychology. Option (3) assumes that non-fictional representations provide transparent access to reality. A forceful denial of this claim can be found in the works of Hayden White (1987). Although White is prone to exaggeration, the core of his view is, I think, uncontroversial. Narratives embody perspectives and perspectives – by definition – give us a take on reality, rather than reality itself (see Goldie 2012, 13–25; Matravers 2022). There is no necessary connection between the psychology as depicted and the actual psychology.

This leaves us with (1) and (2). To think that (2) is the appropriate option would be to fall into the error, previously identified, of mistaking the representation/confrontation distinction for the fiction/non-fiction distinction. Our concern is with characters as depicted in a (fictional or non-fictional) narrative. Recall what was said above: reading a book involves building a situation model of the content of that book, which would include the various psychological relations we have to the characters in that book. Hence, in reading a book about the Suez Crisis (say, Robert Rhodes James's *Anthony Eden*) the relevant affective state is that which is incorporated into the situation model: that is, to Eden *as depicted* (in Rhodes James's book he is depicted sympathetically). The actual state of mind of the actual Eden plays no role in the psychology of the reader. Hence, in the above reconstruction of Petraschka's argument, (a) and (b) are equally true of non-fictional texts. I am happy to concede that, in general, non-fictional texts are less prone to there being equally optimal and incompatible interpretations of a character's affective state (although there are instances<sup>3</sup>) but it is not clear why that would be relevant. It would still be true that, in both cases, the reader empathized with the character *as interpreted* – the difference would only be that, in the fictional case, there are sometimes equally optimal and incompatible representations of a character's affective state while, in the non-fictional case, that is generally not true – but so what?

Petraschka's second separatist argument turns on the claim that fictions are an aesthetic artefact and thus our attention ought to be drawn to their aesthetic structure rather than engaging with characters and generating empathetic states.

To recognize a fiction as literature means to recognize it as an artwork. And the recognition of an artefact as an artwork comes with the obligation to treat it as an artwork, or, as it is usually phrased, to appreciate it as an artwork [...]. Emotional engagement in general is likely to distract the reader from the aesthetic qualities of an artwork. And since empathy can be understood as one way of engaging with a character, this danger translates into empathetic engagement.

(Petraschka 2021, 229)

Here is my reconstruction of the argument:

(a) We are obliged to treat fictions as artworks; (b) treating a text as an artwork means attending to its aesthetic qualities; (c) emotional reactions to characters distract readers from attending to aesthetic qualities; hence, (d) in fiction, we should not indulge in emotional reactions to characters.

I shall dwell at length on this argument as it rests on much of what is at issue between myself and the separatists. Its evaluation will require us to consider three questions. The first will be to establish some groundwork: namely, are there aesthetic qualities that are peculiar to fiction? That is, aesthetic properties that are characteristic of fiction, and not shared with non-fiction? The second is whether our obligations with respect to aesthetic qualities differ, depending on whether we are reading as fiction or reading as non-fiction. That is, are we obliged to attend to aesthetic properties when reading fiction in a way in which we are not so obliged when reading non-fiction? The third is whether, if so, feeling an emotion is a distraction when reading fiction in a way in which it is not when reading non-fiction.

What are the aesthetic qualities of fiction, and do they differ from the qualities of non-fiction? Petraschka gives a list, taken from the work of Susan Feagin (2010, 636): “the character of the writing, the structure of the plot, the subtle handling of the themes, the vividness and intricacy of its detail”. In addition, he gives the following from Peter Lamarque. In treating a text as an art, we

[a]ttend to the character as an integral part of a linguistic artifact. Other elements, literary elements, come into play. To understand Anna [Karenina], on this conception, is to understand the thematic, symbolic, and meaning-laden relations that the character-as-described enters into with other characters and other incidents in the novel.

(Lamarque 2011, 310)

Let us distinguish two ways of engaging with a text, distinguished by the different properties of the text on which our attention is focussed. The first set of properties are those described above as “aesthetic qualities”. The second set of properties are the succession of states of affairs as represented in the text. Taking *Sense and Sensibility* as our example, the latter would include Marianne not hearing from Willoughby; his failure to acknowledge their relationship at the ball; his returning her letters and tokens; her distress. I shall co-opt some old terminology and refer to the former set of properties as “form” and the latter set as “content”.<sup>4</sup>

Does fiction differ from non-fiction in terms of its aesthetic qualities? Non-fictions, along with fictions, are constructed narratives. Looking back on the quotation from Feagin and substituting “story” for “plot” so as not to beg the question, the author of a non-fiction text has no option but to attend to “the character of the writing, the structure of the [story], the subtle handling of the themes, the vividness and intricacy of its detail”. Any non-fiction will, as a result, have the correlative aesthetic properties to some degree, and the best non-fictions (like the best fictions) will have them to some great degree (we need think only of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Lawrence’s *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Runciman’s *The Crusades*). There is nothing here to suggest that we have identified properties possessed by fiction that are not shared with non-fiction.

In reply, Petraschka might argue that Feagin’s list does not exhaust the relevant aesthetic properties. The elements Lamarque lists, “thematic, symbolic, and meaning-laden relations”, may be thought to apply particularly to fiction rather than to non-fiction. Do non-fictions have “thematic, symbolic, and meaning-laden relations”? Consider the themes of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, which Lamarque discusses in his contribution to this volume. Amongst them will be themes of fate and of relations between the sexes. There are, obviously, countless non-fictions with such themes. Perhaps Lamarque’s claim is that it is only in fictions that themes can play a constitutive role (I shall leave aside what exactly is ‘a constitutive role’). Let us grant that it is a mistake to think that themes have a constitutive role in lived lives (for discussions of this see (Lamarque 2014) and (Goldie 2012, 150–173)) but, as I have said before, that is not the point. The question is whether, *pace* Lamarque, it is possible that themes can play the role they play in (some) non-fictions that they play in (some) fictions. The answer is, surely, that it is possible. Indeed, one reason to embark on writing a biography (or a history, for that matter) is the thought that there are generalizable truths about the human condition to convey. To write a book that uses the story of a life as an exemplar of such a generalizable truth would be to write a book that has that as a constitutive theme.<sup>5</sup>

An author gives a narrative a theme by arranging the events of the narrative in a certain way and describing them in a certain way so as to make salient certain relations between the properties of those events. This can be done with non-fictional content as much as it can be done with fictional content. That is right as far as it goes, however, there is nonetheless a relevant difference between non-fiction and fiction with respect to content. The content of non-fictions is given by what the author believed actually happened and the content of non-fictions is not; it is created. In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* Hardy creates the event of Alec’s rape of Tess, her relation to Angel, and her arrest by a group of policemen in order to make content available to him so that he is then able to explore the themes of

the different natures of male domination of women. Thus, the thematic properties are more deeply part of the created structure of a fiction than they are of a non-fiction. For this reason, there are more aspects of form to which the reader can pay attention when reading fiction compared to that available when reading non-fiction. The extent to which this constitutes a difference with respect to our empathetic reactions to fictional and to non-fictional characters will be answered below.

Let us consider Lamarque's second element, symbolism. Lamarque discusses the mud and fog at the beginning of *Bleak House* being a symbol for decay, but there is no reason to think that using one thing to stand for another is the sole province of fiction (Lamarque 2014, 73). For a pithy example, consider Winston Churchill's description of Arthur Balfour's betrayal of Asquith.

He passed from one Cabinet to another, from the Prime Minister who was his champion to the Prime Minister who had been his most severe critic, like a powerful, graceful cat walking delicately and unsoiled across a rather muddy street.

(Churchill 1942, 185).

Perhaps the thought is that symbolism can be part of what makes something fictional in a way that it cannot be part of what makes something non-fiction. In George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, part of what constitutes the fictionality is that the farm is a symbol for the Soviet Union. However, analogous symbolism can lie at the heart of non-fictions. Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* is, on the surface, an argument to solve the problems of Ireland through cannibalism. It is, of course, a satire and is understood by understanding that the recommendations are symbolic of government policies of the time. One would miss the point of the title of the first volume of Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, if one did not take the caged bird as symbolic of the situation of African-Americans in 1940s America. Furthermore, the limited disanalogy we found in the case of themes (invented as opposed to discovered content) does not apply here, as all symbolism is invented.

Finally, let us consider "meaning-laden relations". This is, clearly, a broad heading that could cover a variety of phenomena. I shall take it to mean that the author can arrange the events in their narrative in a way that brings out "meaningful" (that is, more than causal) links between them. If this is what Lamarque means, it is not the sole province of fiction. Authors of fiction can make limited choices as to the order in which they represent events but, barring science fiction, the events will need to be represented as having happened in some order. For example, in the original *Tender is the Night*, Scott Fitzgerald began the book halfway through the

story he represents; armed with this knowledge, readers can see the first half of the story – when they eventually encounter it – as building inexorably to a certain peak. However, employing (to use the Russian formalist terms) the distinction between *fabula* (the story) and *syuzhet* (the order in which it is represented) is not the exclusive province of fictional narratives. Here are some examples at random from my bookshelf. Carl Breihan's *The Complete and Authentic Life of Jesse James* begins with a death; not even the death of James but the death in 1951 of the last person who claimed, fraudulently, to be James. This throws the rest of the book into sharp relief, bringing out the mythologizing tendency of those who think too much about cowboys. Peter Hopkirk begins his *The Great Game* (about the shadowy struggle between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia over central Asia) with an event that somehow symbolizes it all – the execution of Stoddart and Connolly in Bukhara in 1842. Writers of non-fiction can “break the rules” in other ways as well. In his travel book, *Old Calabria*, Norman Douglas devotes an entire chapter to reporting, without scepticism, the tale of Joseph of Copertino and his remarkable ability to fly. This puts the other events in the book in a different light and emphasizes the heroic nature of that part of the world's resistance to modernity. Writers of non-fiction are perfectly able to use both form and content to create meaning-laden relations. Thus, while not denying differences, it is difficult to force systematic distinctions between fiction and non-fiction by appeal to the aesthetic properties listed.

Let us move on to our second question. Are we obliged to attend to both form and content when reading fiction in a way in which we are not so obliged when reading non-fiction? In the literature on pictorial representation, there is a great deal of discussion of viewers' need to engage with both the surface of the painting (the “configurational aspect”) and what is depicted therein (the “recognitional aspect”).<sup>6</sup> There is no comparable discussion of the need of readers to engage with both the form and content of a written representation.<sup>7</sup> Hence, we lack a clear sense of what is going on when readers split their attention in this way. I am not able to provide this here. For our purposes, we can simply bracket that question, and consider the reasons we have to focus on both form and content. The issue is whether we have such reasons when we read fiction and do not have such reasons when we read non-fiction.

Scepticism over whether readers of non-fiction need attend to form is grounded, I will assume, in the claim that (a) the function of non-fiction is the communication of information and (b) the communication of information does not require attending to form. Let us consider these in turn.

It is the status of (a) that seems to be the crucial issue between separatists such as Lamarque and Petraschka and myself. Lamarque sums up the separatist view as follows:



With biographies and autobiographies, it will not be uncommon for readers to attend, and be invited to attend, to the narrative vehicle. This, though, is largely dictated by broader literary concerns with fine writing and stylistic effect. Like all fact-stating discourses, biographies aim to transmit information and are primarily constrained by ‘getting it right’.

(Lamarque 2014, 78)

As the primary concern is ‘getting it right’ empathy with characters of non-fiction will be at best a bonus, possibly a distraction. However, what reason is there to believe the primary concern of people who read non-fiction is the acquisition of information? People read non-fiction for different reasons and which reason is primary is an empirical matter. My belief is that readers are motivated to read non-fictions for broadly similar reasons to those that motivate them to read fictions. Since we started gathering around the campfire, human beings have told each other stories. There are various (often overlapping) genres of stories: histories, historical novels, realist fiction, science fiction, and so on. These genres have different relations to truth: realist fiction should pay heed to the laws of nature, science fiction less so; non-fiction should attend to what actually happened, fiction less so.<sup>8</sup> However, they are all just stories and should be treated as stories. What separatists take to be a root-and-branch rationale is in fact only a genre convention (Friend 2012).

Which of these two views is correct is, as I have said, an empirical matter. The separatist view has the advantage of simplicity, so why should we even consider my suggested alternative? Unlike the separatist view, it can explain phenomena such as the following. Pick any work of popular history off your shelf and read the quotations from reviews. They will not be of the form ‘contains a great many facts’ but are likely to be of the form: ‘a page turner’, ‘reads like a novel’, ‘it is almost as if you can hear Napoleon in the next room’. This suggests that the primary reason people read fiction is consonant with the primary reason they read non-fiction: to get lost in the world of the story. I can enlist some powerful testimony on my behalf. In the preface to his biography of Augustus John, Michael Holroyd writes:

Biography is no longer simply an instrument of information retrieval, though historical and cultural information that is retrieved from these expeditions is a bonus. The biographer’s prime purpose is to recreate a world into which readers may enter and where, interpreting messages from the past, they may experience feelings and thoughts that remain with them after the book is closed.

(Holroyd 2011, xxxiii)

The same point is made, with greater charm, by T.E. Lawrence at the beginning of his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*:

Half-way through the labour of an index to this book I recalled the practice of my ten years' study of history; and realised I had never used the index of a book fit to read. Who would insult his *Decline and Fall*, by consulting it just upon a specific point?

(Lawrence 1939, 7).

If the primary purpose of a story is what explains why we pick it off the shelf and start to read it, then the primary purpose of any story worth the read is not to transmit information, but to engross us, to transport us to a world that is not our own.<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, part of such a transportation will be the construction of a situation model which features psychological relations to characters, including empathy.

In the light of the rejection of (a), let us consider (b) as a question that applies to all genres: to the extent that a story (any story) engages in the transmission of information, would it follow that there is less reason to attend to its form? To answer this question, we need to be more specific about what we mean by "information". If we simply mean facts (the city of Akaba was captured in 1917) then form is not important. However, the narrative form provides richer resources for understanding than the simple transmission of facts; that could be done as effectively (or more effectively) by an annal or a chronicle. This potential of narrative is brought out in this definition by Peter Goldie.

A narrative is a representation of events which is shaped, organised and coloured, presenting those events, and the people involved in them, from a certain perspective or perspectives, and thereby giving narrative structure – coherence, meaningfulness, and evaluative and emotional import, to what is narrated.

(Goldie 2012, 8)

A narrative is coherent, in that it reveals "connections between the related events, and it does so in a way that a mere list or annal, or chronicle, does not". It has internal meaningfulness; that is, "making sense of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people who are internal to the narrative". Finally, there is evaluative and emotional import: "things matter to people, and a narrative involving people can capture the way things matter to them" (Goldie 2012, 14–25).

Narrative form, then, can help provide a reader with an understanding of the events related. To revert to our example, it can put the recapture of Akaba into the context of the Arab Revolt, the First World War, the

decline of the Ottoman empire, the growth of Arab consciousness, T.E. Lawrence's psychological state, and colonialism. It can make clear why it happened as it happened, what it was like to be there, why people cared, the historical import of the event and so on and so forth. If this is what is meant by "information" then there is little or no intuitive force to the claim that the form in which the content is conveyed is irrelevant. A narrative is able to convey the kind of information it is able to convey precisely because it has what a list, annal, or chronicle, lack: namely, form.

This brings us, finally, to the third question: whether feeling an emotion is a distraction when reading fiction in a way in which it is not when reading non-fiction. The argument that it is a distraction when reading fiction turns on what it is to engage appropriately with a text. In his contribution to this volume, Peter Lamarque, building on the classic paper by Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy", argues that the aim of criticism is understanding "the meaning and achievement" of a text. By this Lamarque means something like understanding how the content emerges from the form and how particular affects are achieved (this is not meant to be exhaustive). Hence, the actual felt emotion (the "tears, prickles or physiological symptoms") are, if not a distraction, only the starting point of enquiry (Lamarque, in this volume). The critical reader's task is to understand how, or whether, such a reaction is justified by the text. Let us grant that this is the function of criticism. Having established that fiction and non-fiction share at least some aesthetic properties, and that the obligations to attend to such properties do not differ between fiction and non-fiction, it follows that there is no reason to think that the critical appraisal appropriate to *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* will necessarily differ from the critical appraisal appropriate to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. If the critics' task is to understand the meaning and achievement of the text, why should it matter whether the text is fictional or non-fictional? In both cases the "tears, prickles or physiological symptoms" will only be a starting point for greater critical exploration.

I have dwelt at length on Petraschka's second argument, as it is built on deep differences between our two views. The final argument, with turns on degrees of difficulty, can be dealt with more quickly. He sums up the position thus:

Literature makes empathy with its protagonists both harder and easier at the same time. The situations that characters find themselves in and the emotional states they experience are very often extreme or special. This makes it hard to empathize with them. The extensive amount of effort needed to empathize with them, however, is then lessened by the means literature typically employs to facilitate empathy [...].

(Petraschka 2021, 230)

In as much as we empathize with characters, this seems correct. However, there is clearly nothing in there that suggests a distinction between fiction and non-fiction. It is true that Dostoyevsky enables us to feel some psychological affinity with Raskolnikov, but it is also true that David Crane enables us to feel some psychological affinity with Robert Falcon Scott in his biography of the great explorer. That, to put it bluntly, this is one of the things that books do.

I think it is telling in Petraschka's paper that although his title promises one distinction – "How Empathy with *Fictional Characters* Differs from Empathy with Real Persons" – his arguments generally argue for another. His conclusion is that "empathy with characters is special and differs from empathy with persons" (agreed) and his final section, headed "Conclusion", does not mention "fiction" at all (Petraschka 2021, 230). Indeed, if the arguments of this chapter are correct, Petraschka's paper would be more profitably read as a reasoned defence of the distinction between empathy for represented characters and empathy for characters encountered face-to-face.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, my argument is that if we are engaging with a representation, we meet characters depicted in that representation via the descriptions that are given to them. Our psychological interactions with such characters are part and parcel with our representing them to ourselves, via those descriptions. This is true whether the representations are fictional or non-fictional. Hence, the big divide – if there is a divide – is not between empathy felt for characters in fiction and empathy felt for characters in non-fiction, but empathy felt for characters in representations and empathy felt for characters in confrontations.<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Walton thought the confusion had been "amply realized" in 1990; it is difficult to think of words to describe the situation since.
- 2 Peter Lamarque discusses Robinson's example in his contribution to this collection, disagreeing with her claim that, with respect to narrative, felt emotion precedes understanding. I take no view on that here; my point is, *pace* Lamarque, that whatever is said applies to both fiction and non-fiction. I discuss Lamarque's own views below.
- 3 Hemingway, as represented in Carlos Baker's biography, seems to me a case in point (Baker 1969).
- 4 This distinction is similar to that which underpins Peter Lamarque's distinction between the "internal" and the "external" perspective we can take on a text, and that which underpins Patrick Colm Hogan's distinction between "fiction emotions" and "artefact emotions". Neither Lamarque's nor Hogan's distinctions will serve my purpose as they (mistakenly in my view) import elements of the fiction/non-fiction distinction in making them (see Lamarque and Olsen 1994, 143–148; Hogan 2018, 98, Lamarque in this volume).
- 5 Thus, it is no surprise to find biographies with titles such as the following: *Churchill: A Study in Failure (1900–1939)* or *A Spirit Undaunted: The Political Role of George VI*.

- 6 The literature on this is vast. The starting point is Wollheim (1980).
- 7 The various positions taken in the literature on pictorial representations also seem options for written representations. For example, Ernst Gombrich (1977) held that viewers alternate between the two – a view which seems to be held by Peter Lamarque. However, there seems room for an analogue of Richard Wollheim’s view that there is a single complex experience that covers both aspects.
- 8 As Stacie Friend points out, these conventions are not immutable. In the Ancient World, history had a more flexible relation to truth than it does now (Friend 2012).
- 9 The view I hold has an undischarged debt to explain why there is a genre that has a close relation to truth – what is the point of history? I hope to solve this problem (also noted by Walton) in future work (Walton 1990, 96).
- 10 Petraschka’s paper is one of four in a symposium on “Empathy and Literature”, all of which take themselves to be dealing with the fictional. The arguments of the other three papers, while framed as being about fictions, apply indifferently to fictions and non-fictions.
- 11 This chapter was originally given at a conference in Duisburg in May 2022. I would like to thank Christiana Werner and Tom Petraschka for their invitation, and to both of them and Peter Lamarque for comments. The editors provided valuable feedback on my draft. Despite my attempts to address his concerns, I fear Petraschka remains unconvinced. Hence, I should stress that errors, omissions, and rank implausibilities are solely my responsibility.

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# 9 “Tell me, how does it feel?”

## Learning what it is like through literature

*Christiana Werner*

### 9.1 Introduction

Can we learn from literature what it is like to have an experience (WIL-knowledge) of a kind we never had before? It seems to be a quite common idea outside academic debates that we can learn what it is like to be in a specific situation by means of reading works of literature.

Independently of the problem of fiction as a source of knowledge, it is unclear whether it is at all possible to gain WIL-knowledge by reading or listening to other people’s non-fictional descriptions of their experiences. Most participants in debates about phenomenal consciousness in philosophy of mind answer this question negatively. In a Lewisian line, L.A. Paul claims that we cannot know what it is like to have experiences like being a parent or a woman in Ethiopia unless we undergo these experiences (Paul 2014). On the other hand, philosophers who believe that we can gain WIL-knowledge without having the experience highlight the role of imagination, simulation, or empathy (Wiltsher 2021; Kind 2020; Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo 2021, Berninger in this volume).

Literature, obviously, does not need to be fictional. However, the great psychological novels which seem to be good candidates to learn what it is like for their characters to go through their experiences, are fictional. In fictional literature, the stories and the characters of the work are invented by the author. They neither need nor in many cases actually do rely on facts. Therefore, it is unclear if and how we can learn from a consciously invented narrative at all. Literary cognitivists in debates about the epistemic value of works of fiction argue, however, that we can learn by means of reading fictional literature. But then “learning” in this context usually means gaining propositional knowledge, not WIL-knowledge.

In order to investigate whether readers can learn from fictional literature what it is like to be in a specific situation we accordingly need to answer two main questions:

- 1) How can we gain WIL-knowledge by means of reading a text/a work of literature at all?

- 2) If WIL-knowledge transfer is at all possible by means of non-fictional sources, is it also possible to gain WIL-knowledge from fiction?

This chapter aims to answer these questions and proceeds as follows: as a first step, I will clarify the notion of what-it-is-like-knowledge. Second, I will distinguish three ways in which the term “experience” is frequently used. The interesting cases for our purposes here are what I call complex conscious states. In line with Amy Kind, I argue that skilled imaginers can imaginatively put components of such a complex state together. This “imaginative scaffolding” together with the relevant distinctions in hand allow us to turn to the question of how we can gain WIL-knowledge of these complex conscious states by means of other people’s descriptions of their experiences. The idea is relatively simple: readers can imaginatively put components of another person’s experience together. If they do that according to the other person’s testimony, they can gain WIL-knowledge of the phenomenal character of this person’s experience. Some non-fictional works of literature are testimonies of experiences in a relevant sense. Literary works of fiction in contrast can be a source of true beliefs about real people’s experiences, but I will argue that for pragmatic reasons, they cannot be a reliable source of WIL-knowledge. However, literary works of fiction can be a source of WIL-knowledge of the fictional character’s experience. But more importantly these works can be a source of WIL-knowledge of possible experiences, that is, experiences real people could have in situations which are relevantly similar to those described in the work.

## 9.2 The Locution of “What It Is Like”

I do not claim that WIL-knowledge transfer is the only aim, or is even among the most important aims of literature. But it seems that at least every now and then, people read literature in order to learn about what it is like to be a soldier in war, a parent separated from their child, or any one of an innumerable list of experiences.

In order to answer the question, of whether WIL-knowledge can be transferred by means of literature, I want to start by distinguishing three different uses of the “what it is like”-locution. First, if, for example, a teacher is asked what it is like to be a teacher in times of the pandemic, one appropriate answer could be something like “I suddenly had to teach online, which was very difficult, because my school was technically not prepared for this and neither were the kids at home”. This response is of course not an exhaustive answer to the question, but nevertheless appropriate. One important initial observation is that in everyday conversations “what it is like” is not only used to refer to the phenomenal character of



mental states. As the example shows, it is often not even used to refer to psychological states at all. Instead, descriptions of the external situation can be an appropriate way of describing what it is like to be in a specific situation. Beliefs (or knowledge) about the external situation of a person (e.g. technical problems with online teaching) are propositionally structured. Hence these beliefs (or knowledge) provide no specific problems for transfer via testimony.

Second, a “what it is like”-question might be answered by means of describing a psychological state or psychological reactions to a specific situation. The teacher could also potentially answer the question thus: “At the beginning of the pandemic I was very nervous and stressed, because the online lessons were new to me and to my pupils. I was worried that I was not able to prepare the pupils for their exams”. This answer delivers information about the teacher’s mental state in the relevant situation. We learn that she was “nervous”, “stressed” and “worried”. Y. Cath calls merely propositionally structured knowledge about a person’s mental state the “Bronze-standard” of knowing what it is like to be in a specific situation (Cath 2019, 16).<sup>1</sup> We can know in a non-phenomenal way that a person is in a specific mental state. Although this information is about the teacher’s mental states, there is no reason to doubt that this sort of knowledge generates any specific problems for a transfer via testimony, because it is, or at least can be, merely propositionally structured.

Both (1) descriptions of a person’s external situation or circumstances and (2) descriptions of psychological states of a person are appropriate answers to “what it is like”-questions in everyday contexts. Because beliefs about (1) and (2) are or can be merely propositionally structured, we found two possible ways of talking about what it is like to be in a specific situation which provide no (or at least no specific) problems for knowledge transfer by means of testimony. Although (1) and (2) can be appropriate answers to “what it is like”- questions in everyday contexts, knowledge about a person’s external circumstances and non-phenomenal knowledge about a person’s mental state should be distinguished from what I call in this chapter “WIL-knowledge”.

In what follows, I will use the term “WIL-knowledge” in the narrow sense of phenomenal knowledge, i.e. knowing a state phenomenally. There are many different ways in which WIL-knowledge is analyzed. I will assume that for WIL-knowledge someone needs to know the phenomenal character of an experience. By means of experiencing a new mental state with a phenomenal character, the experiencer gains new WIL-knowledge. For the sake of simplicity, I will assume that the experience of a mental state is not only a necessary, but also a sufficient condition for WIL-knowledge, although I am rather sceptical that this is indeed true. Much more needs to be said about the sufficient conditions of WIL-knowledge. I will further

assume that by means of experiencing a mental state we acquire new phenomenal concepts. These phenomenal concepts can be part of propositions (for an overview, see Alter and Walter 2006). Hence people can have beliefs with a propositional content which contains a phenomenal concept.

If a person has had a colour perception of a red object, she has the phenomenal concept “red”. As a result, she can (for example) believe that the car in front of the house is “red”, where “red” is a phenomenal concept. This person knows in a phenomenal way that there is a red car in front of the house. In contrast, a person who has never seen a red object in her life and has not gained the phenomenal concept “red” can only form the corresponding belief that the car in front of the house is red\*, where red\* is just a physical concept.

### 9.3 “Experience”: Three Distinctions

The term “experience”, much as “what it is like”, is used in many different ways. For the purposes of this paper, we have to distinguish two ways in which the kinds of experiences referenced in Frank Jackson’s original knowledge argument differ from the kinds of experience at issue here (the experience of being a teacher in times of the pandemic, being a soldier in war, being victim of oppression, and so on).

The first thing to notice is that the original debate in the philosophy of mind typically focuses on WIL-knowledge of some particular mental state, such as that of seeing something red. A possible reason for this is that many contributions to this debate refer directly to Jackson’s “Mary” thought experiment. In this famous paper Jackson uses colour perception as an example for a conscious mental state with a phenomenal character (Jackson 1982). I will assume that there are mental states with a single phenomenal character where this phenomenal character has no further phenomenal components or are “undifferentiated wholes” (Kind 2020, 144). For this reason, I call these states “atomic conscious states”. I assume colour perception, taste and many affective states are atomic in this sense.

It is important to see that such experiences of single perceptual properties differ both in their immediacy and lack of complexity from the experiences invoked when people talk of what it is like to go to war or to be separated from your own child (see Kind 2020).

In order to characterize the second way of using the term experience, we can return to Mary and extend the story a little and think more about Mary’s experience of leaving her black-and-white room for the first time. After all, she was imprisoned her entire life and has never seen any coloured objects. Let us assume that she is thrilled, surprised and deeply moved by seeing something red for the first time (see Paul 2014). Mary’s state is multi-layered: she has different emotional or affective states, certain beliefs

and desires and perceives different things, all more or less at the same time. She is, as I will call it, in a complex conscious state. The phenomenal character of this complex conscious state is a composition of its components (see Bayne 2010).

When we use the locution of experience to refer to such a state, we also refer to an experience which lasts only for a relatively short time. The examples named above, such as the experience of being a soldier in war, are by contrast experiences that last much longer. We usually do not mean by “the experience of being a soldier” a state a person is in for a short moment of time, such as “the experience of leaving the black-and-room for the first time”.

So far, I have proposed that the term “experience” refers to mental states; sometimes to atomic conscious states, sometimes to complex conscious states. For both, it is plausible to assume that they have a specific phenomenal character. For a soldier in war, it would be odd to assume that this person is constantly, probably over years, either in one and the same atomic conscious state or in the same complex conscious states. This person will have different perceptual states over time and will react psychologically in various ways to several aspects of the situations she will find herself in. For this reason, I suggest that she is in a series of complex conscious states. Such a series, however, does not generate a new phenomenal character in addition to the phenomenal character of each single complex state of the series.

#### 9.4 WIL-knowledge of Atomic, Complex, and Series of Complex States

Jackson claims that we cannot know what it is like to be in a conscious mental state unless we experience this state. Jackson’s Mary thought experiment has or is supposed to have important metaphysical implications, because Mary is a super scientist with knowledge about all physical facts. Roughly, the claim is that, if Mary does not know what it is like to see something red before she has actually seen something red, there must be a non-physical fact she learns about. For the purposes of this chapter, the metaphysical questions of the debate about Jackson’s thought experiment and conscious states in general are unimportant. Even physicalists in this debate, who argue that Mary does not learn anything new when she leaves her black-and-white prison, can accept that ordinary people without Mary’s knowledge learn something new when they are in a conscious state they have never been in before. In these debates it is also widely agreed that we cannot learn by means of testimony and (fictional) stories what it is like to have an experience. It is of great importance to highlight that this consensus is about WIL-knowledge of what I call atomic conscious states.

Like A. Kind, I will accept that we cannot gain WIL-knowledge of atomic conscious states without having the experience of such a state. I will further assume that by experiencing an atomic conscious state, we also learn what it is like for someone else to be in exactly this atomic conscious state (Nida-Rümelin 1998). This means, when Mary leaves her black-and-white room and perceives a red object for the first time, she learns what it is like for other people to see the same nuance of red, *ceteris paribus*. What the *ceteris paribus* conditions are for learning what it is like for somebody else to be in a particular atomic conscious state depends on the type of atomic conscious state. For colour perception (for example), we can assume that people have the same form of visual apparatus, there are similar light conditions and so on.

Let us turn again to the example of Mary and the experience of leaving her black-and-white room for the first time. Some of the components of her complex conscious state are perceptions, some are emotional, some doxastic and conative states. In particular, emotional reactions towards aspects of a situation seem to depend highly on things such as a person's character traits, their biography and so on. Therefore, we can assume that different people will react differently and even the same person can react at different times differently to the same or a very similar situation. For example, if Jack was, like Mary, trapped in a black-and-white room and leaves it for the first time, it is possible and likely that Jack would react differently. Thus, his complex conscious state has different components than Mary's complex conscious state. This means “the experience of leaving the black-and-white room for the first time” refers to complex conscious states with different components when we use it to refer to Mary's or Jack's experiences. If the phenomenal character of a complex conscious state is, as I suggest, composed of the phenomenal characters of its components, Mary's experience of leaving her black-and-white room for the first time teaches her what it is like for her to leave the black-and-white room for the first time. It does not teach her what it is like for Jack to have the same type of experience, because his experience of leaving the black-and-white room is a complex conscious state with different components and so most likely has a different phenomenal character.

The obvious fact that Mary and Jack react differently might be missed because of the fact that we called both of their experiences “the experience of leaving the black-and-white room for the first time”. As noted in section 9.3, we often type experiences by non-mental features and it is important to note that the similarities we highlight by using the same location are very often only similarities of non-mental features (e.g. “leaving a black-and-white room”). Because people can react quite differently, their complex states have different components and thus often, if not always, different phenomenal characters. For this reason, there is no

unique phenomenal character of experiences like the experience of leaving the black-and-white room for the first time. And it is moreover for this reason that by means of having the experience of leaving the black-and-white room for the first time Mary does not learn what it is like for Jack or anybody else to leave the black-and-white room for the first time. Having said this, it is of course important to note that there might nevertheless be similarities in people's emotional reactions and it might even be that many people react in the same emotional way to specific situations. It is however not very likely that all of the components of a complex state are exactly the same and so it is very likely that the phenomenal character of the complex state will even differ in cases where people have the same emotional reaction.

I have suggested that experiences like being a soldier in war are best described as a series of complex states. Since there is no additional phenomenal character of such a series, there is or can be only WIL-knowledge of the atomic or complex conscious states which are components of the series. There might be situations which are in one way or another typical or characteristic of, or important for being a soldier in war or any other prolonged experience. If this is the case, then people might have the phenomenal character of their complex conscious state in this typical, important or characteristic situation in mind, when they talk about "what it is like to be a soldier in war".

### 9.5 Mental State Prediction and WIL-knowledge

In sections 9.3 and 9.4, I argued that we often type experiences not by referring to mental states, but to non-mental features of a person's situation. Because people react differently to their immediate situation, the fact that two people undergo an experience individuated in this way, as in the example of the experience of leaving the black-and-white room, does not mean that these two people are or were in the same complex conscious state. Further, one and the same person might react differently at different times. Most likely they were in different complex conscious states, and hence the phenomenal character of their states will most likely differ. For this reason, the experience of such an experience as leaving the black-and-white room is not a source of WIL-knowledge of other people's experience or of future experiences of the same person. It seems, however, that the situation would be different, if a person knows the components of her future complex state.

Let us turn once again to Mary and change the story again slightly. If Mary is not only a super physicist, but also an omniscient psychologist with all-encompassing knowledge about her own psychological reactions, she would be able to predict the way in which she reacts to her first colour

perception. If Mary was thrilled, surprised and deeply moved in her life before, she would not only know the way in which she will react, but she will also know what it is like for her to be thrilled, surprised and deeply moved. This means that she will be surprised by the phenomenal character of her experience of seeing something red, but she will not be surprised that she is surprised. Because she knows her psychological reactions to her first colour perception and because she has been in those states before which constitute her reaction, she also knows what it will be like for her to react to seeing a red rose for the first time.

The extended Mary thought experiment shows that we need to distinguish between (a) knowing how somebody reacts psychologically and (b) knowing what it is like to undergo these psychological reactions. Moreover, the extended Mary thought experiment shows that (a) and (b) can come apart. Knowing how a person reacts psychologically or knowing that a person is in a specific psychological state can be, as we have already seen, merely propositionally structured. As such this knowledge provides no specific problems for transfer by means of testimony. For people without all-encompassing psychological knowledge it is, however, difficult to predict how somebody will react, even how one will react herself to an input or to being in a certain mental state. Empirical evidence suggests that people are in general not very good at predicting their own psychological and especially emotional reactions to a situation (see Maibom 2016, 2018). One reason why it is difficult to predict psychological reactions is the complexity of human psychology. Heidi Maibom mentions a further problem, namely the tendency of people to imagine how they should react emotionally in a specific situation, instead of how they would. How we think we should react and how we actually react can of course differ greatly (Maibom 2018), hence people rarely predict the reactions they will have. If we could predict or know how we will react to something, which is occasionally possible especially if this is a psychological reaction we have had before, we know what it is like to have this reaction. If a person wants to know the phenomenal character of a complex experience, we need to distinguish two cases.

First, complex conscious states can consist of (some) components which the imaginer has never experienced herself. It seems likely that extreme external situations provoke often extreme psychological reactions. Being confronted with danger on a battlefield might provoke a kind of fear that is probably not provoked by something in peaceful situations. It seems very plausible to assume that an imaginer who has not previously been in every one of the conscious states that are components of the complex experience cannot, at least not completely, know the phenomenal character of this complex experience, even if she were in a position to know what the components are.

Second, complex conscious states can consist of mental states the imaginer was in before. In this case, like in the extended Mary thought

experiment, the imaginer knows what it is like to be in the relevant mental states. Unlike super-scientist Mary however, people – very often – do not know the components of their own future complex experience or of another person’s complex conscious state. But it seems that a person could know what it is like to have the complex experience, if she knew the components.

### 9.6 Imaginative Scaffolding

In debates about consciousness, the decisive function ascribed to knowledge of “what it is like” by conceptions such as the “ability” account (Lewis 1983, 1988; and in Nemirow 1980) and “phenomenal concepts” accounts (Balog 2012; Sundström 2011) is that such knowledge involves the agent’s ability to remember or imagine what it is like to be in a specific state. Further, Amy Kind (2020) argues that people are capable of what she calls imaginative scaffolding, which is roughly the capacity to put components of an experience imaginatively together. With distinctions between atomic and complex mental states in hand, we can now see how such imaginative scaffolding can work. Assuming that a person has both the ability for imaginative scaffolding and WIL-knowledge of the components of a complex experience, imagination can be a source of WIL-knowledge of complex experience the imaginer has not yet had.

The ability for imaginative scaffolding and WIL-knowledge are, however, necessary and not sufficient conditions for successfully imagining a future complex mental state. As we have already seen, the imaginer also needs to know what the components of the complex states are that she has to put imaginatively together. If the imaginer wants to know what it will be like for her to have a future experience, she therefore has to predict what the components of her future complex state will be. Even if it is true that people are not successful in predicting their own psychological states in a specific situation, still it may well be that someone succeeds in imagining her exact reaction and her exact complex state in a specific situation. Hence, she could form true beliefs about her future complex state. Although this is possible, this scenario seems to be a matter of luck. Therefore, imagination, it seems, cannot be a context of justification for beliefs about our own future complex states. Even if a person is epistemically lucky and acquires a true belief by means of imagining her future complex experience, it still would not count as knowledge.

### 9.7 Empathic Scaffolding and Non-fictional Literature

In the previous section we have seen that there is a way to imagine what it is like to be in a complex state one has not experienced before. We

have two necessary but not sufficient conditions: the imaginer needs WIL-knowledge of the components of the complex state and the general ability to put components of a complex state imaginatively together. So far I have discussed only the scenario in which a person tries to imagine her own future complex state. I argued that because of the complexity of human psychology and the fact mentioned by Heidi Maibom that people tend to imagine how they should react, people are not good at predicting their own psychological reactions. This means that it is not very likely that even a person who has WIL-knowledge of all the components of a future complex state will be able to put the components in her imagination correctly together. The attempt to imagine what it will be like to be in a specific future complex state fails in this case, not because of any arguable peculiarities of the phenomenal character of mental states or the WIL-knowledge of them, but only because the imaginer does not know what the components of her future complex state will be. The key would be to know or to correctly predict the components of a complex experience.

At this point other people's testimony of their experiences comes into play. In many works of non-fictional literature authors describe in detail their own experiences. Thus, these non-fictional works of literature, such as autobiographies, are a type of testimony. For the sake of simplicity, I take it for granted that readers can gain propositional knowledge from these non-fictional works of literature. If non-fictional literature contains descriptions of the author's experiences in the sense that she describes her complex mental states in specific situations, readers can gain propositional knowledge of the author's experiences.

We are, however, not interested in propositional knowledge transfer by means of literature. The question is whether readers can also gain WIL-knowledge. In order to understand how testimony can transfer WIL-knowledge, we need to see that forming beliefs is not the only way of responding adequately to testimony. There is a widely accepted view in aesthetics that fictional narratives are invitations to imagine the content of the fictional work (Currie 1990). Without going into the details of this account, it seems unproblematic to assume that we can not only imagine fictional content, but also the content of non-fictional descriptions of other people's experiences. It is further important at this point to note that readers do not only propositionally imagine the content of a work of literature. Readers can also imagine experientially. This can involve having mental pictures, sounds, and so on of what is described in the text. When it comes to descriptions of complex mental states, there is also a way of experientially imagining what it is like to be in the described states.

So far, I have discussed cases in which people imagine their own future state and we have found that will they most likely not imagine their future complex state correctly. Readers of works of literature are in a different



situation: they can use the descriptions of complex states they find in the works as a kind of instruction manual or script for imagining another person's complex experience, namely the author's complex experience.

This provides the key to explaining literature's and the imagination's role in coming to know what it is like to have a complex experience: the work of literature needs to detail those mental states that are components of the complex experience. Authors can name component states, but they can also use more literary ways, e.g. metaphors, to describe their complex conscious state in a specific situation. This does not mean that the descriptions somehow contain information about the phenomenal character of the experience. The transfer of WIL-knowledge of a complex conscious state requires cooperation on the part of the reader's imagination and proceeds as follows: the author can characterize her individual complex experience, at least in part by describing her relevant mental states. The reader, an agent without this complex experience, can use the author's descriptions as an instruction manual for her imaginings. On the basis of the description of the mental states, which partly constitute the complex experience, and the reader's prior WIL-knowledge of such states, the reader can imagine what it is like to be in the component states and, at least up to a certain point, put the components of the complex experience imaginatively together. If the reader is successful, she acquires, on the basis of her literature-driven imaginings, knowledge of what it was like for the author to have undergone the complex experience.

It is important to highlight that the knowledge the reader gains by means of this process is not WIL-knowledge of her own future experience, but of another person's experience. Empathy is often seen as a process which enables the empathizer to recognize another person's mental state and to learn what it is like for this person to be in this state (e.g., Coplan 2011). Thus, empathy and imaginative scaffolding according to testimony share an epistemic goal, because both empathizer and imaginer learn, in case of success, what it is like for another person to undergo her experience. Because of this shared epistemic goal and because imaginative scaffolding according to another person's description is essentially directed towards another person, I call this process empathic scaffolding. Although it is important and interesting, this is not the place to compare imaginative scaffolding with the numerous definitions or characterizations of empathy we can find in philosophical and psychological debates.

But we must remain cautious about the limitations of this process. V. Simoniti (2021, 572) argues that, "for example, we do not go up to victims of political oppression and say "I know how it must feel; I have read many novels about oppression", nor do we consult artworks in preparation for some distinctly practical challenge". Although he mentions novels as an

example for literary art and not a non-fictional genre, it is important to take his scepticism seriously.

The reader of non-fictional literature can by these means most likely only gain partial knowledge of what it was like for the author to have had her complex experience. How close the reader’s knowledge will be to full knowledge of what the specific complex experience was like depends in particular on three factors: (1) on the extent of the reader’s WIL-knowledge of the component states of the complex experience, (2) on the detail and richness of the author’s descriptions, and (3) on how closely the reader’s imaginings conform to the author’s descriptions.

Furthermore, it seems that speakers use expressions like “I know how it feels” or “I know what it is like” in everyday contexts often to express that they had a complex conscious state or a series of complex conscious states of the same type before. Such statements express a personal acquaintance with this type of experience. If true, this explains why it seems odd for a reader who never had an experience of the specific type to claim that she knows what it is like.

It seems to me, however, to be an open question whether competent speakers want to express with statements such as “I know what it is like” that they have WIL-knowledge of another person’s complex conscious state. As I have argued in sections 9.3 and 9.4, we cannot assume that our experience of a complex conscious state is a source of WIL-knowledge of another person’s conscious state of the same type. If we understand statements such as “I know how it feels” or “I know what it is like” as an expression that the speaker has full WIL-knowledge of the other person’s state, these statements become problematic for both readers and those who had a complex conscious state of the same type as the other person. This is the case, because it is hardly likely that they really have full WIL-knowledge of the other person’s state.

## 9.8 Empathic Scaffolding and Fiction

There are certainly many very important non-fictional works of literature and therefore many opportunities for readers to learn what it was like for their authors to go through their experiences. However, people often have fictional works of literature in mind when they think of sources of WIL-knowledge of other people’s experiences. Moreover, it seems to be generally accepted that great works of fictional literature are very important or especially good sources of WIL-knowledge. J. Gibson writes for example in the *Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature*:

I call this experiential knowledge (some will prefer to call it “phenomenological knowledge”), and think of it as a broadening of our

understanding of both the range of possible human experience and the what-it-is-like to be the subject of these experiences (See Walsh 1969 and Gibson 2008). My own life provides me with no knowledge of what it is like to be one who finds all experience impoverished, as subjecting us to a constant stream of tedious, meaningless, repetition. Nor does it reveal to me what it is like to have my community turn against me and scatter my family across various concentration camps in Poland. But I can read Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* or Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939*. Literature, in this sense, compensates for the incredibly limited range of experience the real world offers us, and in doing so it enriches our knowledge of experience itself. Empathy for "real" people is often thought to yield knowledge. It is clearly thought to offer a kind of knowledge of others' mental states, and this is significant enough.

And he goes on:

[a]s David Novitz claims, literature gives us "empathic knowledge" insofar as it gives readers a "pretty good idea" of, or enables them to know something about, what it feels like to be ensnared" in a certain situation (Novitz 1987, 136. For discussion, see Lamarque 2014, 137). The basic features of empathy—its reliance on imagination for the sake of other-directed perspective-taking—make it a natural ally in literature's apparent quest to illuminate the nature and variety of human experience.

(Gibson 2016, 241)

Gibson is a proponent of so-called literary cognitivism, whose central claim is roughly that readers can learn from works of fiction (Currie 1990; Konrad 2017; Stock 2017; Vendrell Ferran 2018; Garcia-Carpintero 2019; Voltolini 2021). In particular he claims, as we can see in the quotation above, that we can acquire WIL-knowledge by means of reading fictional works of literature.

Prima facie, it seems that if readers find fictional descriptions of a fictional character's experiences, they can proceed in the same way as in the case of non-fictional descriptions of experiences: they can imagine the respective mental states as described or alluded to, bearing in mind that that these descriptions are fictional. In section 9.7, I focused on non-fictional descriptions of experiences and how readers can use them as an instruction manual for their imagination. Accordingly, I will focus solely on fictional descriptions of experiences and the question whether they can function in the same way as their non-fictional counterparts. Because of this focus, I leave it open whether there are any other ways of gaining

WIL-knowledge by means of imagination and reading fiction. In particular I will not discuss whether or not aesthetic responses to literature can be a source of WIL-knowledge. I seek to distinguish four different claims about what exactly we learn (among possibly many other things) from reading fiction:

- 1) By means of reading fiction, readers can learn what it would be like for themselves to undergo the experiences described in works of fiction
- 2) By means of reading fiction, readers learn what it is like for fictional characters to undergo the experiences described in works of fiction
- 3) By means of reading fiction, readers can learn what it is (or was) like for a real person (such as the author, someone the author knows, etc.) to undergo an experience described in works of fiction
- 4) By means of reading fiction, readers can learn what it could be like for someone to be in a situation described in works of fiction. This means we acquire WIL-knowledge about possible experiences

In the quotation above, it seems that Gibson has something like claim (1) in mind when he argues that literature provides the possibility to learn what it is like to be in situations that a reader will not encounter in her life. We could also interpret his words as assuming that readers learn what it is like for them to undergo these experiences, because there is something general in what it is like to "have my community turn against me and scatter my family across various concentration camps in Poland".

Experiences like these are, according to my analysis in section 9.3, types of complex conscious states or series of complex conscious states. As I have argued, types of complex states are often individuated not by referring to the mental states of the experiencer, but by referring to non-mental features of the experiencer's situation. This is the case for Gibson's examples too. I further argued that people react psychologically very differently to the different features of their situations. Thus, people who go through something like Gibson's examples will be in different mental states and it is thus very likely that the phenomenal character of their mental states will differ. Hence, there is no unique phenomenal character of Gibson's examples of experiences.

But even if he does not assume that there is a unique phenomenal character of the aforementioned experiences, I do not believe that a reader will learn what it would be like for her to undergo these experiences. If the work of literature contains descriptions of the mental states of the character who undergoes the experience, the reader gains information about the character's specific state. Albeit unlikely, it may be that the reader herself will be in the same mental state as the character in the work, if she has gone through an experience similar to that described in the fictional work.

A reader might also try to imagine how she would react psychologically if she were in the situation described in the fictional work. In this case we are again confronted with the problem that we are in general not very good at predicting our own reactions towards a specific situation, as I argued above. It might be that a reader predicts her own reactions correctly and that she is a very skilled imaginer in the sense that she can accurately bring together in her imagination the components of her future experience. As I argued in section 9.6, this seems to be a matter of luck. Thus, even true beliefs about future experiences we gain in this way cannot count as knowledge. Therefore claim (1) is false.

In general, one reason to think that reading works of fiction is a particularly good way to gain WIL-knowledge seems to be the elaborate and rhetorical use of language we find in these works. Our ordinary language is sometimes not sufficiently fine-grained or lacks vocabulary to name or describe mental states. If a person cannot describe her own experience adequately, it seems that there is no way in which another person can learn what it is like for the experiencer. In these cases, stylistic devices can be a way of describing mental states and thus help readers to imagine the described state. Therefore, the idea could be that skilled authors find a way by means of these stylistic devices and the special artistic use of language to describe experiences, thereby enabling readers to learn what something is like for other people, especially those who lack these linguistic and rhetorical skills.

I assume that we find this use of language more often in fictional literature, which however has no monopoly on this feature. We can find stylistic devices obviously in non-fictional literature as well. But beliefs about the experiences of fictional characters face a general problem of beliefs and assertions about fiction: how can a belief or an assertion about a fictional entity be true? This concerns claim (2). According to fictional anti-realists (Lamarque and Olsen 1994; Yagisawa 2001; Everett 2005), there are no fictional characters; hence, there is no entity with the described experience. According to fictional realists (Inwagen 1977; Salmon 1998; Thomasson 1998; Voltolini 2006; Kripke 2013), fictional characters exist but they suggest that the characters are artefacts and therefore entities without a mental life (see Gibson 2008, 583). For this reason, it also cannot be literally true that a fictional character is in a state of joy or jealousy (etc.). A solution to the problem of true beliefs and assertions about fiction will therefore depend on a metaphysical theory of fictional entities.<sup>2</sup> If there is a solution to the general problem, I am quite optimistic that there would be no specific problem for WIL-knowledge of mental states of fictional characters. In this case we could assume that readers can gain WIL-knowledge of a fictional character's experience by putting together in their imagination the components of the character's complex mental states according to

the fictional text. They could then also have true beliefs about the fictional character’s experience. Hence, I agree with claim (2), with the proviso that there is a solution for the problem of true assertions about fiction.

However, this is probably not the knowledge people might have in mind when they claim that we can learn about experiences by means of fictional literature. This assertion rather seems to state that we can learn something about the experiences of real people. This leads us to claim (3).

Authors sometimes create fictional characters by describing their own experiences. Because the character’s inner life is in these cases based on the author’s real experiences, it seems that the fictional description could function as testimony, in much the way as do non-fictional descriptions of experiences. Would a reader who imagines experiences according to such a fictional description gain phenomenal knowledge of the author’s experience?

Another possibility is that authors of fiction interview people about their experiences. The author could use these people’s testimony within the fictional work, such that the fictional work includes proper descriptions of real people’s experiences. If we assume that these descriptions are adequate, it seems that a fictional work which contains these descriptions contains true propositions.

Some literary cognitivists in the debate about the epistemic value of fiction argue that passages in fictional works can be true assertions (Currie 1990; Konrad 2017) or that fictional works can contain, besides purely fictional utterances also utterances which are both fictional and assertive at the same time (Friend 2008; Stock 2017). Hence, they argue that these passages can work as proper testimony because of their assertive character. If this were true, the descriptions of the real people’s experiences could play the same role as testimony we encountered in the case of non-fictional literature. Readers of fiction could then gain WIL-knowledge of the experiences of a real person by means of imagining the experiences according to the assertive passages.

In what follows I will argue against this cognitivist view. Rather for pragmatic than semantic reasons, fictional literature cannot play the role of testimony in the process of gaining WIL-knowledge of other people’s experiences.

George Saunders, an author of fictional short stories, describes in the *Guardian* in October 2022 the process of the creation of one of his fictional characters, a sexist barber. The character is based on a real person who used to live in the same town as the author:

Every day, I got to inhabit the mind of this sexist dope and cosy up to the reader by making fun of him. The humour of the story had to do with how blind this guy was to his own faults, as he harshly judged everyone around him, especially the women. What a crude, arrogant

misogynist! Who, though past 40, still lived with his mother! Hah!  
Take that, idiot!

(Saunders 2022)

After some weeks of work, the author however found, as he tells in the article, that he became unhappy with the character and his story:

The short story is about change. This is not a short story: “Once upon a time, an asshole stayed an asshole”. In real life, sure, that narrative (“Asshole remains asshole”) abounds. But a story wants change and should be set within a window during which a change might reasonably be expected to occur.

(Saunders 2022)

Obviously, an author of fiction can write about things she has never experienced before. If a work of fiction contains descriptions of experiences of a fictional character including descriptions of complex states of this character, it may well be that these descriptions are entirely made up. The author might also simply imagine what he or she finds to be a plausible reaction towards a situation she might have made up.

Saunders’ reflections also show that he feels obliged to conform to the conventions of the literary genre he has chosen. At this point it is important to keep in mind the Janus-faced nature of fictional characters: within the world of the story, fictional characters appear to us as human beings with human psychology. Fictional characters are, however, also artefacts created by authors with a specific function in the story (Lamarque 1996, 2008; see also Lamarque’s chapter in this volume). When Saunders realizes that he has to change his text in order to conform to the genre’s conventions and write a good story, he decides to change the character in order to make the story more interesting and less one-dimensional. The previously flatly sexist barber becomes a sexist barber with vulnerability who experiences self-consciousness. Saunders, however, did not seek out the real person who inspired him in the first place. He did not enter into conversations with him to find out more about this person. He rather changed the main character by adding features he found in his own personality or life.

This example shows that authors of fiction can – and often do – follow a variety of aims when creating a fictional character. One aim of realistic novels is to create a character with an inner life that appears plausible to readers. But this does not mean that the character’s inner life is created in such a way that we could find a real-life counterpart. Authors of fiction are free to combine descriptions of their own experiences or testimony of other real people’s experiences with invented descriptions. Furthermore, fictional characters have often specific functions in the narrative, such as

being another character’s opponent. Or they might be created such that the descriptions are meant to be understood in an allegorical or some other non-literal way. We saw that Saunders created a character that allowed him to tell a story which involved a change or development of the character.

These and similar aims have an influence on the way a fictional character is created. As a result, even in cases where authors interview real persons and use their descriptions of their experiences or when they describe their own experiences, these descriptions can be mixed with invented passages. And readers accept or even assume that descriptions of experiences they find in fictional works are influenced by these different aims of the author. In particular, experienced and professional readers will not only focus on the character as a human being in the world of the story, but also on the character’s function in the literary work.

Because authors of fiction are allowed and expected to write made-up stories, it is not always easy for readers to recognize which passages are or are meant to be about facts in the world and which are entirely invented. When it comes to descriptions of experiences, this seems to me to be particularly problematic. How should readers discover or decide whether a description of an experience contains a made-up element? A reader’s background knowledge about human psychology might help to identify extremely implausible descriptions, but it will not help to identify made-up elements which are in the realm of plausible psychological reactions. For this reason, it is extremely difficult for readers to find true propositions or to reliably distinguish them from made-up passages in the work. This in turn means that, although a work of fiction can contain true propositions, it is not a reliable source. On the contrary, it seems to be a matter of luck whether a reader identifies a sentence in a fictional work as a true assertion or proposition. Hence, a (or part of a) work of fiction cannot play the justifying role of testimony. And this consequently means that readers of fictional works can gain true beliefs about the experiences of real people, but these beliefs cannot count as knowledge. Therefore, claim (3) is false.

A proponent of the idea that fictional works of literature are especially good sources of WIL-knowledge might reply that the experiences of fictional characters are exemplifications. Learning about the fictional character is a way of learning about the possible experiences of real people in the same or similar situations. This is roughly what claim (4) is about. Green (2022, 280), for example, claims that

[s]ome works of fiction may be summarized as a whole, or contain elements that, in effect, say: “this is what X is like” [...] where values for X might include: losing a child to opioid addiction, being a victim of intimate partner violence, learning to accept one’s limitations.



In the most straightforward cases, such works follow characters who undergo the foregoing experiences.

Now, a literary cognitivist could argue that authors of great works of fiction are highly skilled imaginers. In particular they are very good at imagining other people's experiences in the way these experiences really are. Quite apart from their linguistic skills, this is what makes them extraordinary authors. Hence, we have good reasons to believe that, although the descriptions of experiences in their works are invented, they match the experiences people would have if they were in the situation described in the work. Cognitivists could argue that some authors are such highly skilled imaginers that regarding their descriptions of experiences, it is very likely or psychologically plausible that real people in the situation have complex states like that described. Some real people who are in the situation described in the literary work have exactly the complex mental states or series of these states described by the author. This could only be true in cases where there are such real situations as those described in the fictional work. But even if there are not or have not been such situations as described in the fictional work, cognitivists could argue that we do not gain WIL-knowledge about past experiences of real people, but about possible experiences.

It seems that in general people are not very good at imagining other people's experiences or their situations. This of course does not exclude the possibility that there are people with extraordinary imaginative skills (Kind 2020). This means it is possible that an author might be such an extraordinary imaginer that she can correctly describe a complex mental state or a series of complex mental states of another person although she has not talked to this person. While I agree this is possible, I think it is relatively unlikely that many authors are such highly skilled imaginers. Especially in cases where authors write about people in circumstances very different to their own, the chances are quite high that the author describes experiences not exactly in the way the experiences of a real person in these circumstances are. If these authors use their own personalities as a source of inspiration for their characters, it seems very likely that their characters will somehow remain within the realm of the author's own experiences. These authors may well still write about possible experiences, but I would suggest that the descriptions of these possible experiences are of less epistemic value. The reason is that these possible experiences will most likely be very different from real people's experiences.

There are, however, of course cases where authors write fictional stories, but these stories take place in circumstances with which the author is familiar. In these cases, the plot of the story and its characters are invented, but its background (such as where the characters live and what the circumstances of their lives are) is not. The descriptions of the characters'

experiences are made-up and so are only potential sources of knowledge about possible experiences. Nevertheless, it seems in these cases more likely that real people under these circumstances have experiences like those described in the story. Therefore, I suggest that these cases are more epistemically valuable with respect to WIL-knowledge of the described experiences.

## 9.9 Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to discuss whether we can learn what it is like to have an experience of a new kind by means of other people’s testimony and literature. I argued that it is possible to put components of a complex mental state imaginatively together if a person has WIL-knowledge of these components. By putting the components of a complex state together, she can in such a case acquire WIL-knowledge of a complex state she has not been in before. However, the imaginer needs to know the components of a complex state in order to be able to put them imaginatively together. In general, it seems that we are not very good at predicting our own psychological reactions towards a specific situation. Because of this, predicting the correct reaction seems to be a matter of luck. Hence, I argued, the imagining our own future complex conscious states cannot be a reliable source of WIL-knowledge of our future complex states.

The situation is different for other people’s experiences: I argued that another person’s testimony of her experience can be a reliable source. If the imaginer imagines the other’s experience following reliable testimony, her imagining of the experience is a source of WIL-knowledge of another person. There are works of non-fictional literature which can count as testimony in this sense. By means of imaginatively putting together components of a complex conscious state, in accordance with a description of that state, the imaginer can acquire WIL-knowledge of the author’s state.

For works of fiction the situation looks rather different. I distinguished four different claims about works of fiction as a source of WIL-knowledge. First, I argued that claim (1) is false: by means of reading fiction readers will not gain WIL-knowledge of their future experiences, because it would be a matter of luck if the reader reacts in exactly the same way as the author describes it. Second, I argued that if there is a theory that can explain true beliefs and assertions about fiction, we can acquire WIL-knowledge of a fictional character’s experience. However, I assumed that this is not the knowledge that people like John Gibson have in mind when they claim that we can acquire WIL-knowledge by means of reading fiction. According to some literary cognitivists, some works of fiction (or parts thereof) function like testimony. Hence, they argue, readers can learn from fiction. In contrast, I claimed that there are pragmatic reasons why fiction cannot count as testimony about real people’s experiences. Even if

a work contains true descriptions of a real person's experience, it is a matter of luck if readers can identify these descriptions. Therefore, and third, readers cannot gain justified true beliefs about other people's experiences by means of imaginatively putting the components of a complex state together, according to a fictional description. This leaves claim (4) as the most promising candidate: by means of reading fiction, readers can learn what it could be like for someone to be in a situation described in works of fiction. This means we acquire WIL-knowledge about possible experiences. I think "possible" cannot mean logically or metaphysically possible, because it seems rather uninteresting to learn about all these possibilities. Instead I think we are as readers interested in descriptions of experiences that have psychological plausibility. If this analysis is correct, much more needs to be said to explain in which sense the experiences we can learn about from fiction are "possible".<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Cath distinguishes the Gold- from the Silver- and Bronze-standard of what he calls knowledge of experience ("KoE"): "Gold-standard KoE: There is some way such that Mary knows that that way is a way it feels to go to war, and Mary knows this proposition in a phenomenal way in the sense that her concept of that way originated in acts of directly attending to the phenomenal properties of her own experiences of going to war. Silver-standard KoE: There is some way such that Mary knows that that way is a way it feels to go to war, and Mary knows this proposition in a phenomenal way in the sense that her concept of that way originated in acts of directly attending to the phenomenal properties of her own experiences distinct from, but relevantly similar to, the experience of going to war (which she has not had). Bronze-standard KoE: There is some way such that Mary knows that that way is a way it feels to go to war, and Mary knows this proposition in some non-phenomenal way" (Cath 2019, 16).
- 2 In the debate about the metaphysics of fictional characters, possibilists claim, roughly, that fictional characters are possible entities. A consequence of this view could be that my claim 2 about learning from fiction collapses into claim 4. I would like to thank Jakob Roloff and Jan Seibert who pointed this out to me.
- 3 Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the audience of the workshop "Empathetic Understanding", held at Duisburg-Essen University in May 2022, for their useful feedback on an earlier version of this chapter. I am also grateful to Matthias Vogel, Serena Gergorio and Gerson Reuter and the members of his research colloquium for discussing an early version of this chapter so constructively. I also would like to thank Katharina Sodoma, Vid Simoniti, Rachel Wiseman and last but not least Neil Roughley for their helpful comments and lunch time discussions.

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# 10 Affective Resonance and Narrative Immersion

*Suzanne Keen*

## 10.1 Affective Resonance and Immersion Reading as Related to Narrative Empathy

In his first axiom, Rainer Mühlhoff asserts, “(1) Affective resonance is a dynamical entanglement of moving and being-moved in relation, of affecting and being-affected, which is sensitive and specific to the concrete relational and situational configuration” (Mühlhoff 2014, 1016), an observation that contributes a building block to his theory of affective resonance and social interaction. In this chapter, I extend Mühlhoff’s ideas to the imaginative context of fiction reading, placing it in conversation with recent interdisciplinary scholarship on immersion reading. Mühlhoff’s theorizing concerns intersubjectivity of embodied persons. He responds to the cognitive, social, and developmental psychology that studies interactive, responsive behaviours such as motor mimicry or attunement of facial expression, gestures, and postures. Where attunement, mimicry, or synchrony have been studied as “bi-directional dynamical couplings”, Mühlhoff proposes an alternative philosophical framework, labelled *affective resonance*, that understands the “interaction dynamic itself [as] creat[ing] an affective experience rather than transmitting internal feeling states between pre-existent individuals”. What does that affective experience feel like? It begins with a sensation of being “immersed in interaction”. The ensuing affective resonance refers to “a dynamic entanglement of moving and being moved in relation” (Mühlhoff 2014, 1001). Conceived by Mühlhoff as a pervasive element of face-to-face encounters, affective resonance is inadequately described by noting the inner feelings of an individual sharing with another, giving, or receiving a transmission in social interaction – the bi-directional dynamic. Instead, affective resonance is an “open process, shaped by potentials arising continuously within the relational configuration itself”, a dynamic that “creates and constitutes an affective quality which is not pre-existent to the encounter” (Mühlhoff 2014, 1002). Mühlhoff strives to avoid locating his description of the phenomenon inside the individual person, proposing instead “a framework taking relatedness and processuality as ontologically primary”. Thus, for Mühlhoff, the inevitably mentioned individual is to

be understood as one “always in relation and always in becoming within a relational-processual realm of affective resonance” (Mühlhoff 2014, 1003). He offers for our consideration “a new paradigm [for] thinking about social interaction”, one that is more accurate to “the experience of being-in-resonance” (Mühlhoff 2014, 1016).

Never once, I must immediately disclose, does Mühlhoff raise the issue of affective resonance in relation to fictional worlds and their imaginary denizens. His account is resolutely social, whereas fiction reading is para-social. None the less, I engage with Mühlhoff’s thinking because it offers a path to understanding why immersion reading of narrative fiction feels as intense and memorable as real experience. Unlike a dream or a memory, which can be understood to occur within an individual, the phenomenon of immersed reading occurs in relation to the prompts of the narrative, which has an existence outside the person, in words that can be stored in a library, on paper, or in the cloud, in electronic form. Yet without the active contribution of the co-creating reader, the physical text is inert, a surface code (Van Dijk and Kintsch 1983). The reading process, which draws the reader into relation to a fictional world, characters, and events created by an author, is also “always in becoming within a relational-processual realm of affective resonance” (Mühlhoff 2014, 1003), in the course of which a situation model is generated. Elaine Auyoung (2018, 14) describes the reader’s contributing behaviours well:

As part of the process of building durable mental representation of fictional worlds, readers draw upon their embodied knowledge to comprehend sensory phenomena; they use their social intelligence to interpret the behavior of fictional persons; and they repeatedly retrieve and revise mental models of persons and places.

These are the active requirements of an experience that often implies passive capture or submerging of a reader’s will, as Bilandzic and Busselle (2008, 12) rightly note. The immanent connectedness of an author’s original imagining, the text, and a reader’s co-creative understanding opens up occasions for the experience of narrative empathy, a form of empathy provoked and mediated by a story (in my theorizing, in narrative fiction).

In connecting Mühlhoff’s ideas to the absorbing experience of reading about unreal beings, I am transposing thinking intended to illuminate relations between real people to another circumstance, which involves both real people who are not co-present to one another (readers and authors) and also unreal beings proffered in the form of words by real authors to real readers. That is, I am displacing a theory about social experience to a context of solitary imagining and responding that often feels like a social experience. I am emboldened in this transposition from a social context to a circumstance of aesthetic engagement by Mühlhoff’s original analogizing

from physics to psychology, and philosophy. Extending this move activates a frame for considering human intersubjectivity and the imaginative engagement with narrative that hitches a ride on our cognitive and affective capacities. To the point of this collection of essays, our behaviour as immersion readers may also illuminate the way we relate to real people, especially those who we have just met, do not know well, spontaneously empathize with, or even misunderstand.

Empathy is an aspect of intersubjectivity, arising out of human intercorporeality and embodied simulation. The functional mechanisms of our brains and bodies operate to provide a framework for experience and understanding; according to neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese (2017, 189), embodied simulation is “triggered during our interactions with others, and is plastically modulated by contextual and cognitive factors as well as ones related to personal identity”. Stimulated by both the experience of being a body in space and by the objects of our attention, embodied simulation also makes empathy possible. Gallese proposes,

empathy is the outcome of the natural tendency to experience our interpersonal relations first and foremost at the implicit level of intercorporeality [...] embodied simulation not only connects us to others. It connects us to our world, a world populated by natural objects, man-made objects with or without symbolic meaning, and other individuals, a world in which most of the time we feel at home. The sense we attribute to our lived experience of the world is grounded on the relational quality of our bodily action potentialities, that are laden with affects and enabled by the way they are mapped in our brains.

(Gallese 2017, 189)

Puzzles remain about the version of embodied simulation experienced when engaged in solitary immersion reading, in which a common reported sensation is loss of awareness of readers' actual surroundings. Literally no one else needs to be present other than the reader. Yet the social, personal, and emotional sensations of connection, scaffolded on the core affects of narrativity by way of the discourse, and hitched to actants and events through representation, embed the individual reader in a matrix of relations that often includes intensities of shared emotional experience: narrative empathy. My purpose in this essay is to dignify immersion reading as an alternative mode of affective resonance, in connection with the narrative empathy it richly and frequently evokes. This effort will require discussion of satellite topics: the persons and roles in a narrative communication model; the limited role of the author; mental visualizing; and recent scholarship on narrative absorption.



Each of Mühlhoff's three axioms concerning affective resonance applies elliptically to immersion reading of fiction. Valued as an aspect of readers' ongoing lived history of being-in-relation with others – both present and absent, real and imaginary, living and dead, sentient and impercipient, neighbour and stranger, friend and foe, subject to readers' affection, compassion, curiosity, desire, disdain, antipathy, disgust – immersion reading is not only a stage for rehearsal, but also a genuine experience of lived humanity in its own right. The diversity of those feelings for others, in a list suggestive of range, correlates with my view that narrative empathy is not simply a matter of a reader's resonating with a character's pain, but should be regarded as affording broader and more complex paths to understanding others, and the richness of subjectivity. The relationship of narrative empathy to immersion in fictional worlds still requires further investigation. Recent neuroscientific research suggests that readers' responses to literary style and emotional intensity engage different parts of the brain (Hartung et al. 2021). Though aesthetic appreciation is certainly an important aspect of the reading experience, I focus here on immersion, which is characterized by emotional engagement with characters and their situations, with implications for understanding. As Elaine Auyoung (2018, 2) proposes, we should understand “the claim that novels ‘come alive’ not as a distraction from more important forms of engagement with literary texts, but rather as an effect whose persistence suggests that producing it is fundamental to the craft of fiction”.

## 10.2 Narrative Empathy of the Immersed Reader

In his third axiom, Mühlhoff's affective resonance is characterized in a fashion that resembles empathy. He writes, “(3) Affective resonance is a creative dynamic, it produces its own lines of a movement-in-relation” (Mühlhoff 2014, 1016). But the different forms of empathy produce different degrees and intensities of relation. Human empathy encompasses many phenomena, ranging from emotional contagion and motor mimicry; role-taking and perspective-taking, emotional fusion, and compassionate fellow-feeling; all the way to empathic concern. Not all human empathy leads to expressions of sympathy and altruistic action, for the aversive response called “personal distress” in the psychological literature is also an empathic phenomenon (Keen 2018). Empathy can even involve sharing feelings with inanimate objects; indeed, the early theories of *Einfühlung* began there. Embodied humanity is not a requirement to serve as a target for empathy. One important form of empathy, fantasy empathy (Davis 1980), describes sensations of shared feeling and perspective with those special effects of the inanimate objects that we call works of fiction. From marks on the page or pixels imitating fonts readers co-create fictional characters that can evoke intensities of emotional fusion, the shock of recognition, and the

attentional investment we call character identification. This is a version of narrative empathy, a creative dynamic in its own right.

Psychologists often express human differences by acknowledging ranges of behaviour or responses. Mark Davis's well-known empathy scale, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), includes four subscales: Perspective Taking; Empathic Concern; Personal Distress; and Fantasy. While these elements do not exhaust the possible ways in which an individual might experience empathy, they can be used to discern a person's relative high or low empathy, according to their self-report. The prompts, to be evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from A, "Does not describe me well", to E, "Describes very well", include these seven statements related to fantasy empathy:

1. I daydream and fantasize, with some regularity, about things that might happen to me.
5. I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel.
7. I am usually objective when I watch a movie or play, and I don't often get completely caught up in it.
12. Becoming extremely involved in a good book or movie is somewhat rare for me.
16. After seeing a play or movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters.
23. When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character.
26. When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me.

(Davis 1980, 95)

The reader will have discerned that items 7 and 12 are oriented negatively towards empathic experiences. Keeping in mind that a high empathy individual would indicate a low rating ("does not describe me well") for 7 and 12, we can characterize people high in fantasy empathy if they daydream or fantasize frequently, readily immerse in films and novels, get caught up in stories, imagine how they would feel in the depicted situations, put themselves (easily) in the shoes of the protagonist, get involved with the characters' feelings, and (afterwards) feel as they had been one of the characters.

It is easy to imagine the denigration of such a person, the high fantasy empathy individual, as an escapist pleasure reader. The dissociative and emotive traits of the immersed, transported, empathic reader do not command (indeed have not commanded) respect, whereas behaviours associated with role-taking or perspective-taking empathy have seemed more

laudable and worthy of cultivation. Thus, defences of fiction reading have often focused on the exercise of those capacities, perhaps because they seem more effortful than submerging one's consciousness in a fictional world, losing oneself in a book. Many philosophers and novelists have advocated novel reading as a good way of practising perspective-taking, a cognitive form of empathy. George Eliot thought that a major purpose of her work was to cultivate her readers' sympathetic imagination through attention to others. In *The Natural History of German Life*, she writes,

[t]he greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment.

(Eliot 1883, 144–145)

For the purposes of this chapter, I propose that the immersive pleasure reader who reads to escape should be considered a version of Eliot's "trivial and [...] selfish" reader, who can be surprised into other-directed attention by narrative art, not necessarily realistic fiction. That reader need not be reading a George Eliot novel to encounter the artful depiction that prompts such an extension of the sympathies in the direction of others.

Narrative empathy differs from real-life empathy because we feel it in response to a story rather than having a here-and-now reaction to another living creature in the real world. Yet it can feel just as intense when we share feelings with imaginary others in narrative empathy. As I have earlier defined it, narrative empathy involves the sharing of feeling, matching feelings, and perspective-taking brought about by reading, viewing, hearing about, or even imagining stories of another's situation or condition (Keen 2013b). Authors experience it, which is part of why I include imagining. Narrative empathy plays a role in the aesthetics of production when writers feel it in the process of creating fiction. Marjorie Taylor's studies of fiction writers have shown that successful fiction writers, those who can make a living by their work, score very high on empathy scales. They experience the illusion that their fictional creations possess independent agency, so when they "feel with" their characters, it is as if they were feeling with beings separate from themselves (Taylor et al. 2003). This consequence of high empathy and an imaginative disposition may help in the creation of characters that evoke empathy in readers. Something lifelike is breathed into them through the author's empathy, even if they are unrealistic, fantastical characters. The strategic narrative empathy of authors can in the

most favourable circumstances reach readers both inside and outside the tribe and, at least in the short term, widen the empathetic circle, reduce bias, increase a sense of belonging, render the unfamiliar less strange, shift beliefs, and alter attitudes (Keen 2008).

Immersion reading and experiences of narrative empathy are at the very least strongly correlated, as psychologists following the lead of Richard Gerrig, a pioneer in the field, have sought to demonstrate. But which comes first? Chicken-and-egg questions remain. An fMRI study of Harry Potter readers revealed effects that suggest “the immersion experience was particularly facilitated by the motor component of affective empathy” (Hsu et al. 2014, 1356). These neuroscientists hypothesized that emotionally engaging fictional narratives invite affective empathy, which their observations of blood flow in the anterior insula and the mid-cingulate cortex supported. The connection with immersion reading experiences was made following post-hoc ratings, which were higher for emotion-inducing passages than for neutral passages. As Calarco et al. (2017, 300) observe, “the directionality of the relationship between absorption and character identification is still under debate”.

Bal and Veltkamp (2013, 1) look at the relationship from the opposite direction, showing that high emotional transportation (immersion) into a story led to higher empathy at least one week later. Their study assessed the impact of narrative immersion in fiction over time, an important contribution, for longitudinal studies are still lacking. They also detected a surprising result, that the failure to become transported actually lowered reader empathy over time (Bal and Veltkamp 2013, 5). They conclude, “a reader has to become fully transported into the story to change as a consequence of reading, to become more empathic” (Bal and Veltkamp 2013, 8). In my view, readers’ empathy and immersion experiences almost certainly vacillate, with personal differences in fluency, genre familiarity, and memories influencing whether emotional engagement precedes immersion or vice versa. The demonstrated outcomes of reading may be impacted by whether the study focuses on empathy or immersion. Studies by Mar and Oatley, Bal and Veltkamp, Zwaan, and Dan R. Johnson show that some components of attitude change, bias reduction, and extension of the empathetic circle can come, at least in the short term, from reading fiction with a sympathetic orientation towards an outgroup. These studies link readers’ empathy with measurable changes. Gerrig (1993) hypothesizes that attitudes change as a result of transportation. Green and Brock (2002) link emotional transport to stronger attitude change than for those who did not experience immersion. Regardless of the order of the response to the stimulus of fiction reading, its impact requires the active collaboration of readers, whose mental simulation co-creates fictional worlds devised by authors. That collaboration occurs anew each time a reader activates

or reactivates fictional worldmaking in the reading process. To refer to terms congruent with Mühlhoff's thinking, reading is a creative dynamic, responding to textual prompts put in place by, but no longer controlled by, an author. The immersive reading experience occurs beyond and between these individuals, in a penumbra of the text, an imagined dimension that takes readers out of themselves and out of this world.

Readers often report a refreshing break from being themselves while they give their attention to the doings of fictional beings. But they do not feel lonely. Paradoxically, solitary empathic readers often feel as if they are connecting with characters, joining social worlds, communing with soul mates, or simply hanging out in the company of an old gang of familiars, especially in the return reading behaviour that is invited by series fiction (Keen 2012). Gabriel and Young (2011) applied Doi's *amae* to the fantasy-fiction reading context, showing that readers' joining an imaginative community of characters provided sought-for sensations of *amae*, a feeling of harmonious interdependence (Doi 1989). Immersion reading that offers a sensation of joining a company of others can translate into social knowledge and opportunities to empathize, transcending barriers of distance, unfamiliarity, and dissimilarity.

In the next section, I describe the communication model that rhetorical narrative theorists regard as the configuration of roles in narrative fiction. This sets up my claim that narrative fiction, despite the solitary scene of its activation in reading, hosts a zone of cognitive and affective interplay that remains interpersonal even when it cannot be regarded as social. Persons remain vital agents of the narrative transaction, although not all of them are real people and some are not required to be present after their contribution to the text's creation concludes. When it comes to narrative empathy, an experience of affective resonance occurring while immersed in a fictional world, the sensations are brought to life and concentrated within one person, the reader. The co-creative work of that reader (first theorized by Louise Rosenblatt 1938a, 1938b) requires the full staffing of the other roles surrounding the text, from the reader to the author. A reader-aloud may of course have an auditor or an audience; an author may be a co-author or a collaborator. But these plurals are optional; a reader needs only to hear the narrative or to read the text to engage in co-creation.

### 10.3 The Persons and Roles of Narrative Communication

Seymour Chatman's influential paradigm of narrative communication is indebted to the rhetorical narrative theory of both Wayne Booth (1983) and the reception theory of Wolfgang Iser (Iser 1974). Chatman (1978) presents the roles of persons and person-like functions involved in narrative transactions, when narrative is understood as an act of communication, with a sender (author) and a receiver (reader): "real author-->||implied author--> (narrator)--> (narratee)-->implied reader||-->real reader" (Chatman 1978,

151). I have elucidated these terms at greater length in *Narrative Form* (Keen 2015b, 33–38), but, in brief:

- Author: a biographical person who created the narrative work, in a variety of possible media; receives past tense reference in recognition of real-world temporality and mortality
- Implied author: an implication of the text, a version of the author to whom we attribute agencies for all the ongoing effects of the discourse; receives present tense reference in recognition of the ongoingness of its actions, aesthetic decisions, possible motivations, and putative intentions
- Narrator: the entity responsible for telling, who can narrate from inside the fictional world with other characters, or from a vantage point external to the story world. Its existence is implied by the narration
- Characters: represented beings and active agents of the fictional world, often resembling people; entities made out of words
- Narratee: the entity to whom the narration is directed, sometimes in direct address, often only implicit
- Implied reader: a role comprised of readerly traits demanded or at least implied by the text; may or may not share qualities with the narratee
- Reader: a real person in the past, present, or future who receives the text and brings it to life by reading it; may or may not resemble the implied reader (often doesn't)

Placed in a reading-centred frame, interactions of these functions include: the author's communicating with the reader, the narrator's directing its discourse to a narratee; characters' conversations with one another; the narratee's reception of the narrative; and above all the reader's co-creation of the fictional world by responding to the text's instructions and implications about all of the former positions. In short, to echo Mühlhoff, a narrative fiction offers a rich relational configuration for potential affective resonance, to be called into being and perceived by a reader. What does it mean to situate affective resonance among these roles, when only the real author and real reader are living persons, and may not even be alive at the same time? In short, to activate the full potential of affective resonance in immersion reading, the real author must be dismissed to the paratextual edges of the work.

Only trace elements of the author remain in ordinary fiction reading. Just as we often eat without thinking about the farmers and agricultural labourers who cultivated the contents of our food, we often read without foregrounding awareness of the somebody who must've written the text. Of course, real authors exist, but they have a limited role to play once they have surrendered the fictional text to readers. Sometimes the reader seeks out the text because a particular author created it or is expected to release

it: I eagerly await news of the third instalment of Philip Pullman's *The Book of Dust*. Ironically, once I have his novel, this real author (whose actions of inventing, writing, revising, seeking a publisher, and releasing a book into the world gives actual readers the opportunity of affective resonance with unreal beings) must fade from view for the immersive transportation into a fictional world to work at all. I am not interested in the biographical Philip Pullman once I have his new volume in my hands: it's Lyra and Pan I care about. To the degree that I remain aware of the presence of the author when I read, it is the implied author who engages my attention. I can perceive that the Pullman of *His Dark Materials* worked with a romantic poet's version of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, whereas the Pullman of the prequel trilogy has taken up the Milton of *Comus* and the *Nativity Ode* and his precursor, Edmund Spenser. These versions of Pullman are projections and implications of the text, activated into the relational configuration by my reading.

Conventionally, literary analysis concerns itself primarily with the text and its implied author, and very little with its human maker, even in contexts that emphasize a collection of writers sharing a common identity or a single author: Shakespeare means mostly the plays, and very little the man. The implied Shakespeare's art occludes the biographical person, except in the genre of literary history. Yet the dismissal of the author is not only a habit of the literary analytical discipline. Ordinary readers also demonstrate the dispensable nature of the real author by failing to recall the writer's name, while vividly conjuring the fictional world she or he has created. The consciousness of an author, a shaping hand and originating maker, that an immersed reader remains in touch with while absorbed in that author's creation is the implied author, a projection of the text whose existence will survive the actual author's death.

The affective resonance that an immersed reader experiences does not require the presence of a real author. Projections of the text replace the author; the co-creative imagining that the reader calls into being while unspooling the length of discourse folded into the codex, delivered to the e-reader, or piped into earbuds produces its own images, dimensionality, spaces, population, moods, tones, and feelings, including empathy. This is intersubjectivity stripped down to a real reader engaging imaginatively with non-human roles rather than real persons. Though the real author may be dismissed to his alphabetical place in the library catalogue, we keep all the rest of the dynamic forces arising within the relational configuration for narrative communication. Leave us alone while we read; we have company.

#### 10.4 Immersion, Mental Visualizing, and Empathy

Mühlhoff's second axiom foregrounds the feeling of its experience: "(2) Affective resonance is primarily experienced as a gripping force, which is

immanently arising in the relational interplay and actualizes in a jointly unfolding dynamic” (Mühlhoff 2014, 1016). This relates to the readerly experience of immersion. As students often justly assert, the teacher’s focus on the writerly actions observable in the discourse of the text can “ruin” the experience of reading a story. The discipline of literary analysis, with its focus on picking apart passages through close reading, tracing the patterns of motifs that generate the impression of themes, naming techniques, and ruminating on authorial choices, differs profoundly from the experience of immersion reading. This ordinary reading practice is experienced as a gripping force, that commands the reader’s attention, submerges the reader in a fictional world, and places the reader in relation to imaginary others for and with whom strong feelings of attachment and reaction flow. This experience is rarely acknowledged in the literature classroom. As Elaine Auyoung (2018, 2) proposes, we should understand “the claim that novels ‘come alive’ not as a distraction from more important forms of engagement with literary texts, but rather as an effect whose persistence suggests that producing it is fundamental to the craft of fiction”.

Let us consider those great countries of the imagination that we inhabit when we get lost in a book (immersion), and what happens to us when we voluntarily spend part of our lives journeying through them, away from our reality (transportation). The metaphor for reading that I just used – lost in a book – calls up the suite of related terms used to describe the experience of entering or projecting one’s presence into a story world: immersion (Ryan 2001), transportation (Gerrig 1993), or, in critical disapproval, the referential illusion (Barthes 1989). Victor Nell (1988) referred to it as “entrancement” and considered it a variety of “flow”. Virginia Woolf (1979, 319) once described it in a letter to Ethel Smythe as a “disembodied trance-like [...] rapture”. The authoritative text on the subject declines to endorse a single term, referring to it as “a family of absorption-like states” (Kuijpers and Hakemulder, 2017, 2). To the immersed reader, the experience may feel like getting away, but it doesn’t actually feel like being lost. Following the movements of beings through vivid fictional worlds commands alert attention. Absorption blots out consciousness of much of the readers’ surrounding reality, but it is not unconsciousness. Actually, falling asleep while reading interrupts the trance and breaks the spell.

Common features of immersed reading include empathy with characters, mental visualizing of plot actions and story spaces, and losing track of time. I travel in my mind with Lyra to the place in Svalbard where the armoured bears live. I stand with Jay Gatsby looking across the water at the green light marking the end of Daisy Buchanan’s dock. I return to London between the wars, where I never was in real life, when I reread *Mrs Dalloway*. I walk with Leopold Bloom through the familiar streets of 1904 Dublin on a June day, in the company of the exiled James Joyce,



who invented his Dublin of the mind from far away in time and distance. Imaginative transportation endows the reader with astonishing superpowers. We need no translator to speak the local lingo; we can see into the minds of our companions; and the narrator will carry us through to the end of our journey even if we are bewildered by strange and unfamiliar beings along the way. A re-reader is especially empowered by getting lost in a book. Once I go through that wardrobe in the spare room, I know how to find Mr Tumnus and I can see in my mind's eye the beaver dam, and the snowy wood, and the way to the White Witch's castle.

Mental visualizing, or seeing with the mind's eye, is an important component of immersion reading, along with losing track of time, forgetting, or blocking out the real world in which the reader exists temporarily in favour of a wrought world. Immersion reading requires not just literacy but fluency. It means the ability to call up a visual image in your mind's eye. We do it when we are remembering, planning a journey, rehearsing, and when we hear or read fiction. Similarly to empathy, which some people feel more strongly than others, mental visualizing ability is stronger in some people than in others, and many highly intelligent, successful people have weak mental visualizing skills. Some people, strong mental visualizers, can call up vivid pictures of places not present to you, while others will not be able to "see" anything at all in their minds' eye (Schultheis and Carlson 2013). The impact of individual differences has been studied in contexts such as indoor wayfinding, in which personal variances impact the ability to learn routes from mental visualization prompts (Münzer and Stahl 2014; Hegarty et al. 2006).

This faculty of mental visualizing may have an impact on the way readers co-create fictional worlds and it almost certainly maps onto readers' preferences for different kinds of reading. It is probably not an accident that I have spent a lifetime submerged in fictional worlds, that I score high on fantasy empathy scales, and that I am prone to vivid daydreaming, and can remember scenes and spaces from the past with visual and dimensional richness. But which of these traits is a matter of disposition, or habit, or training? Reading image-rich literature may be one of the ways we can cultivate a habit of mental visualizing and ease the way to immersion.

Every generation of readers will have some who are readier to immerse in fictional worlds from the cues of prose than others. Some scholars think that today's young people are less adept as a generation in mental visualizing than those of us who grew up without the vivid fictional worlds of video games and virtual reality visualized for them in three-dimensional colour! For example, Alan Richardson (2010, 54) observes that today's students lack the mental visualizing skills called upon (and cultivated in earlier generations) by image-rich romantic poetry. But it is also possible that readers who are also gamers bring higher expectations of vividness

and emotional intensity to their encounters with textual worlds; some of them will become creators themselves. Potentially they will elevate the experience of immersion to a more respected level in the scale of aesthetic judgements.

One popular scholarly way of recuperating immersion reading to more dignified programmes of self-improvement is to suggest that the role-taking and perspective-taking practice of novel readers exercises capacities that they subsequently use prosocially in the real world. Theorists of narrative ethics and moral sentimentalists place stock in the potential of both role-taking and perspective-taking. Role-taking means answering the prompt, “How would I feel if I were in that situation?” Perspective-taking means answering a slightly different question: “How does she or he feel in that situation?” They are reflected in Mark Davis’s (1980, 10) IRI through statement 23, on perspective-taking, “When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character” and statement 26, on role-taking, “When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me”. Both are understood to exercise our capacity towards other-direction, though perspective-taking is sometimes advanced as less egocentric than role-taking. A great deal of theorizing about narrative fiction hinges on the belief that fiction reading engages readers in both practices: imagining ourselves in fictional circumstances and investing emotionally in the perspectives of imaginary others in those circumstances.

In an ingenious study, cognitive scientist Dan R. Johnson (2012) and his students carried out an experiment that suggests mental visualizing may have a greater immediate impact on empathy than thinking exercises designed to induce role-taking or perspective-taking. Johnson and his students found that the readers in the mental visualizing condition were more readily immersed in fictional worlds than those given other-directed perspective-taking instructions. That is, readers who were given exercises prompting mental visualizing before reading fiction, in controlled laboratory circumstances, experienced a greater degree of immersion in fictional worlds, contrasted with a group given perspective-taking instructions to put themselves in the shoes of the character. The more thoroughly immersed readers also showed increases in empathic reactions and increased helping behaviour. Added to the existing evidence that novel reading can alter readers’ beliefs and attitudes (Green and Brock 2002; Nünning 2014; Sklar 2013), the discovery that deeper immersion can strengthen empathetic connections to fictional beings and real people, improves the chance that a reader might respond prosocially to another in need, or even engage in the personally costly helping behaviour that we call altruism. This result runs counter to many assumptions about the relative worthiness of demanding literary reading, especially socially conscious improving reading, in

contrast to popular genre fiction that invites immersion. Johnson's findings suggest that immersion reading supported by strong mental visualizing looks rather more valuable than escapist, more improving than lazy. This may mean adopting a greater tolerance for the diverse modes and subgenres of fiction that real readers may prefer. One of the first scholars of narrative transportation, Victor Nell, allowed his research subjects to bring whatever novel they wanted to the lab.

It has yet to be demonstrated that popular fiction fails to invite the inference-making and gap-filling imagining associated with more difficult or demanding literary texts. Until such time as we have discovered firm evidence of demonstrated categorical differences in the impact of literary techniques, we should set aside assumptions about the greater and lesser value of fiction based on prestige. As a reader of the psychological literature, I am encouraged by discoveries such as those made by Fong et al. (2013) about popular subgenres of fiction. Fong, Mullin, and Mar found that after controlling for personality, gender, age, and English fluency, exposure to Romance novels and, to a lesser degree, suspenseful thrillers, significantly predicted interpersonal sensitivity, results they did not find for either domestic realism or science fiction. Genres that "highlight interpersonal relationships appear to be particularly relevant for outcomes associated with social ability" (Fong et al. 2013, 374), they conclude. This contrasts with the common denigration of Romance novels as time-wasting indulgence. As Victor Nell (1988) suggests, losing track of time in immersion reading, rather than a concerning dissociation, should be understood as a form of "flow" (Csikszentmihályi 1998).

Why might immersion reading of fiction invite higher levels of narrative empathy than other kinds of reading, or even with people in real life? I have argued that some people find it easier to share feelings with fictional characters than with real-life individuals, in part (following Gallagher 1994) because our fiction reading demands little of us other than our co-creative attention. We can let our caution and scepticism relax when we read fiction: it doesn't matter if we are fooled by it because we go into the experience knowing that it is unreal. I have previously hypothesized that the "no strings attached" expectation invoked by the paratextual label, "fiction" releases the reader to make empathetic connections without fear that they will be required to reciprocate, make commitments, or act in the real world (Keen 2013a, 16). In a study corroborating this view, Appel and Malečkar (2012, 459) show that the conditions set by paratexts trigger different needs, a need for cognition in reading nonfiction and a need for affect when reading fiction, and that readers expect to be transported more into fictional worlds. Furthermore, subgenres of nonfiction focused on the perspectives of human agents, including memoir, testimony, and biography may attract (or form) higher empathy readers than dryer, more factual and

overtly argumentative or analytical forms of nonfiction. Ulrike Altmann and her collaborators (2012) performed a neuroimaging study that showed activation patterns in reading factual narratives that suggested an action-based reconstruction was elicited, whereas the brain areas involved in fiction reading suggested constructive simulation, in line with imagining potential or future events. This work supports a suggestion of Mar and Oatley (2008, 173) that factual and fictional works orient readers to real-world interactions on the one hand, and imaginative simulations on the other. Story labels effect transportation (Appel and Malečkar 2012, 474).

Research by Eva Maria (Emy) Koopman showed a positive impact on prosocial behaviour of reading accounts of depression; she writes “[t]his appeared to be due to higher emotional involvement (absorption and aesthetic attractiveness)” (Koopman 2015, 75). Kuiken and Oliver (2013), among others, have associated aesthetic engagement with representations of suffering, information that a reader might respond to with aversive personal distress rather than empathy if encountered in real life. Arising in the relational interplay between readers’ expectations of an immersive and affective experience, their co-creative worldmaking in response to the unfolding narrative prompts calls into being a dynamic of imagining and perceiving, recognizing and responding, visualizing and projecting. The fictional frame liberates the reader to immerse and empathize. I feel intuitively that getting lost in a book makes me smarter, more alert to the experiences of others, and it helps me build a sense of self as connected to inhabitants of other times and spaces. The immersion experience, in Mühlhoff’s (2014, 1002) terms “a dynamic entanglement of moving and being-moved in relation”, can apply to empathetic experiences evoked by fictional characters and features of imagined worlds and brought to fruition by a co-creating reader. Through reading an individual can share experience with, acquire knowledge of, and engage emotionally with numerous diverse represented persons. The dynamic entanglement with fictional worlds and their inhabitants is one of the most memorable aspects of immersion reading. How these dynamic imaginative experiences model and shape affective resonance between real people remains to be discovered. However, a strong form of affective resonance, stimulating, and prolonging relational interplay, arises between people out of mutual experience of a story world in which both have immersed themselves.

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# 11 Empathy for the Devil

*Claudia Hillebrandt*

This chapter focuses on villainous characters in fiction who induce empathy and other feelings of caring as well as of disapproval or even disgust. Characters like Tom Ripley, or Phèdre seem to belong to this group: we disapprove of their deeds, but we nonetheless understand their motives, do feel *with* them, and maybe even have feelings of compassion *for* them. Phèdre, for instance, desperately loves her step-son Hippolyte. In danger of being punished for that by her husband Thésée, her nurse Oenone tries to protect her, and defames Hippolyte of the rape of Phèdre. Phèdre refrains from contradicting this accusation when she realizes that Hippolyte loves another woman. Following the rules of tragic development, Thésée curses his son, Oenone commits suicide, Hippolyte is killed by a monster sent to him by Neptune due to his father's curse, and Phèdre chooses to die as well after having confessed her sin (cf. Racine 1973). On the one hand, craving for her step-son as well as omitting to tell the truth makes Phèdre's behaviour appalling. On the other hand, her desperateness and jealousy are depicted so vividly on the stage that it is hard to just disapprove of her. The play thus exhibits Racine's Jansenist concept of fate: Phèdre simply cannot escape from her emotions and the actions they cause. Accordingly, the character of Phèdre can be said to be an ambivalent one probably provoking conflicting feelings of empathy and disgust in her spectators.

How do texts stimulate these different feelings in their readers and spectators? Which literary techniques and character traits can be held responsible for that? And why do readers willingly engage in the process of experiencing mixed feelings of this kind towards characters in fiction – feelings they would in many cases rather try to avoid in their everyday social relationships? With a German term, one may sum these questions up as the problem of the “*sympathische Unsympath*”: a fictional character that can be characterized as villainous but is still able to provoke empathy as well as mixed feelings of caring, and disapproval. By addressing this problem and the questions it poses for philosophers, psychologists, and literary scholars, the relationship between “*Sympathie*”<sup>1</sup> and empathy is brought into focus.

The first two questions mentioned above call for an approach from the perspective of literary criticism. Correspondingly, this chapter focuses on

the interplay between evaluative text elements and different ways of referring to character emotions. Its aim is to explore the role empathy-building text elements have in shaping an appreciative attitude towards fictional characters. For this purpose, literary techniques that augment, or decrease the likeability of characters in fiction have to be taken into account as well as these can trigger, or undermine an attitude of “*Sympathie*”, and also readers’ willingness to empathize.

At the beginning of this chapter (1), the term “*Sympathie*” is explained referring to a conceptualization by emotional psychologist Brigitte Scheele. “*Sympathie*” is considered as a crucial term for explaining the phenomenon of mixed feelings towards ostensibly villainous characters. Hence, literary scholars can bring out several ways of explicitly and/or implicitly evaluating characters in fiction that affect their likeability. The next section (2), then, tries to shed a bit of light on the relationship between empathy and “*Sympathie*” as well as different textual features that allow for empathy-building. This is followed by section (3), a case study of Highsmith’s novel illustrating the different sorts of literary techniques that come into play to induce mixed feelings of caring, antipathy, and empathy in readers. There are lots of questions and unsolved problems remaining, which I will address in the last section of this chapter (4).

I will argue that (1) textual features enabling readers to empathize with fictive characters can be regarded as implicit evaluative comments that contribute to establishing an attitude of “*Sympathie*” to those characters, and that (2) textual features that enable readers to evaluate characters in fiction in a positive way render empathic engagement with them more likely. Conclusively, (3) the willingness to empathize with villainous characters may be influenced by foregrounding likeable character traits (3.1), and empathy-building textual features can be used as an instrument to augment the likeability of an otherwise unlikeable character (3.2). The analysis of Highsmith’s novel substantiates this claim. From the point of view of literary criticism, then, to explain shifts in the empathic potential as well as the likeability of characters in fiction amounts to analyzing the dynamics and the interplay of empathy-building textual features and evaluative character-related ones throughout the progress of a text.

### 11.1 Readerly “*Sympathie*” and the Likeability of Characters in Fiction

Appreciation or disapproval is crucial for understanding the different emotional reactions readers show towards characters with malicious character traits. It does not only seem to be the case that those characters induce cognitions of valorization or degradation respectively, but rather feelings *for* them like respect, admiration, disapproval, or even disgust (cf. Barthel 2008, 40–41; Chismar 1988; Eisenberg 2000; Gerhards 1988; Giovanelli

2009; Keen 2007, 4; Ratcliffe 2008, 19; Wispé 1989). The kind of appreciation that is of interest here is thus something that emotional psychologist Brigitte Scheele calls a “warm” cognition, that is an emotional process that stems from a cognitive appraisal of a certain situation and that concerns the subject’s relationship towards the world (cf. Scheele 2014, 37f). More specifically, an appraisal of someone in a certain situation is at the centre of this process of “Sympathie”-building. According to Scheele, this appraisal may lead to an attitude that renders future positive or negative emotional responses to that person or character more likely. It originates from the reader’s evaluation of how the character looks like, acts, thinks, and feels. If the reader concludes that there is a congruence between at least some part of her or his system of values and certain character traits, this will result in an attitude of “Sympathie”. “Sympathie”, thus, is a term that denotes an attitude characterized by a positive ego-alter-relation which is relatively stable over time (cf. Scheele 2014, 39). Consequently, “Sympathie” in specific situations engenders emotions that are concerned with a character’s needs, like sympathy, or compassion for instance.

A literary text may influence this attitude by providing information and evaluative comments about its characters – textual features that literary scholars are able to describe and interpret with the analytic tools developed in narratology, lyricology, and drama analysis (for further reading see Barthel 2008; Dimpel 2011; Hillebrandt 2011, 88–102; Nünning and Nünning 2008; Nünning 2021; Prinz and Winko 2014; Sklar 2008 and 2009). Central to a character analysis regarding its likeability is to look for elements of a text that display a specific character in a certain evaluative light. One can name several sorts of explicitly or implicitly evaluative text elements that are of interest here (cf. Hillebrandt 2011, 94–95; Winko 1991): evaluative comments can be given directly (“He had always thought *he had the world’s dullest face* [...]” (Highsmith 1973, 34 [italics by C.H.]), by pointing to its evaluative quality (“He *judged himself as having the world’s dullest face*”).), or by providing information that manifests itself as judgmental by paraphrasing (“He looked at Dickie with his *dull face*”).) Apart from those explicit types of evaluating characters there are also two implicit types that have to be taken into account as well and that may be even more important when it comes to analyzing the potential of a character to appear as likeable or not: (1) Due to other elements of the text a textual element may gain an evaluative connotation. For example, the caps Tom buys for himself help him to feel as if he was another person which to him amounts to being more likeable, and authoritative at the same time. Thus, wearing a cap in Tom’s eyes makes him a better person (cf. Highsmith, 1973, 34). (2) The mode and the quantity of information provided can be interpreted as evaluative. As *The Talented Mr. Ripley* focuses exclusively on its protagonist, Tom Ripley is marked as the most

relevant character of the whole novel, the main point of interest of the story told. This also holds true for textual features that provide information about the emotional state of a character in fiction, thus enabling readers to empathize more easily with him or her. As the novel exclusively focalizes on Tom providing a vast amount of information about his emotions, it also presents him as its main object of empathy. Such offers for empathy can thus be regarded as implicit evaluative comments on the relevance of a character's inner life.

Analyzing these evaluative elements helps to reconstruct the character-related value system of a literary text and thus the potential of a character to appear as likeable or not. Such a character-related analysis of a text's value system can then be compared to the value system of its cultural background, or to evidence of reception to bring out whether the two match or not. Following Scheele again, let me now take a closer look at the connection of empathy and "Sympathie" that may be of help to better understand the mixed feelings towards villainous characters and the ways in which literary techniques may influence them.

### 11.2 Empathy and "Sympathie"

Roughly speaking, empathy is a mental process that represents and simulates the emotional inner state of another person or fictional character. It is a short-term response to another's feelings in a certain situation (cf. Coplan 2004; Scheele 2014, 39; see also the introduction to this volume by Thomas Petraschka and Christiana Werner). Once again, from the perspective of literary criticism it is possible to bring out what offers for empathic engagement a literary text provides and if and how these were historically effective. There are lots of elements that might be of interest here: not only do texts *name* certain emotions. What is more interesting still, is how a literary text helps to imagine certain emotions more vividly *by pointing to them in an implicit way*, for instance by providing information about physiological or vocal elements of that emotion (like sighing, screaming etc.), by using certain metaphors, figures of speech, references to other texts, or by depicting a character in a certain situation that is linked to an emotional script (cf. Hillebrandt 2011, 78–81). All of this information as well as the mode and quantity of its presentation can be regarded as offers of empathic interaction exhibiting an implicit evaluative element (cf. Keen 2007, 92–99).

According to Scheele, empathy has a key role in shaping an attitude of "Sympathie", and vice versa. For her, empathy and "Sympathie" are connected in a kind of control loop (cf. Scheele 2014, 43–46). The evolution of "Sympathie" starts with a short-term empathic reaction towards someone in a certain situation. This also induces a positive parasocial response towards this other person, or character. In the progress of parasocial

interaction with the other, this estimation is then specified and consolidated by integrating moral values. The result is a classification of the observed alter as likeable or not and a more stable attitude of “Sympathie”. This attitude, on the other hand, leads to a deepened empathic reaction related to its object in certain situations. Thus, empathy and “Sympathie” are closely connected to each other due to the implicit evaluative dimension of empathy, and a heightened willingness to react empathically to an appreciated alter. Empathy, then, is a key element of processes that result in an appreciative attitude towards a certain character.

Now, this process is prone to failure, of course. If any new information about the object of “Sympathie” is given that undermines his or her valorization, this may result in a devaluation and a lower level of appreciation, or even a complete shift to antipathy. This is what seems to happen to a character like Phèdre when spectators witness her refusing to exculpate Hippolyte. As Manfred Pfister has pointed out, those turns of “Sympathie” are relatively common during the reading process (cf. Pfister 1978). They even seem to give readers pleasure while reading a book or watching a play or movie. Consequently, characters who do not only feature some shortcomings, but exhibit villainous character traits (like being a murderer in the case of Tom Ripley for example) at first sight are not very likely to provoke strong feelings of caring within readers. Following Scheele, this rather low potential for “Sympathie” would also affect a reader’s willingness to empathize with such characters.

Textual features triggering empathy may be very important here to prevent readers from completely condemning characters they liked beforehand when observing character traits that contradict their appreciative attitude. In providing information that gives access to the character’s feelings, a short-term evaluative process can be initiated again, enabling a new control loop of empathy–“Sympathie”–building to begin. Conversely, textual features that help to reevaluate a character in a more positive way may also enhance the willingness to empathize with her or him. By this means, literary texts can influence the dynamics of emotional interaction with villainous characters in fiction by either providing information that allows for empathy-building, or heightening their likeability to prevent them from being completely condemned, or empathically neglected. This assumption may also be a starting point in search of an explanation why ambivalent characters seem to attract readers. At least, the way in which information about Tom Ripley is provided in Highsmith’s novel neatly follows the scheme outlined above.

### 11.3 *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

Tom Ripley, the protagonist of Patricia Highsmith’s famous thriller, commits cheque fraud right from the beginning, coolly intimidating his victims

if necessary. In the progress of the novel, Tom murders two people – his best friend Dickie Greenleaf as well as Dickie's friend Freddie Miles. Moreover, it is made clear that he is willing to murder again to avoid being found guilty. Though several times Tom is about to be convicted, he finally gets away with his crimes, and even inherits his victim's money which allows for a luxurious future life. From a moral point of view, the plot of Highsmith's thriller is most appalling as the culprit is not prosecuted in the end, but rather rewarded. The only reverence given to the idea of poetic justice in the novel is Tom's developing paranoia:

He saw four figures standing on the imaginary pier, the figures of Cretan policemen waiting for him, patiently waiting with folded arms. He grew suddenly tense, and his vision vanished. Was he going to see policemen waiting for him on every pier that he ever approached? In Alexandria? Istanbul? Bombay? Rio? No use thinking of that. He pulled his shoulders back. No use spoiling his trip worrying about imaginary policemen. Even if there *were* policemen on the pier, it wouldn't necessarily mean –

(Highsmith 1973, 295 [italics in the original text])

Just as Tom's inner turmoil becomes unbearable, he is interrupted by a taxi driver who offers him a lift into his new life in Greece as the legal owner of his victim's property. This is the end of the story.

As in this paragraph, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* focalizes on its protagonist exclusively, thus evaluating him in an implicit way as the most relevant object of readerly attention and empathy. All other characters are only seen from his point of view. This makes it rather difficult for readers to adopt a different perspective on Tom apart from his own. Nonetheless, his deeds are so shocking that it is unlikely readers would simply agree with his crimes. They are shocking even for Tom who fully realizes that he is a felon, and who is afflicted by feelings of guilt several times:

But what seemed to terrify him was not the dialogue of his hallucinatory belief that he had done it [...] but the memory of himself standing in front of Marge with the shoe in his hand, imagining all this in a cool, methodical way. And the fact that he had done it twice before. Those two other times were *facts*, not imagination. He could say he hadn't wanted to do them, but he had done them. He didn't want to become a murderer. Sometimes he could absolutely forget that he had murdered, he realized. But sometimes – like now – he couldn't.

(Highsmith 1973, 257 [italics in the original text])

Consequently, the novel does not present a world that differs from ours morally which might trigger processes of imaginary resistance on readers' side (cf. Bareis 2014; Misselhorn 2009). On the contrary, it is unmistakably clear that Tom's deeds are reprehensible. So, even though Tom's emotions are displayed very vividly and in many details throughout the whole novel, it does not follow that intense processes of empathy are about to develop due to Tom's probable devaluation, at least from a moral point of view. Readers might even decide to turn down the book if feelings of disapproval or disgust towards its main character become too intense. With regard to Scheele, a control loop of empathy and "Sympathie" is about to fail.<sup>2</sup>

To heighten Tom's likeability, throughout the beginning of the novel Tom is given a carefully composed back story that allows for an understanding of his motives and feelings: Tom is an orphan whose parents have drowned in an accident when he was still very young (cf. Highsmith 1973, 20, 24, 37–38). He was then adopted and brought up by his aunt Dottie who in Tom's memory was an authoritative and unloving person with a sadistic penchant for defaming his deceased father and humiliating Tom (cf. Highsmith 1973, 27, 37–38). Her treatment leads to a pseudodarwinian ethic her young nephew dedicates himself to:

He remembered the vows he had made, even at the age of eight, to run away from Aunt Dottie, the violent scenes he had imagined – Aunt Dottie trying to hold him in the house, and he hitting her with his fists, flinging her to the ground and throttling her, and finally tearing her brooch off her dress and stabbing her a million times in the throat with it. He had run away at seventeen and had been brought back, and he had done it again at twenty and succeeded. And it was astounding and pitiful how naïve he had been, how little he had known about the way the world worked, as if he had spent so much of his time hating Aunt Dottie and scheming how to escape her, that he had not had enough time to learn and grow. He remembered the way he had felt when he had been fired from the warehouse job during his first month in New York. He had held the job less than two weeks, because he hadn't been strong enough to lift orange crates eight hours a day, but he had done his best and knocked himself out trying to hold the job, and when they had fired him, he remembered how horribly unjust he had thought it. He remembered deciding then that the world was full of Simon Legrees, and that you had to be an animal, as tough as the gorillas who worked with him at the warehouse, or starve. He remembered that right after that, he had stolen a loaf of bread from a delicatessen counter and had taken it home and devoured it, feeling that the world owed a loaf of bread to him, and more.

(Highsmith 1973, 39–40)

This sketchy back story is meant to explain Tom's craving for acceptance as well as his self-contempt, his greed for possessions and luxury as well as his willingness (and partly also his ability) to adapt to any situation and any person's wishes. These character traits, obviously, result from a lack of parental love, and protection as well as from different experiences of emotional and physical violence he suffered from throughout his whole childhood. They are complemented by emotional states of self-hatred, fear (of being detected or laughed at for instance), shame, and anger that are typical of Tom. They also lead to murdering Dickie Greenleaf when Dickie is about to dismiss him:

A crazy emotion of hate, of affection, of impatience and frustration was swelling in him, hampering his breathing. He wanted to kill Dickie. It was not the first time he had thought of it. Before, once or twice or three times, it had been an impulse caused by anger or disappointment, and [*sic*] impulse that vanished immediately and left him with a feeling of shame. Now he thought about it for an entire minute, two minutes, because he was leaving Dickie anyway, and what was there to be ashamed of any more? He had failed with Dickie, in every way. He hated Dickie, because, however he looked at what had happened, his failing had not been his own fault, not due to anything he had done, but due to Dickie's inhuman stubbornness. And his blatant rudeness! He had offered Dickie friendship, companionship, and respect, everything he had to offer, and Dickie had replied with ingratitude and now hostility. Dickie was just shoving him out in the cold.

(Highsmith 1973, 100)

Thus, the motive for Tom's deed is not mainly greed, but rather hatred stemming from his affection for Dickie which matches with Tom's childish struggle for acceptance. From a moral point of view, Tom is a victim himself, which allows for a more differentiated evaluation of him. Furthermore, his ability to control his emotions and actions becomes dubious.<sup>3</sup>

This does not mean that the murder is justified, of course, but rather that it is harder to completely disapprove of Tom, and easier to understand the emotional state he is in when he decides to kill Dickie. Or, in other words, to empathize with Tom even though he commits such a severe crime. As, additionally, we learn nearly nothing about Dickie's inner life it is harder to refrain from adopting Tom's emotional perspective. Compared to Tom, the other characters' feelings are implicitly marked far less relevant.

This scheme of empathy-building for the protagonist is introduced right from the beginning of the novel. At the outset, he is presented as feeling afraid of being hunted by Dickie's father whom he does not know at that time:



Tom glanced behind him and saw the man coming out of the Green Cage, heading his way. Tom walked faster. There was no doubt the man was after him. Tom had noticed him five minutes ago, eyeing him carefully from a table, as if he weren't *quite* sure, but almost. He had looked sure enough for Tom to down his drink in a hurry, pay and get out.

(Highsmith 1973, 1 [*italics in the original text*])

Only after that do readers learn that Tom makes money by betraying people double-cashing their taxes. The initial offer for empathizing with Tom, and also implicitly accepting him as a likeable character rightfully deserving compassion is thus contradicted by his criminal activities. But again, these are carefully counterbalanced by presenting him as a miserable creature struggling for approval. And it is this struggle, not mere greediness that finally leads to murdering Dickie. So, whenever Tom is about to act arrogantly, unempathically, or brutally – features that allow for deprecating him – new information about his inner state is provided that show him as being afraid, lonely, or ashamed. After the murder of Freddie Miles for example, the novel rather elaborately illustrates the emotional costs for Tom: “He had to keep a distance from people, always. He might acquire the different standards and habits, but he could never acquire the circle of friends [...]. He was alone, and it was a lonely game he was playing” (Highsmith 1973, 186).

So there seems to be a scheme of rebuilding control loops of empathy and “*Sympathie*” following episodes that might lead to a complete devaluation of Tom. The novel starts with offers for empathy for Tom, after that introducing him as someone committing “only” financial crimes to amount for his mere subsistence, then provides a back story depicting him as a victim of emotional as well as physical violence and abuse. It is not till then that the murder of Dickie is depicted, a capital crime which seems to happen in the heat of the moment rather than being planned in cold blood. And after this and the next murder, the emotional costs of Tom's offence are made unmistakably clear thus counterbalancing feelings of disgust, or abhorrence towards him. Conclusively, it seems rather likely that textual features providing access towards Tom's inner life as well as allowing to evaluate him in a differentiated way play a crucial role in the reading process. They enable readers to empathize with Tom or feel compassion for him – at least from time to time, and especially in contrast to episodes that might cause a strong aversion towards him.

So, given that Scheele's assumption about the interplay of empathy and “*Sympathie*” is convincing, it seems plausible that empathy-building as well as character-related evaluative literary techniques can be used to

induce empathy and to initiate processes of reevaluation towards villainous literary characters thus heightening their likeability and motivating readers to keep on reading even though they despise what these characters are doing.

#### 11.4 *Desiderata*

There are a lot of questions remaining that need further discussion, of course. Some of them are of a psychological kind, some are philosophical, and others are central to literary scholars. Let me name just a few of them:

a. The question of differentiation

There are other emotional responses or attitudes to characters that are of an evaluative kind. But not all of them should be regarded as stemming from an attitude of “*Sympathie*”. For example, one can be fascinated by a character or may appreciate him or her without experiencing emotions that stem from the character’s likeability. For example, Tom’s ability to become another person, or to easily adopt to new situations can be said to be fascinating, although this ability may not affect his likeability. How can these be differentiated from “*Sympathie*”? Are they equally important for the analysis of ambivalent characters? The same holds true for reactions of disapproval other than antipathic ones, of course.

b. The question of the kind of relation between alter and ego

Following Scheele, “*Sympathie*” is mainly focused on another’s deeds, skills, and traits. For Katharina Prinz and Simone Winko, the traits, goals, emotions, and external features of characters are the key elements the subject of “*Sympathie*” will concentrate on (cf. Prinz and Winko 2014). Does that seem convincing? And if so, what kind of values are at the core of the evaluation process that results in an attitude of “*Sympathie*”? Prinz and Winko name a broad range of relevant types of values like moral, pragmatic, social, and aesthetic ones, but also aspects like attractiveness of a character, or the appropriateness of his or her feelings and actions (cf. Prinz and Winko 2014, 111). Can this list be specified and/or put into a hierarchical order? For example, there are scholars besides Scheele like Murray Smith who regard moral values as the most important ones here (cf. Smith 1995, 84). Others like Katja Mellmann contest this assumption. She claims that “*Sympathie*” rather rests upon all kinds of perceived likenesses between alter and ego that are of no moral kind (cf. Mellmann 2006, 137). Is one of these more specific positions more convincing?

## c. The question of caring for fictional characters

For fictional characters one has to solve the paradox of caring, thus answering the question of why we care about someone who, as we know, does not exist. Gregory Currie has put it like that:

1. I care about Jago [a fictional character in C. P. Snow's novel *The Masters*, C.H.]
2. To care about someone I have to believe in him or her
3. I don't believe in Jago (Currie 1997, 65)

As this paradox resembles the paradox of fiction in many ways, one may follow a similar path for its solution (cf. Stecker 2011).

## d. The question of aesthetic appreciation

Readers, it seems, do not only respond with emotions like sympathy or disgust to ambivalent characters, but also with aesthetic emotions like pleasure. Even more so, readers seem to appreciate literary artefacts that enable them to experience converse emotions towards one and the same character. Why do they do that, given that in ordinary social relationships the same kind of oscillating emotional experiences may elicit stress rather than pleasure? As Jens Eder has pointed out (cf. Eder 2008, 134–143), fictional characters can be perceived as persons in a fictional world as well as artificial beings. With regard to Eder, emotions like aesthetic pleasure stem from that second perspective on fictional characters as carefully composed artefacts. And moral values may be more or less irrelevant for readers when evaluating fictional characters in that vein (see also Lamarque in this volume). If this seems convincing, the question arises how feelings of empathy and feelings of caring towards fictional characters perceived as persons and aesthetic emotions towards them perceived as artefacts interact with each other during reading processes.

## e. The problem of gradation

When speaking of “Sympathie” as a term that allows for upgrades and downgrades, this boils down to the assumption that “Sympathie” is somewhat gradable. Is this convincing? And if so, to what extent is it possible to differentiate grades of “Sympathie”? At what level of appreciation does “Sympathie” begin? The same question arises for empathy, of course.

f. The problem of textual analysis

How do we analyze ambivalent characters in literary texts? What we can do is to bring out which emotions are ascribed to the characters and to which degree of frequency and intensity this is done, thus describing the empathic potential of those textual features. And we can analyze which kinds of character traits are displayed in a text and which character-related values are triggered. Moreover, we can search for evidence from reception history as well as for indicators that help us reconstruct the value system of a culture, or a social group that may have influenced evaluative reading processes focused on characters. But how should textual analysis, reception analysis, and discourse analysis be combined here? What tools are appropriate to reconstruct potentials of characters to appear as likeable or not? And how do we describe its changes over time?

g. The problem of evidence

As Katharina Prinz has pointed out, one should only speak of a full-fledged form of “*Sympathie*” if it’s possible to show that there really was such a thing as a congruence of values between a certain character and its readers (cf. Prinz 2016, 63). Which amounts to verifying this relationship by pointing either to evidence from reception documents, or to the value system of the contemporaries. However, not all reception documents exhibit the information needed in this context. And, even more seriously, there are periods of literary history where we even lack information regarding the value system. This holds true for a lot of medieval texts, for instance. Should one refrain from speaking of “*Sympathie*”, or ambivalence in this case? How do we deal with texts from cultural backgrounds in which the concept of “*Sympathie*” does not exist?

To further explore the character type of the “*sympathische Unsympath*”, all of these questions need further clarification.

## Notes

- 1 In German, “*Sympathie*”, refers to an appreciative attitude towards a person or character as well as to several emotions of caring this attitude may induce in its subject. There seems to be no appropriate verbal equivalent to the German word “*Sympathie*” in English, which is why I will speak of “*Sympathie*” for a lack of better terms.
- 2 Of course, after the murder of Dickie Greenleaf there would still be the thriller scheme of the novel that could keep readers at reading on, as it is an open question throughout the novel whether Tom will be found guilty by the Italian police or Mr. McCarron or not, thus giving way to feelings of suspense and curiosity. But a feeling of suspense also affords some kind of appreciation for the protagonist of the novel (cf. Vorderer 1996).

- 3 Besides, it remains an open question why his so-called friends do not notice his desperateness and loneliness. None of them seems to be very empathic. Accordingly, there are some hints that the ethics of the people Tom lives with mirror his own ethical convictions, at least in part.

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## 12 “Empathy Is a Swindle!” – Or Is It?

### Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* as an Empathy Test for Readers

*Eva-Maria Konrad*

At the heart of Philip K. Dick’s work lies the question of what is real and what is fake. In one of Dick’s most famous books, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, which was cinematized as *Blade Runner*, authenticity comes into play with regard to the differences between humans and androids, real and electric animals, true revelations and delusion, as well as, astonishingly enough, real and artificial feelings. On an earth devastated by the nuclear “World War Terminus” (Dick 1968/2010, 5),<sup>1</sup> the remaining people rely greatly on technology by using “empathy box[es]” (DAD 16) to fuse empathically with other human beings. “Mercerism” (DAD 7), the spiritual movement deeply intertwined with this fusion, turns out, however, to be based on a fake concept, thus casting doubt not only on the realness of the human protagonists’ feelings but also on the existence of empathy in the first place. As the lack of empathy – “the book’s all-purpose word for social feeling” (Kerman 1984, 71) – is presented as the main characteristic distinguishing androids from humans, it is hardly surprising that the boundless research on *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* has focused primarily on empathy as one of the major topics of the text.

Considering the decisive role the reader plays in Dick’s definition of “Science Fiction”, however, it is rather surprising that the reader’s empathic reaction to the story has mostly been neglected so far.<sup>2</sup> Dick (1981/1995, 100) emphasizes that in *good* science fiction the conceptual dislocation central to this genre

is new, it is stimulating, and, probably most important of all, it sets off a chain reaction of ramification ideas in the mind of the reader; it so to speak unlocks the reader’s mind so that that mind, like the author’s, begins to create. [...] [T]he very best science fiction ultimately winds up being a collaboration between author and reader, in which both create – and *enjoy* doing it.

The defining characteristics of *good* science fiction therefore relate to the theme (or structure) – a new conceptual dislocation – and to reader-response – intellectual stimulation, artistic creation, and joy.

Since one can safely proceed on the assumption that Dick did his best to ensure that these intended reactions on the part of the reader actually occur, I will argue that *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is not only *about* empathy but that it also *provokes* empathic reactions that are an important factor in understanding the fictional characters as well as the story as a whole. Empathy (and reflection on it) is therefore not only one of the main topics of the novel but also a major effect of the book. Nevertheless, I will speculate as little as possible on concrete reader responses (which could only be ascertained empirically anyway) and focus instead on the narrative, linguistic, and structural strategies Dick uses to address – and basically disorient – the reader’s empathic reactions. Three different aspects will be subject to detailed analysis: the “Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test” (DAD 23) used to discriminate androids from human beings; the empathic capacities of the three different types of characters – humans, androids, and “specials”; and the animals, the worshipped counterpart of the androids.

### 12.1 The Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test

The professional bounty hunter Rick Deckard is “retiring – i.e. killing –” (DAD 24) androids that are illegally on earth. It is not easy, however, to distinguish androids from humans. Since androids are intelligent as well as organic, there are only two ways to differentiate between them and humans: either a bone marrow analysis – a procedure that is not only “slow and painful” (DAD 41) for a living subject but also illegal to force on somebody – or the Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test – “a ‘behavioural’ examination” (Panka 2020, 232; cf. also Teschner and Grace 2011, 90) based on the fact that an android, “no matter how gifted as to pure intellectual capacity, could make no sense out of the fusion which took place routinely among the followers of Mercerism. [...] Empathy, evidently, existed only within the human community” (DAD 23–24).<sup>3</sup> Since the six escaped androids Deckard is instructed to retire are of the most modern type, the “Nexus-6”, their intellectual capacities are enhanced so that they “surpassed several classes of human specials in terms of intelligence” (DAD 23). More importantly, it is unclear whether the Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test is still accurate in its results for this type. Deckard is therefore sent to their manufacturer, the Rosen organization, to put not only “a representative sampling of types employing the new Nexus-6 unit” (DAD 29) but also a human control group through the test. As his superior warns Deckard in advance, “this could go wrong either way. If you can’t pick out all the humanoid robots, then we have no reliable analytical tool and we’ll never find the ones who’re already escaping. If your scale factors out a human subject, identifies him as android –” (DAD 31).<sup>4</sup> This second problem, however, has already been recognized: certain human beings, especially “schizoid and schizophrenic human patients [...] – [t]hose specifically,



which reveal what's called a 'flattening of affect'" (DAD 30) – cannot pass the test either.<sup>5</sup>

When Deckard arrives at the Rosen organization, the reader is eager to witness the Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test in practice since it has been mentioned several times and explained theoretically in quite some detail. The reader's curiosity gets satisfied in unexpected specificity when Deckard is asked to test Rachael Rosen, allegedly Eldon Rosen's niece. The ensuing extensive testing is striking in several aspects.

First of all, it is remarkable *per se* that Dick does not summarize and comprise the testing but instead presents it in great detail with every question and answer word for word and exact descriptions of the reactions shown by the gauges. This enables the reader to take part in the testing personally. Having aroused the reader's curiosity, Dick now extends an invitation to observe (quite like Deckard with Rachael) one's own personal empathic reactions to the questions.

Second, the beginning of the testing holds quite a surprise in store for the reader. Although Dick prepares us (along with Rachael) for the empathy test to measure the testee's "reaction to a morally shocking stimulus" (DAD 37), the first situation presented by Deckard seems to lack any such stimulus or any appeal to empathy at all. "You are given a calfskin wallet on your birthday" (DAD 38). Since no further explanation is given, only a description of the movement of the gauges – "[b]oth gauges immediately registered past the green and onto the red; the needles swung violently and then subsided" (DAD 38) – the reader is left to wonder what might have caused this reaction. Why should the situation described evoke any empathic reaction? And who is even this figure at whom the empathic reaction is supposed to be directed? Rachael's reply of "I wouldn't accept it, [...] [a]lso I'd report the person who gave it to me to the police" (DAD 38) gives no answer to any of these questions either.

For Deckard, though, Rachael's involuntary and verbal reactions seem to be telling. He makes "a jot of notation" (DAD 38) before continuing with the next question. A third relevant aspect, one in sharp contrast to the detailed presentation of the testing, is the withholding of Deckard's reasons for making a note and the meaning of the note in respect to Rachael's test result.<sup>6</sup> The repetition of the exact same narrative pattern with regard to test questions two and three<sup>7</sup> – as Deckard presents a new situation to Rachael, Rachael answers, the gauges register Rachael's involuntary reaction, and Deckard makes a note – makes it obvious that Dick is pursuing a strategy of disorientation vis-à-vis the reader: since the text offers no solution or explanation to the reader's inevitable irritation in regard to the empathy test, the reader is left alone to search for possible answers to the erratic situations presented to Rachael as well as to reader's own (probably) missing empathic reactions.

The fourth question finally clears some things up with Dick’s use of a fourth narrative strategy, namely misdirection. The passage must therefore be cited completely.

“In a magazine you come across a full-page color picture of a nude girl”.

He paused.

“Is this testing whether I’m an android”, Rachael asked tartly, “or whether I’m homosexual?” The gauges did not register.

He continued. “Your husband likes the picture”. Still the gauges failed to indicate a reaction. “The girl”, he added, “is lying face down on a large and beautiful bearskin rug”. The gauges remained inert, and he said to himself, an android response. Failing to detect the major element, the dead animal pelt. Her – its – mind is concentrating on other factors. “Your husband hangs the picture up on the wall of his study”, he finishes, and this time the needles moved.

“I certainly wouldn’t let him”, Rachael said (DAD 39).

For the first time during the testing, the reader is allowed to inspect Deckard’s thinking and judgement. His analysis, however, comes as a surprise for the reader that has been well-prepared by Dick. For one thing, the situation presented is different from the first three: now there is a human being – i.e. a prototypical individual towards whom the reader can direct empathy – and, likewise for the first time, pornography introduces a subject that is indeed morally problematic. So, now the reader might feel on the safe side with any empathic reaction. For another thing, the narrative explicitly supports this direction of thought by reporting that the gauges “did not register” and still “failed to indicate a reaction” – which obviously implies that a reaction *should* have been registered if Rachael was not an android. This once again reinforces the reader’s idea that it is indeed all about the pornographic content. Yet, just as Rachael’s “mind is concentrating on other factors”, the reader is sent down the wrong track: the major element of moral concern as well as the paramount empathic figure is not the nude girl but the bearskin rug (i.e. the dead bear) – an element of the story that had not even been introduced when the gauges had already “failed to indicate a reaction” twice! This misguidance is reinforced by the way Deckard presents the situation: he pauses twice and waits for Rachael’s (and thereby the reader’s) reaction before introducing the crucial element and finishing the story, thus creating the false impression that an empathic reaction had been expected earlier.

This line of thought is finally supported by the fact that Dick has chosen empathy with animals as the decisive test criterion for differentiating between human beings and androids. As Ursula K. Heise (2003, 73) notes: “This criterion of distinction is interesting because the general claim in Deckard’s society is that androids do not have empathy with other beings;

presumably, to the extent that such an emotional capability is testable at all, it could be assessed through scenarios involving humans as well as animals. But of all the questions in Deekard's repertoire, only one involves humans".<sup>8</sup> Of course, plausible text-internal reasons for this method can be found. In a world in which most animals are extinct, live animals are "fetishized as the repositories of human empathy" (Galvan 1997, 415). And yet, there is another explanation for Dick's choice that once again refers to the reader's own empathic feelings: the situations presented by Deekard are unexpected for the reader since "the idea of empathy is usually used (outside of [...] the book) to characterize aspects of relations *between people*, and not between people and non-human animals or the broader natural world" (Norris 2013, 26). Reference to animals in the context of rather common situations in our world (and even more so at the time the book was written) therefore seems to be the strategy Dick deploys to ensure (as much as possible) that the reader does not react empathically. The actual success of Dick's strategy has been proven by the multitude of comments stressing that "most of Dick's audience would fail the Voigt-Kampff test. Its questions – about topics such as boiling live lobster, eating meat, or using fur – denote things that are commonplace rather than shocking in our world" (Vint 2007, 115).<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, it does not matter when the reader finds out exactly about the direction of the test: even the knowledge of the most alert reader who immediately grasps the relevance of animal welfare for the diegetic world and for the empathy test in particular is most likely not accompanied by the empathic feelings that the test demands as proof of humanness.<sup>10</sup>

Taking all of this into account, it is rather obvious that the Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test is designed less for the text-internal testing of androids (which could have been realized in many different ways) but to a greater degree for testing the reader of the text: the test is narrated in a way that not only leaves the reader in the dark for a long time but that is also deliberately misleading. Even if the reader does not fall for these strategies, one is forced to experience – and then reflect on – one's own attitude towards animal welfare first-hand. From the viewpoint of a future planet earth with most animals either extinct or critically endangered, our contemporary treatment of them must seem heedless, cruel, and abusive – and therefore show a serious lack of empathy. The reader's test result thus probably corresponds to the test result of a "Nexus-6", thereby facilitating not only a cognitive grasp of the central direction of the novel but also enabling a personal affective experience – one that definitely promotes a better understanding of the text.

## 12.2 Humans, Androids, and "Specials"

Dick's pursuance of constant disorientation through continuous subversion of any certainties previously assumed by the reader in regard to one's own

empathic attitude is even more pronounced in the depiction of the capacity for empathy of three different types of characters – humans, androids, and “specials”. At the beginning of the novel, the reader is mainly confronted with Deckard’s and his superior’s contemptuous attitude towards androids and with TV advertising that presents androids “as body servants or tireless field hands” (DAD 13) – a perspective that dehumanizes androids by emphasizing their mechanical lives as slaves, instruments, and unempathic “solitary predator[s]” (DAD 24), thus systematically impeding any empathic attitude towards them.<sup>11</sup> However, the novel soon starts to cast doubt on the correctness of these viewpoints.

One crucial aspect that disorients the reader’s empathic judgement is the repeated deprecation of the Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test – the only method supposedly able to differentiate between androids and humans. This method is unveiled to be not half as scientific and reliable as it appears at first sight: first of all, after declaring that the test results show Rachael to be an android, Deckard gets tricked by Eldon Rosen’s claim that he is wrong. Rosen’s attempt at deception is almost successful due to bribing Deckard with a living owl – an appeal to Deckard’s great wish to own a real animal – as well as to the fact that Deckard knows of the deficits of the test. His superior had articulated these in their communication beforehand. Then Eldon Rosen repeats:

[Y]our Voigt-Kampff test was a failure before we released that type of android [the Nexus-6]. [...] Your police department – others as well – may have retired, very probably have retired, authentic humans with underdeveloped empathic ability, such as my niece here. Your position, Mr Deckard, is extremely bad morally. Ours isn’t (DAD 43).

Second, the decisive cue for Deckard that his initial assessment of Rachael was right is not the result of her answer to one of the test questions but of his observation of her wording: “It, he thought. *She keeps calling the owl it.* Not her” (DAD 46). Once again, it is remarkable that Dick does not spell out exactly what it is that Deckard realizes. According to McInnis (2018, 105), what happens is that “Rachael’s linguistic limits are noticed by Deckard”. She “is unable to make an exception or change with the new circumstance because she is programmed to ‘keep calling the owl it’” (McInnis 2018, 105). The problem, then, does not seem to be that this is unempathic phrasing – Deckard himself keeps calling the owl “it”, even after Rachael has convinced him that the animal is not artificial (cf. DAD 34). Instead, Deckard realizes that Rachael would have had to lie to adhere to the deceit but couldn’t make herself incorrectly call the owl “her”. It is Rachael’s inability to adapt to the situation linguistically – and not the notoriously unreliable Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test – that gives away the artificiality of the owl and thereby of the whole scenario created by the Rosens.<sup>12</sup>

Third, Rachael's subsequent conviction is also not the result of one of the many standard questions of the Voigt-Kampff test. "My briefcase,' Rick said as he rummaged for the Voigt-Kampff forms. 'Nice, isn't it? Department issue. [...] Babyhide,' Rick said. He stroked the black leather surface of the briefcase. 'One hundred percent genuine human babyhide'" (DAD 47). This scenario is so strikingly different from all the other situations presented (in content *and* in language) that it immediately suggests that Deckard is improvising. For one thing, the scenario originates from a concrete object right in front of Rachael, not from an imaginary situation. In addition, Deckard himself is part of it ("my briefcase"). For another thing, the verbal presentation is broken and fragmented in syntax and even includes a question, all in sharp contrast to the earlier situations. Unlike Panka (2020, 233), who juxtaposes Deckard's intuition with "the scientifically grounded Voigt-Kampff" test, I consider the test to be fundamentally reliant on Deckard's resourcefulness.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, it is only by creative modification of the test situation – and not by a scientifically fixed procedure – that Deckard finally succeeds in proving Rachael's android status.

Nevertheless, the verdict against Rachael seems to demonstrate to the reader that there are, in fact, detectable differences between humans and androids. This is why it is important that, fourth, the Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test be narrated in detail a second time in the novel when Deckard performs it on Luba Luft. In contrast to Rachael, Luba Luft succeeds in undermining the test and getting Deckard arrested by using a combination of three strategies. She questions Deckard's humanity, saying that he "must be an android" (DAD 80) because he hunts androids without any apparent mercy; she pretends to misunderstand the situations presented to her and not to grasp the meaning of the words, thereby creating a "semantic fog" (DAD 83) that makes it impossible for Deckard to get meaningful readings;<sup>14</sup> and she casts doubt on the method of the Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test altogether by judging its questions to be obscene and Deckard to be "a sexual deviant" (DAD 84). Though Luba Luft eventually gets "retired", the effect of the whole scene is a fundamental destabilization of all alleged certainties about the scientific nature of the test and the "superior [human] life form" (DAD 106).

The scene at the Mission Street Hall of Justice, an alternative, "android-infested" (DAD 99) police station in a kind of parallel universe (cf. Panka 2020, 228), is the final straw that breaks the camel's back and results in a total "breakdown of categorization and classification" (Panka 2020, 232): Deckard is led off to a police station "[h]e had never seen [...] before" (DAD 89) where one of the officials is even on Deckard's killing list and the other bounty hunters, who Deckard has never heard of, use the morphological "Boneli Reflex-Arc Test" (DAD 95) instead of the behavioural Voigt-Kampff test.<sup>15</sup> One of these bounty hunters, Phil Resch, has such a

great defect in his “empathic, role-taking ability” (DAD 112) that Deckard simply cannot believe Resch could be “part of the human race” (DAD 112). All this is combined with the permanent insinuation that Deckard might be an android himself, with his uncompassionate and unmindful relationship to his wife Iran (cf. DAD 1–4; cf. also Vinci 2014, 92; Vint 2007, 116) and his own realization that he is “capable of feeling empathy for at least specific, certain androids” (DAD 113). Taken together, all this generates a total dissolution of everything Deckard has ever believed in and fought (and killed) for, resulting in a serious crisis.<sup>16</sup> In addition, it also leaves the readers completely disoriented as to what is real and what is fake, whether a difference between humans and androids can ever be established and with whom they should sympathize and empathize after all: “So much for the distinction between authentic living humans and humanoid constructs” (DAD 113). Ironically, the only empathic constant in the text seems to be J. R. Isidore, a “special” (DAD 12) – a human being genetically and/or psychologically degenerated by the atomic outfall. Isidore “is probably the most human of all the novel’s characters” (McInnis 2018, 102; cf. also Toth 2013, 70; Vinci 2014, 102; Kerman 1984, 71) and therefore a figure of emotional and especially empathic identification for the readers. His attitude, however, is specifically judged to be over-empathic and inadequate by the humans so that the reader’s empathic attitude is unsettled once more.<sup>17</sup>

In a similar vein, Luba Luft’s “retirement” is not the end of the story. After destabilizing the initial assumptions underlying the introduction of androids into the novel (and therefore probably also destabilizing the reader’s empathic attitude towards them), Dick again makes every effort in the second half of the novel to unsettle the newly reached adjustments. Whereas the unscientific nature of the Voigt-Kampff Test and the unempathic behaviour of the humans tend to undermine empathy as the distinguishing criterion between humans and androids, empathy is later re-established and confirmed by the androids’ own assertions and actions. The androids’ treatment of an animal found by Isidore becomes a turning point: a “spider, undistinguished but alive” (DAD 161). As Isidore presents this living miracle to the androids, they become curious about the numerous legs of the animal:

“Eight?” Irmgard Baty said. “Why couldn’t it get by on four? Cut four off and see”. Impulsively opening her purse she produced a pair of clean, sharp cuticle scissors, which she passed to Pris.

A weird terror struck at J. R. Isidore.

[...] “It probably won’t be able to run as fast”, she [Pris] said, “but there’s nothing for it to catch around here anyhow. It’ll die anyway”. She reached for the scissors.

“Please”, Isidore said. [...] “Don’t mutilate it”, he said wheezingly. Imploringly.

With the scissors Pris snipped off one of the spider’s leg (DAD 162).

The whole scene is presented in zero focalization that prominently presents Isidore’s perspective to the readers as well as that of the spider: “Pris had now cut three legs from the spider, which crept about miserably on the kitchen table, seeking a way out, a path to freedom. It found none” (DAD 163–164). Against this background, it is even more salient that the narrator doesn’t characterize the inner life of the androids but only their emotionless assertions, actions, and outward experience.

With the scissors Pris snipped off another of the spider’s legs. “Four now”, she said. She nudged the spider. “He won’t go. But he can”. [...] “I can make it walk”. Roy Baty got out a book of matches, lit a match; he held it near the spider, closer and closer, until at last it crept feebly away.

“I was right”, Irmgard said. “Didn’t I say it could walk with only four legs?” She peered up expectantly at Isidore. [...]

Pris, with the scissors, cut yet another leg from the spider. All at once John Isidore pushed her away and lifted up the mutilated creature. He carried it to the sink and there he drowned it. In him his mind, his hopes, drowned, too. As swiftly as the spider (DAD 165–166).

The repeated use of the word “mutilation” (not only by Isidore, but also by the narrator; cf. DAD 162, 164, 166, 170), together with the integrated perspective of the tortured spider and the first shocked and finally merciful but completely devastated reaction of Isidore – all in contrast to the “clinical” language and behaviour of the androids – clearly aims at provoking the reader’s empathy with the suffering creature (and possibly also with Isidore, who sees himself betrayed by his alleged friends). On the other side of that coin, the readers, prompted by the strategies deployed earlier in the novel to have doubts about the androids’ lack of empathy, now, without any doubt, find themselves revolted by their unempathic actions.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, the androids themselves not only show but also repeatedly acknowledge that they lack the capacity to empathize and to care. When Deckard faces the android officer with the allegation that “androids [...] don’t exactly cover for each other in times of stress” (98), the android admits: “I think you’re right; it would seem we lack a specific talent you humans possess. I believe it’s called empathy” (DAD 98). After Deckard fulfils Luba Luft’s last wish, she admires humans as “a superior life form” (DAD 106) because “[t]here’s something very strange and touching about

humans. An android would never have done that” (DAD 106). Similarly, referring to Isidore’s help, Roy Baty admits: “If he was an android, [...] he’d turn us in about ten tomorrow morning” (DAD 130; cf. also 127). Even Rachael tells Deckard: “I don’t care if Roy Baty nails you or not. I care whether I get nailed [...]. Christ, I’m empathic about myself. [...] [A]ndroids have no loyalty to one another” (DAD 150). Rachael’s killing of Deckard’s goat later in an act of revenge once more “confirms precisely the perception of androids as incapable of understanding and feeling with other living beings that much of the preceding text had seemed to portray as mere prejudice” (Heise 2003, 74). And yet, a closer look modifies this impression once again as the text expresses repeatedly (and convincingly) that the androids do have a concept of friendship (cf. DAD 118, 156) and that they do care for each other (cf. DAD 121, 177).

Taken as a whole, the reader’s empathic attitude is constantly disoriented. Is the reader (just as the androids themselves) just being told that the androids lack empathic feelings or is there really a difference between humans and androids? Do the androids deserve the reader’s empathy or don’t they? As Dick gives the readers no chance at all to *know* whether the alleged difference between humans and androids actually exists, the reader relies solely on personal affective (and especially empathic) reactions to find answers to these questions. Once again, this experience enables the reader to understand the text better as the experience resembles the one Deckard goes through in his evolution from a bounty hunter who treats androids thoughtlessly and carelessly into a person who has “begun to empathize with androids” (DAD 137) – a process resulting not from acquisition of new knowledge but from a new affective attitude brought about through his encounters with Luba Luft and Rachael. As Hayles (1999, 175) plausibly argues, the novel

shows the essential quality of “the human” shifting from rationality to feeling. [...] The change comes when nonhuman animals, rapidly fading into extinction, have ceased to pose any conceivable threat to human domination. Since the real threat now comes from the androids, the shift in definition is hardly a coincidence

– and this shift is exactly the effect Dick’s narrative strategy provokes with regard to the readers. This constant adjustment and readjustment of the reader’s empathic attitude is ultimately mirrored by the construction and deconstruction of Mercer, the prophet-like leader of “Mercerism” whose existence is at the basis of the whole concept of empathy – and therefore the definition of humanness itself – in the novel. The announcement that Mercer’s life of suffering is based on a Hollywood production and that Mercer is a fraud is remarkably interwoven with the dismemberment of



the spider by the androids.<sup>19</sup> The conclusion drawn by Roy Baty is that “‘Mercerism is a swindle.’ The whole experience of empathy is a swindle” (DAD 165–166). Apparently, the entire system of empathy on which the distinction between humans and androids is based seems not only to waver but to collapse. Yet, once again, this is not the end: Mercer, the alleged fraud, reappears not only to Isidore but also to Deckard, whom he even saves from being killed by one of the androids. Therefore, not only the androids “have trouble understanding why nothing has changed” (DAD 169) by the unveiling of Mercer’s fake existence. As Hayles (1999, 175, 178) notes,

Dick’s treatment of Mercerism remains complexly ambiguous. The text refuses an either/or choice and implies that Mercerism is both political hucksterism and a genuinely meaningful experience. [...] Dick [...] insists that alongside its fakery there exists a possibility for genuine atonement and redemption [...]. Mercer is in some sense real as well as fake.

Accordingly, the nucleus of Dick’s narrative strategy seems to be to announce, renounce, and re-renounce all categories until the ever-changing information putting pressure on the beliefs and convictions of the readers no longer has an impact on their affective reactions.

### 12.3 Animals

As the discussion on the Voigt-Kampff test has already revealed, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* stages animals as a counterpoint to androids: animals are worshipped to the same extent that androids are devalued (cf. DAD 97). In fact, Deckard’s dream of owning a real animal only comes true because of his (at least initially) ruthless “retiring” of androids for bounty money. The differentiation between these species is closely connected to the question of empathy: a constituent of humanness is being “superior to the android (who cannot empathize) and empathetic toward the animal (whose vulnerability necessitates human care)” (Vinci 2014, 93).<sup>20</sup> Thus, it is hardly surprising that animals, similarly to the androids, play an important role in evoking empathic reactions in the readers.

One highly revelatory scene in this respect shows Isidore pursuing his profession as driver of the Van Ness Pet Hospital – a “carefully misnamed little enterprise which rarely existed in the tough, competitive field of false-animal repair” (DAD 56). In the back of his truck, he has a supposedly electric cat that deceases and only afterward is revealed – to Isidore and to the readers – to have been real. Similar to the episode concerning the Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test, this scene is instructive not only with regard

to Isidore's affective capacities but also to those of the reader as Dick's narration once again aims strategically at disorienting the reader with respect to the realness of the cat – and therefore also with respect to the empathic reactions that might be directed at it.

First of all, Dick explicitly, repeatedly, and extensively describes the suffering of the allegedly electric cat as it groans, wheezes, and gurgles (cf. DAD 56–57), thereby creating a vivid picture of the creature's (pseudo-) pain. Second, these descriptions are accompanied by Isidore's recurrent astonishment about the authenticity of the suffering: "You'd almost think it was real, Isidore observed. [...] It really sounds as if it's dying. [...] [T]he whole thing appeared – not broken – but organically ill. It would have fooled me, Isidore said to himself" (DAD 56–57). Since Isidore is not new to his job and is confronted with malfunctioning electric animals on a daily basis, this cannot but alert the reader's awareness. The combination of these two aspects alone may already raise doubts about the cat's mode of existence. Additionally, after introducing the cat as "electric" (DAD 56), the narrator repeatedly omits this adjective and refers to the animal as only "the cat" (DAD 56), thereby intensifying the disorientation concerning the status of the animal. Yet, from the moment Isidore approaches it with the intention of recharging the allegedly dying battery, mechanical descriptions of "the construct" (DAD 57) with its "ersatz stomach fur" (DAD 57) abound: "The electric mechanism, within its compellingly authentic-style gray pelt, gurgled and blew bubbles, its vid-lenses glassy, its metal jaws locked together" (DAD 56). On top of that, Dick again makes use of a narrative strategy already discussed with reference to Deckard by repeatedly conflating the narrator's and Isidore's perspectives, thereby making it impossible for the reader to decide who is talking or thinking: "Deftly, he [Isidore] ran his fingers along the pseudo bony spine. The cables should be about here. Damn expert workmanship; so absolutely perfect an imitation" (DAD 57). In whose opinion is the bony spine a "pseudo bony spine" – is it the opinion of the narrator, who seems to describe the situation objectively in the first sentence, or is it the viewpoint of Isidore, whose perspective dominates in the following?<sup>21</sup> That Isidore can't find the control panel or any cables in the cat's fur once again raises doubts in the reader that the cat is "only" electric.

Nevertheless, the reader has to wait several more pages until the truth is finally revealed: "This cat [...] isn't false. [...] And it's dead" (DAD 61). Thus, during the scene in the truck, the reader is confronted with an entity that is suffering – but doesn't know whether the entity is real or not. Since the suffering of a creature is a prototypical situation for arousing empathic reactions, Dick's writing strategies of scattering contradictory signals with regard to the realness of the cat as well as postponing elucidation of this question have the effect of arousing the reader's possible affective reaction long before the status of the cat has been revealed. The

postponed disclosure of the answer provokes reflection on the reader's prior emotional response: regardless of which affective reaction the reader has actually shown – whether empathy with the cat or a lack of empathy – the reader's reaction must be correlated to the cat's once assumed and now (maybe different) form of existence. Once again, the fundamental questions that bother Deckard are mirrored in the reader's own affective experiences that serve to enhance our understanding of the text: is it possible – and/or is it ethically due – to feel empathy for entities that have not been born, but created?

Apart from the electric sheep and the real goat possessed by Deckard (both of which reflect more on Deckard's attitude towards artificial and real animals than the reader's),<sup>22</sup> there are two other animals in the text that play an important role with respect to the reader's empathic reactions and that can only be dealt with in combination: Isidore's spider and Deckard's toad. In comparison to the scene with the cat, the one during which the androids mutilate the spider is especially illuminating as Dick does not show any seeds of doubt here that the spider could be anything but real. In combination with the previously discussed integration of the reaction of the spider, this whole scene clearly aims at provoking the reader's empathy with the suffering creature. Later in the novel, the reader's empathic reaction, however, gets distorted once again: after retiring all six androids, Deckard leaves the city "toward the uninhabited desolation to the north. To the place where no living thing would go. Not unless it felt that the end had come" (DAD 180). Yet, Deckard escapes death by permanently fusing with Mercer and, exhausted and desperate, sees a movement. "An animal, he said to himself" (DAD 187). He finds a toad, a species considered

[e]xtinct for years [...]. Jesus, he thought; it can't be. Maybe it's due to brain damage on my part: exposure to radioactivity. I'm a special, he thought. Something has happened to me. Like the chickenhead Isidore and his spider; what happened to him is happening to me. Did Mercer arrange it? But I'm Mercer. I arranged it; I found the toad. Found it because I see through Mercer's eyes (DAD 187–188).<sup>23</sup>

He puts the creature in a box and takes it home carefully "as a surprise" (DAD 189) for his wife Iran,<sup>24</sup> carrying, "in the box, everything that had happened to him" (DAD 190). Deckard is full of joy – until Iran lifts the toad. She "poked at its abdomen and then, with her nail, located the tiny control panel" (DAD 191). The toad is therefore the counterpart to the cat: since the narrator does not cast any doubt on the assumption that the animal is real, the reader might have assumed (just like Deckard) that the toad is alive – but it turns out to be fake.<sup>25</sup>

Knowing that Deckard hates his electric sheep (cf. DAD 33), the readers might expect a corresponding reaction to Iran’s revelation. But Deckard has changed. “Crestfallen, he gazed mutely at the false animal; he took it back from her, fiddled with the legs as if baffled – he did not seem quite to understand. He then carefully replaced it in its box” (DAD 191) and draws a crucial comparison: “[t]he spider Mercer gave the chickenhead, Isidore; it probably was artificial, too. But it doesn’t matter. The electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are” (DAD 191).<sup>26</sup> The effect of this narrative strategy has been well-prepared. The questioning of the realness of the spider long after the reader has felt empathy for it brings the reader’s experience into accordance with Deckard’s once again. It does not matter whether the creature was real or not, its torture was probably already perceived as unbearable anyway. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the spider is the only animal in the book whose status remains open: it doesn’t matter anymore.<sup>27</sup>

## 12.4 Conclusion

Considering the manifold strategies used by Dick to disorient the reader’s empathic attitudes, it seems quite obvious that the novel aims at putting the reader’s affective reactions to the proof and therefore igniting a thorough reflection on basic assumptions and beliefs with regard to possible objects of empathy, the reader’s own usual empathic or unempathic behaviour and – even more essentially – the meaning of humanness in general. These strategies and their effects not only “facilitate a radical posthuman ethics of expansive vulnerability” (Vinci 2014, 94) and openness towards all kinds of being but also enable the readers to get a better understanding of the salient questions presented in the novel. The empathy test demonstrated in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is therefore not ultimately designed for the androids but for the reader.

## Notes

- 1 In the following, the scribal abbreviation DAD (*Do Androids Dream*) will be used to refer to this text.
- 2 The few papers taking the reader into consideration focus on the effect of a dissolving boundary between human and non-human/android. Cf. Seeger 2011, 40; Butler 2011, 80.
- 3 In several essays and speeches, Dick reflects more theoretically on the concept of androids. In *Man, Android, and Machine* he admits that he concentrated too much “on surface appearances” in his earlier essays (1976/1995, 213) and then adjusts his theory to an android being “someone who does not care about the fate that his fellow loving creatures fall victim to; he stands detached, a spectator” (1976/1995, 211). Accordingly, the vital question for Dick (1976/1995, 212) is whether an entity “*behave[s]* in a human way [...]. ‘Man’ or ‘human being’ are terms that we must understand correctly and apply, but they apply not to origin or to any ontology but to a way of being in the world”. The Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test is a test for just this.

- 4 Though referring to a scene in *Blade Runner*, Norris's (2013, 24) analysis is highly convincing when he points out that Deckard and his superior "do not entertain the possibility that a successful performance by a Replicant [i.e. an android] would show that he or she was empathetic enough to be considered a kind of human being. The test, for them, at this point, does not search for the essential property of the human being, but for a mark that contingently stands in for whatever that property might be. The assumption seems to be that if empathy does not allow for the distinction between human and Replicant, something else must be found. What the real difference between the two might be, or whether there really is one, is simply not asked".
- 5 Cf. Dick 1972/1995, 201. A lot of research has focused on androids as instantiations of schizophrenic patients, cf. for example Matek 2014; McInnis 2018. Cf. also Morrison 2019, 396, and Morton 2015, 27, for parallels between androids and autists, and Greenblatt (2016, 43-43), who illuminatingly uncovers that "any sense that emotionality defines the human has gendered implications. [...] Stories that mark uncannily human-like synthetic humans via affective lack represent not a crisis of human identity but a crisis of normative masculinity".
- 6 It is even more conspicuous that the narrator withholds all information whatsoever concerning Deckard's thoughts, feelings, and judgements at this point since the narrative voice and Deckard's thoughts sometimes seem so closely intertwined that a metaleptic effect emerges. Cf. for example DAD 5: "The morning air, spilling over with radioactive motes, gray and sun-beclouding, belched about him, haunting his nose; he sniffed involuntarily the taint of death. Well, that was too strong a description for it, he decided". Or DAD 113: "And, he [Deckard] realized, if Phil Resch had proved out android, I [again: Deckard] could have killed him without feeling anything".
- 7 These are: "You have a little boy and he shows you his butterfly collection, including his killing jar" (DAD 38) and "You're sitting watching TV [...] and suddenly you discover a wasp crawling on your wrist" (DAD 39).
- 8 It should be added that none involves androids too, which is striking since – as is repeatedly stressed – "[a]n android [...] doesn't care what happens to another android" (DAD 80) as well.
- 9 Cf. also Galvan 1997, 415; Wheale 1991, 300; Kerman 1984, 71; Heise 2003, 73.
- 10 It is not easy, though, to grasp the concept of empathy used in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* With regard to the six most popular processes and mental states associated with empathy listed by Amy Coplan, Dick's term comes closest to conceptions "(B) Caring about someone else" and "(C) Being emotionally affected by someone else's emotions and experiences, though not necessarily experiencing the same emotions" (Coplan 2011, 4).
- 11 Cf. Toth 67: "The novel critiques the human tendency (so apparent in America's various exclusionary practices) to commodify, exploit and estrange 'others' in the name of humanity and the sustainment of exclusionary identity categories". Cf. also Norris 2013, 37: "The slavery of the Replicants is so complete that death for them is identified in the terms of labour. They are not killed or 'executed,' they are *retired*".
- 12 Cf. in this respect Dick 1972/1995, 191: "Androidization requires obedience. And, most of all, *predictability*. [...] Any machine must always work to be reliable. The android, like any other machine, must perform on cue". "Another quality of the android mind is an inability to make exceptions. Perhaps this

- is the essence of it: the failure to drop a response when it fails to accomplish results, but rather to repeat it, over and over again” (Dick 1972/1995, 201).
- 13 Deckard not only improvises this last question but also intuits right from the start which of the questions he should pose to test Rachael best (cf. DAD 38–39). As the later testing of Luba Luft reveals, Deckard even makes changes to the test questions as when “he skipped over the first part” (DAD 82) of a question the reader already knows in full from the test on Rachael.
  - 14 Cf. the instructive analysis of this scene by Galvan (1997, 421): “Luba does here succeed in skirting the authority of the bounty hunter, if only for the moment – and she can do so *precisely because she refuses to respond*, to participate in a dialectic that already finds her culpable. [...] Luba’s android revolt depends upon her capacity to destabilize language, in such a way that throws into question (for Rick, her interlocutor) previously unexamined structures of power”.
  - 15 Cf. Panka 2020, 232: “The fact that there could be more than one classificatory principle (the reflex-arc response and/or the Voigt-Kampff test) renders the whole classificatory process questionable and recalls Dick’s differentiation between ‘ontology’ and ‘being in the world’”.
  - 16 The distinction between androids and humans based on empathy is also put in doubt from another side, namely because the empathic capacity of human beings is strongly bound to, if not controlled by technological devices. The novel begins with a discussion on the setting of the “mood organ[s]” (DAD 1) that Deckard and Iran seem so dependent on that they not only use the device to *alter* their moods but also when it seems completely unnecessary. Deckard “dialed for a creative and fresh attitude toward his job, although this he hardly needed; such was his habitual, innate approach without recourse to Penfield artificial brain stimulation” (DAD 4). This obviously adds to the reader’s disorientation and makes one wonder if the humans are even capable of genuine emotions anymore. Iran herself admits that the mood organ engenders an attitude that once was “considered a sign of mental illness; they called it ‘absence of appropriate affect’” (DAD 3; for a more detailed discussion, see Matek 2014, 74–77; McInnis 2018, 100–102). But if the humans have lost their intuitive ability to react affectively, how can appropriate emotional reactions be the decisive criterion for humanness? Cf. Teschner and Grace 2011, 92; Matek 2014, 86.
  - 17 Cf. Toth 2013, 71; Vint 2007, 116–117. For a critical perspective on Isidore, cf. Vinci 2014, 103. For an instructive gender perspective on the novel, cf. Greenblatt 2016, 49: “Men [...] are in crisis because to feel too little means being not-human but to feel too much may involve becoming not-men. Emotion is both considered the definitional element of the human and a potential threat to it, at least insofar as defining the human relies on modernity’s discrete subject, which shares the attributes traditionally ascribed to maleness”.
  - 18 As several researchers have stressed, this scene “echoes the cold objectivity of scientists engaged in exploratory vivisection” (Toth 2013, 71; cf. also Vint 2007, 113) – and therefore a “behavior we readers recognize as all too human” (Kerman 1984, 71). Nevertheless, it is important to note that Pris cuts off one more leg than envisaged in the initial experiment – an action characterized as senseless and particularly cruel. Cf. also Vint (2007, 113), who claims that this scene “is typically described as the moment when the androids’ truly inhuman nature comes to the surface and all sympathy for them is lost”.
  - 19 Cf. Galvan for considerations on Mercerism and the empathy boxes as instruments of the government’s control over the remaining populace on earth: “[A]s

- the state's optimal homeopathic remedy [...] it recuperates the citizen's transgression into bounds where it can have no consequences. [...] Moreover, in maintaining the illusion of a social network that they in fact forestall, both television and the empathy box covertly disperse individuals, dramatically rupturing the human collective. [...] If the 'empathy' one exercises when fusing with Mercer divides rather than draws individuals together, then what does that say for an accepted understanding of human beings, as differentiated from androids by natural affective interconnections? The electronic image brings this question to the fore, and further it reveals the firm boundaries of the human collective as wholly fictional" (1997, 417–418).
- 20 For an intense discussion of the relation between animals and androids, cf. Vint (2007, 113), who argues that the novel "puts androids in the place historically occupied by animals".
  - 21 Cf. also DAD 57: "Must be a Wheelright & Carpenter product – they cost more, but look what good work they do". Who is addressed by the last part of this sentence? Isidore himself, the narrator – or even the reader?
  - 22 Cf. Vinci 2014, 100; Vint 2007, 116; Kerman 1984, 72.
  - 23 As Heise (2003, 72) notes, "[t]his discovery is so crucial to the novel that Dick originally intended to call it *The Electric Toad: How Androids Dream*".
  - 24 Together with his look through Mercer's eyes, this is a clear sign of his changed and more empathic perspective. As Iran discovered, Deckard's acquisition of a real goat earlier that day was due to him being "depressed. Not as a surprise for me, as you originally said" (DAD 138).
  - 25 Another point strengthening this assumption is that Deckard's wishes come miraculously true throughout the novel. First he realizes that, in order to have a real animal, "[t]he bounty from retiring five andys would do it [...]. The andys would specifically have to take up residence in Northern California, and the senior bounty hunter in this area, Dave Holden, would have to die or retire" (DAD 10). A little later, Dave Holden gets seriously hurt and almost killed by an android, leaving six androids for Deckard to retire – almost exactly as he had imagined it. Additionally, there is no logical explanation (even for Deckard himself) to be found for the dreamlike ease in which he succeeds in 'retiring' all androids but his mere wish for success. Having internalized this logic of fulfilment, the readers might feel safe to assume that the wish Deckard utters later in the novel also gets fulfilled when he finds the toad: "I've never found a live, wild animal. It must be a fantastic experience to look down and see something living scuttling along. Maybe it'll happen someday to me" (DAD 174).
  - 26 Heise argues that the novel "envison[s] the issue of species extinction and the relationship between real and artificial nature from a relentlessly speciesist perspective" that, in "an oblique fashion, Deckard renounces" (Heise 2003, 76) at this point. As Galvan (1997, 427) notes, Deckard also "verbally renounces the ideology of a living community restricted to humans and humans alone".
  - 27 In retrospect, however, readers might find signposts that the spider was in fact artificial. It was found by Isidore, who had been fundamentally mistaken about the status of another animal – the cat – before. In addition, the mutilation of the spider is paralleled by Buster Friendly's unveiling of the fact that "the gray backdrop of sky and daytime moon against which Mercer moves is not only not Terran – *it is artificial*" (DAD 163). Due to Mercer's artificiality, Buster concludes that "Wilbur Mercer is not suffering at all" (DAD 163) – an inference that the novel exposes as problematic and irrelevant.

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## Section 3

# The History of Empathic Understanding



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# 13 Imagination in Early Phenomenological Accounts of Empathy

*Ingrid Vendrell Ferran*

## 13.1 Introduction

In the nineteenth century, when the term “Einfühlung” was coined by Robert Vischer in the context of German aesthetics, it was used to refer to a particular form of engagement with an art work in which the imagination is actively involved (see Maibom 2020, 12, 105). Indeed, “Einfühlung” was translated into English by Titchener as “empathy” and literally means “feeling into”, referring to the human ability to project oneself into an object (broadly understood as encompassing animate as well as inanimate targets).<sup>1</sup> In the context of his Imitation Theory, Lipps employed the term “empathy” precisely in this sense of “feeling into” to explain how we engage with animate and inanimate objects. Lipps’s theory underscored the idea that empathy presupposes a projection into the target, an inner imitation of its feelings, and a resonance with it through the experiencing of these feelings. In accordance with this broad usage of the term, Lipps (1903, 96–223) distinguished between four main types of empathy: empathy of activity, empathy of mood, empathy into nature, and empathy into the sensuous experience of other human beings. As this taxonomy makes clear, empathy experienced a conceptual shift in Lipps’s work so that the term was employed to explain not only how we engage with aesthetic objects but also how we understand others. The meaning of empathy in terms of social cognition was further developed in the works of early phenomenologists such as Husserl and Stein and is now dominant in the current research.<sup>2</sup>

The intimate link between empathy and imagination is today preserved by the Simulation Theory, which was developed during the 1990s as an alternative to the Theory Theory. While in the Theory Theory, as discussed by Carruthers and Smith (1996), we infer what the other is experiencing thanks to a folk psychological theory of how her behaviour and her mental states are connected, in the Simulation Theory defended by Coplan (2011), Goldman (2006), and Stueber (2006), among others, empathy requires a

series of imaginative processes. We imagine the other's experience, adopt her perspective by projecting ourselves into it, re-enact a similar state in ourselves, and resonate with it.<sup>3</sup> The Simulation Theory is often developed by taking Lipps's Imitation Theory – which is considered by many contemporary authors as a proto-simulationist account – as a point of departure. Yet, the Simulation Theory, like the other alternatives in the current debate, has been centred on empathy as a form of social cognition and has not investigated the possibility of empathy with inanimate objects, which was a central aspect in the inception of this concept in the late nineteenth century.

In the last decade, the Direct Perception Theory has gained momentum as an alternative to the Simulation Theory. According to the Direct Perception Theory put forward by Zahavi (2010, 2011; see also Krueger and Overgaard 2012), in empathy we directly perceive the other's experience.<sup>4</sup> This theory has been inspired by the phenomenological accounts of Husserl and, most prominently, Scheler. In particular, the theory has taken as a point of departure the concept of "fellow feeling" (i.e., "Mitgefühl", which means literally "feeling with" the other, and "Mitfühlen", which indicates "co-feeling") developed by Scheler to refer to the immediate apprehension of the other's experience in his or her bodily expression. In contrast to the Simulation Theory, the Direct Perception Theory underscores the immediate character of empathy in terms of a social cognition and emphasizes its quasi-perceptual nature at the expense of the role of imagining. The strong focus of Direct Perception Theory on Husserl and Scheler has led to the impression that early phenomenology explains empathy mostly in terms of a perception-like state, downplaying or rejecting the role that imagining can play in it.<sup>5</sup> This impression is reinforced by the fact that, in general, early phenomenologists such as Husserl, Scheler, and Stein were very critical of the Imitation Theory, which was mainly defended by Lipps.

My aim in this chapter is to counteract this impression by demonstrating that early phenomenologists understood empathy not only in the sense of a direct perception of the other's experiences but as also involving imagination. Indeed, in early phenomenology we can find not only proponents of what we call today the Direct Perception Theory but also authors working with a concept of empathy close to Lipps's, where empathy means "feeling into" animate as well as inanimate targets. In other words, beyond perceptualist models of empathy, we encounter imagination-based accounts of empathy in early phenomenology and these accounts are closer to the Simulation Theory than the Direct Perceptual Theory.

The chapter is structured as follows. It begins by exploring different usages of the term "empathy" in the phenomenological tradition and the role that imagining plays in each one of them (section 13.2). Next, I present and discuss Voigtländer's account of empathy with one's own

image, as developed in her book *Vom Selbstgefühl* (On the Feeling of Self-Worth) (1910) (section 13.3). I then proceed to examine Geiger's account of empathy with atmospheres, as developed in "Zum Problem der Stimmungseinfühlung" (On the Problem of Feeling into Moods) (1911) (section 13.4). Next, I examine Stein's account of empathy with others, as developed in her book *Zum Problem der Einfühlung* (On the Problem of Empathy) (1917/1989) (section 13.5). In the conclusion, I summarize my main findings and show their implications for our understanding of the role of imagining in accounts of empathy developed within the early phenomenological tradition (section 13.6).

### **13.2 Beyond Perceptualism: Radical and Moderate Imaginationists in Early Phenomenology**

To develop my argument, in this chapter I will work with an idea already put forward in 2004 by Moran in his overview of empathy in the phenomenological tradition. According to Moran, in early phenomenology, "empathy" was used with two different meanings. The term is used to refer to the encounter with the other's self in his or her body as well as the projection of one's own self into an alien body (Moran 2004, 271). A look into the complete corpus of early phenomenological literature on empathy confirms Moran's view. Indeed, we find the former usage in Scheler's description of "fellow feeling" (Mitgefühl) and, to a lesser extent, in Husserl's and Stein's accounts of empathy in terms of "perception" of the other's experiences ("Fremdwahrnehmung") (see Moran 2022, 24), though these two authors acknowledge that empathy can also involve processes close to what we today call "imagining".<sup>6</sup> The second usage of "empathy" can be found in authors such as Voigtländer and Geiger, both phenomenologists of the Munich Circle who worked close to Lipps, and who employed the term to refer to a process of "feeling into" inanimate entities, recreating their feelings, and resonating with them. Interestingly, in contrast to the concept of "fellow feeling" (Mitgefühl), Scheler's concept of "Nachfühlen" – usually translated as "vicarious feeling", which means literally re-living (what we would today call re-creating, re-enacting, or simulating) the other's experiences and which Scheler considered to be at work during our engagement with fiction – is closer to the second, rather than the first, usage of the term.

In my view, Moran's thesis about two meanings of empathy in the phenomenological tradition has gone unnoticed. Indeed, the current use of the term "empathy" to refer to a form of social cognition has led to a revival of those early phenomenological accounts of empathy which understand it as a form of encountering the other's self rather than "feeling into" it. This has led to a focus on Scheler's account of "fellow feeling" as the direct perception of the other's experiences, and on Husserl's and

Stein's explanations of empathy as involving perception-like states. And, in spite of the fact that some authors, such as Jardine and Szanto (2017) and Jardine (forthcoming), argue that in Husserl and Stein empathy entails perception- as well as imagination-like processes, the idea that empathy can also be understood in early phenomenology as "feeling into" inanimate as well as animate objects has received scant attention. Against this backdrop, my aim is to make more visible those accounts of empathy in which imagining plays or can play an important role. In so doing, I aim to show that the Direct Perception Theory of empathy is not "the" phenomenological theory of empathy but only one theory of empathy within the early phenomenological tradition.<sup>7</sup>

A focus on these imagination-based accounts will make it clear that, in some of them, as is the case in Lipps, empathy is not restricted to cases of social cognition in which we "feel into" others but is also used to refer to cases in which we "feel into" inanimate objects. Yet, independent of whether the imagination-based accounts employ empathy as social cognition in terms of "feeling into" others or "feeling into" inanimate objects, they underscore the role of imagining in empathy and, in this respect, entail aspects which are close to today's Simulation Theory. In particular, it is my contention here that we can distinguish between two kinds of Imagination-based accounts of empathy in early phenomenology:

#### a) Radical Imaginationists

According to "radical imaginationists", empathy can be explained in terms of a series of imaginative processes entailed in the idea of "feeling into". As developed by Lipps, this involves projecting oneself into an object (animate or inanimate), "imitating" its feelings, and thus experiencing the feelings of our target. I take Voigtländer's account of empathizing with one's own image and Geiger's account of empathizing with atmospheres to be paradigmatic of this kind of account.

#### b) Moderate Imaginationists

According to "moderate imaginationists", empathy might (but does not have to) entail imagining. Stein's account of empathy with others, according to which empathy is a three-step process which can (but does not have to) involve imagination-like states, such as transferring our own self into the other's situation and re-living what she is going through, is a good example of a moderate imaginationist account.<sup>8</sup>

An analysis of Voigtländer's and Geiger's radical accounts – which are not usually discussed in the current literature about empathy in the phenomenological tradition – and a more detailed analysis of the moderate role of imagining in Stein's account, not only provides a richer and more

comprehensive understanding of the usages of empathy in early phenomenology but also underscores the role of imagining as a counter to the recent emphasis put on empathy as the direct perception of the other's experiences.

### 13.3 Voigtländer: Empathy with One's Own Image

In her book *Vom Selbstgefühl* (1910), Voigtländer employs the concept of "Einfühlung" in a sense close to Lipps's "feeling into". In this book, written under the auspices of Lipps and presented as her dissertation thesis in Munich in 1909, she provides a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of feelings of self-worth (Selbstwertgefühle) and its main types.

Though the concept of "feelings of self-worth" had been briefly employed by Lipps to refer to self-feelings in which the subject senses her own value and its fluctuations, Voigtländer was the first to provide an exhaustive analysis of this phenomenon. In her book, she describes feelings of self-worth as "an affective valuating consciousness of one's own self which each of us has and which is subject to fluctuations" (Voigtländer 1910, 19 [own translation]). As examples of such feelings, she mentions confidence, self-affirmation, pride, vanity, shame, cowardice, haughtiness, remorse, embarrassment, ambition, self-abandonment, and self-esteem. In these feelings, we sense our own self as being either elevated or depressed and experience fluctuations of our value in accordance with our abilities, failures, and successes. For instance, in pride we feel elevated while in remorse we feel diminished in worth.

For the purposes of this chapter, Voigtländer's taxonomy of the feelings of self-worth is particularly relevant. To begin, she distinguishes between "vital feelings of self-worth" and "conscious feelings of self-worth". She characterizes the former as instinctive, natural, innate, and "unconscious", by which she means pre-reflective. Examples of this type are self-affirmation, courage, confidence, etc. These feelings are a natural affective orientation which is not related to our achievements (she describes them in quite biological terms). By contrast, the "conscious feelings of self-worth" involve an objective appreciation of our achievements and abilities. As such, they presuppose what she calls a "split of the self" (Voigtländer 1910, 21).

Regarding this latter type, which concerns "conscious feelings of self-worth", she distinguishes between "genuine feelings of self-worth" (eigentliche Selbstgefühle) and "non-genuine" or "mirror feelings of self-worth" (uneigentliche oder Spiegelselbstgefühle) (Voigtländer 1910, 22).<sup>9</sup> While "genuine feelings of self-worth", such as pride, arise from one's own self, "non-genuine" or "mirror feelings of self-worth" emerge by way of joking, make-believe, pretending, acting as if we are moved by an affect, posing, attitudinizing, presenting oneself, and boasting, as well as



in imagining experiences, deceiving ourselves, living a lie, and experiencing ourselves from the perspective of a possible other (Voigtländer 1910, 94–95).

What do all these phenomena have in common? Though at first glance we might think that Voigtländer is referring to self-deceptive states, on closer inspection it is clear that not all of them involve self-deception. For instance, this is not the case when our feelings arise in make-believe or while we are pretending. In fact, several of these feelings have their origins in the social and art worlds. In my reading, what mirror feelings of self-worth have in common is that they emerge when we experience ourselves from the perspective of a hypothetical other. It is in this respect that these feelings are non-genuine (*uneigentlich*) because they have their origins outside our self. In this particular case, they have their roots in the hypothetical other from whose perspective we experience ourselves. Voigtländer (1910, 76 [own translation]) writes that the mirror feeling of self-worth is “a feeling of self-worth experienced with regard to what one is in the imagination, in the opinion of others, to what refers to an “image” of oneself”. Thus, the term “non-genuine” describes how these feelings originate in the image that we think others might have of us. It is in this respect that they are “mirror” feelings, because they reflect the image (we think) others have of us.

It is precisely within the framework of this description of the “non-genuine” or – as I will refer to them to avoid misunderstanding – “mirror” feelings of self-worth that Voigtländer introduces the concept of empathy as a mechanism to explain how such feelings arise. Indeed, Voigtländer (1910, 86, [own translation]) describes this mechanism as a “kind of empathy (*Einfühlung*) with one’s own body, a non-genuine and figurative (*bildmäßiges*) experience of the same”. And she adds:

One has a consciousness of the positions and movements of the body not only in the skin, joint and muscle sensations and the consciousness of activity of the movement, but also in such a way that one has a “picture” of it and in such a way that one feels oneself into the movements and positions and experiences them quite similarly with their psychic content, as is the case with empathy in foreign movements.

(Voigtländer 1910, 86 [own translation])<sup>10</sup>

According to this “empathic” and “figurative experience” (*Einfühlungs- and bildmäßiges Erleben*), as she describes it, our feeling of self-worth experiences fluctuations. Importantly, for Voigtländer, given that these feelings arise from the perspective that we imagine others might have of us, they are not rooted in our own self but rather in the image of our self. Therefore, they are experienced as distant and as having a “coreless”, “airy”, and “playful nature” (1910, 97).

Voigtländer's description of the mechanism through which "mirror feelings of self-worth" arise in terms of an "empathic" and "figurative experience" requires some interpretation. In particular, it requires us to distinguish between the steps necessary for a "mirror feeling of self-worth" to arise. According to my reading, it is first of all necessary that we imagine ourselves from the perspective of the other, to whom I will refer here in terms of a hypothetical observer. Next, we have to adopt this observer's perspective about ourselves and for this to happen it is necessary that we project ourselves into him or her. Then, in the next step, we recreate or re-enact what the observer is experiencing toward us. In so doing, we resonate with it by undergoing a feeling which "mirrors" the other's feelings regarding ourselves. Importantly, this "non-genuine" feeling might influence the way in which we experience ourselves, leading to fluctuations in our feelings of self-worth, which might intensify or diminish.

In my description of these steps, I used contemporary terms to make clear that the particular "kind of empathy" involved in "mirror feelings of self-worth" is a "feeling into" the image that we imagine an observer might have of us. This involves – as it does in Lipps – what in the language of contemporary Simulation Theory we call perspective-shifting, re-enactment, and resonance with the other's experience. Insofar as empathy is understood as a "feeling into" an inanimate entity (the other's perspective), Voigtländer employs the term in a manner close to Lipps, though she does not discuss her allegiance to him explicitly. It is in fact unsurprising that she does not discuss other possible meanings of the term – in the sense of social cognition – because at the time, in the Munich Circle of phenomenology, "Einfühlung" was employed without this meaning. The usage of the term in the sense of social cognition was being developed by other authors in the phenomenological tradition, such as Husserl, Scheler, and Stein, but it was not yet the dominant way of thinking about empathy.

However, that being said, what I find particularly original in Voigtländer's account is, first of all, that we can empathize with a product of our own imagination and that we do so by means of different kinds of imaginative process. Indeed, we first imagine our own image from the point of view of a hypothetical observer, and then we "feel into" it. Thus, the entity we "feel into" is not only an inanimate entity but one of a particular kind: it is something we imagine. In addition, while at that time empathy started to be used to describe not only how we "feel into" inanimate others but also in terms of social cognition – how we "feel into" other living beings – with her account, Voigtländer leaves the door open for the case of "feeling into" hypothetical others, i.e., others who do not necessarily exist as such but whom we have imagined. More precisely, she explores the particular case in which we "feel into" a hypothetical other whom we imagine as having a hypothetical experience regarding ourselves. These important usages of the imagination in empathy are what

make the process she describes an “empathic” as well as a “figurative experience”. Finally, with the introduction of the mechanism of empathy as “feeling into” to explain “mirror feelings of self-worth”, she provides an explanation of a familiar experience: the fact that the way we feel depends strongly on the way in which we imagine others see us. We are not indifferent to the opinions of others. For instance, if a person imagines that others regard her as a bad thinker, a bad person, or ugly, this will have an immediate consequence in the way she feels. In so doing, Voigtländer makes us aware of our intersubjective nature: the fact that we can imagine ourselves from the point of view of a hypothetical observer and that this has an impact on how we feel. The form of empathy she describes presupposes the consciousness of the image others might have of us, or image-consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

In this context, Voigtländer provides a further taxonomy within the “mirror feelings of self-worth”. In the first subtype, mirror feelings of self-worth arise when, in experiencing ourselves from the perspective of the hypothetical observer, we focus on our own experiencing self. This is the case with the thirst for recognition, ambition, honour, or glory. The second subtype concerns mirror feelings of self-worth which arise when we focus on the image that others have of us. This is the case with feelings of vanity or smugness, or those that arise when attitudinizing (the lack of such an experience is characteristic of modest or straightforward personalities). In my reading, this taxonomy indicates two possible forms of self-involvement when we “feel into” the hypothetical observer. In feeling into this observer, we can adopt the other’s perspective toward our own self but remain experientially centred in what we are going through (this is what occurs in the first case). However, we can also adopt the other’s perspective toward our own self and transfer the centre of our experience to this observer’s perspective (in which we have felt into). Unfortunately, the possibilities Voigtländer raises about empathizing with one’s own image have not been further developed in current research.

### 13.4 Geiger: Empathy with Atmospheres

The second early phenomenological account which works with the concept of empathy in terms of “feeling into” was developed by Moritz Geiger, an author who, like Voigtländer, belonged to the Munich Circle of early phenomenology around Lipps. Here I will focus in particular on his usage of the term *Einfühlung* in “Zum Problem der Stimmungseinfühlung” (1911).<sup>12</sup>

In this work, Geiger focuses on a particular kind of empathy already noted by Lipps: “*Stimmungseinfühlung*”, which can be translated as “empathy into mood”. However, we should be cautious about how we

interpret this expression. Neither Lipps nor Geiger aims at describing how we empathize with another person's moods, and neither is interested in using empathy to refer to a form of social cognition. Rather, the term describes how it is possible to experience "life" in inanimate objects and, in particular, the arts. It describes how we happen to apprehend the cheerfulness of a landscape, the tranquillity of the colour blue, the festivity of a violet, the joviality of music, etc. In other words, here "mood" does not refer to the psychological state of a living being but to a particular kind of affective property which spreads over different objects, confers on them a specific glow, and expresses their character. To refer to this property, Geiger (1911, 28) employs terms such as "character" (Charakter), "feeling characters" (Gefühlscharakteren), and, occasionally, "atmospheres" (Atmosphären). In spite of the fact that Geiger rarely uses the later term, I will employ it here to translate "Stimmungseinführung" as "empathy with atmospheres". In so doing, my aim is not only to avoid misunderstandings, but also to offer a reading which makes it easier to connect Geiger's account to current research.

Geiger begins his paper by discussing and indeed rejecting two theories that were in vogue at the time: the Effect Theory (Wirkungstheorie) and the Animation Theory (Belebungstheorie). According to the Effect Theory, the landscape is cheerful because we feel cheerful and project our feeling into it. Yet, against this theory, he argues that we experience "atmospheres" not as a projection of our own mental states into the object but as a property of the object, independent of our own current psychological state. "Atmospheres" cannot be reduced to affective states such as moods or emotions, though we refer to them using the same terms we employ to describe our affective states. In brief, for Geiger, the cheerfulness of the colour should not be assimilated with the affective state of being cheerful. The colour is not cheerful because I am cheerful. In fact, I can apprehend the cheerfulness of the colour even if I am in another state.

By contrast, according to the Animation Theory, there is a kind of feeling in the landscape and this feeling is apprehended in a manner similar to how we apprehend feelings in the other's expression. Against the Animation Theory, he argues that the way in which we apprehend atmospheres differs from how we apprehend the bodily expressions of emotions. We apprehend the cheerfulness of a colour as a property of that colour in a similar way to how we apprehend its intensity and quality.<sup>13</sup> As such, it differs from the way in which we apprehend the cheerfulness of a face, which expresses the emotional state of a person but is not a property of the other's face. In other words, for Geiger, "atmospheres" are presented as having phenomenological objectivity. Thus, in spite of the fact that we refer to our own moods and atmospheres with the same names, according to Geiger we are dealing with two phenomena that are distinct in kind.<sup>14</sup>

Geiger develops his own position independently of these two theories but in accordance to the philosophy of affectivity which was being developed at the time by early phenomenologists. For Geiger, the apprehension of “atmospheres” as affective properties which spread over different objects occurs by the same means as the apprehension of values as evaluative properties. In this regard, while Scheler (1973, 259) and Reinach (1989, 295) argue that values as evaluative properties are apprehended by an intentional feeling (Fühlen), Geiger argues that atmospheres are apprehended as affective properties in a similar way. This intentional feeling is a *sui generis* mental state irreducible to emotion or perception and, for Geiger, it is responsible for making atmospheres accessible to us. We apprehend atmospheres by “feeling” them.

For Geiger, it is the attitude we adopt while apprehending atmospheres that is crucial in determining the kind of experience we will undergo. As he argues, atmospheres can be apprehended while we are in different attitudes (Geiger 1911, 27). A first distinction is traced between a “contemplative attitude” (betrachtende Einstellung) and an “immersive attitude” (aufnehmende Einstellung). While in the former we contemplate the cheerfulness of the colour and experience it as something objective, in the latter – the one in which Geiger is mostly interested – we apprehend the atmosphere but are also immersed (versenken) in it. In particular, the “immersive attitude” might adopt four different forms: objective, positional, sentimental, and empathic.

First, when the immersive attitude is “objective”, we open ourselves to and experience the atmosphere (Geiger 1911, 39–40) but we do not actively adopt any stance toward it. This experience might lead us to interpret the grasped atmosphere as our own mood, yet the atmosphere is a property of the object. In the second kind of immersive attitude, we apprehend an atmosphere and “adopt a stance toward” (stellungnehmend) it. Here, we take a stance toward the sadness we apprehend in a landscape and thereby influence the way we further apprehend this atmosphere. In this case, there is an interdependence between the atmosphere and one’s own affective state. The third kind of immersive attitude is the “sentimental”. Here, rather than apprehending the atmosphere as a property of the landscape, the subject is interested in the effects that the atmosphere has on her. In consequence, the boundary between the atmosphere and her own affective state vanishes. For the purposes of this chapter, the fourth type of immersive attitude – which Geiger describes as “empathic” – deserves separate attention. According to Geiger, it is possible to empathize with an atmosphere. In this case, we are completely absorbed by the atmosphere and become one with it (eins werden) (Geiger 1911, 39). As we shall see, the term empathy is here used in line with Lipps to refer to “feeling into” the atmosphere and has nothing to do with the idea of social cognition.

The sentimental and the empathic attitudes should not be conflated. In the sentimental attitude, we regard the atmosphere as a mere means to evoke an affective state in ourselves. Moreover, here we are interested in the atmosphere only insofar as it can elicit a similar affective state in us.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, in the empathic attitude, we apprehend the atmosphere, feel into it, and become one with it. Unlike what occurs in the sentimental attitude, our interest here is directed toward the atmosphere itself and not to the effects it can produce in us. While in the sentimental attitude, the atmosphere and the affective state elicited by it are presented as two different phenomena, in the empathic attitude, there is a convergence between the two. In brief, in both cases, we end up experiencing an affective state in tune with the apprehended atmosphere, but the way in which we relate to the atmosphere and our motivations for apprehending it differ substantially.

Though Geiger does not explicitly discuss the concept of “empathy” at work in his paper, he employs it in line with Lipps, as mentioned above. Indeed, empathizing with atmospheres must be understood in terms of “feeling into” atmospheres. This presupposes that we project ourselves into the atmosphere, re-live its character, and become one with it. The “feeling into” described in the case of the empathic attitude involves processes to which the Simulation Theory would today refer as perspective-shifting, re-enactment, and resonance.

Interestingly, Geiger employs empathy as “feeling into” to explain a phenomenon which has received particular attention within aesthetics. What Geiger calls “characters”, “feeling characters”, and “atmospheres”, were analyzed in early phenomenology by von Hildebrand (1977, 1984) in terms of “expressive qualities” (Gefühlsqualitäten) and in the *Neue Phänomenologie* in terms of “quasi objective feelings”, “half-things”, and “atmospheres” (Griffero 2014).<sup>16</sup> In the Anglo-American tradition they are known as “expressive” or “emotional properties”, and, less frequently, as “atmospheric properties” (see, for instance, Wollheim 1987). Yet, while Geiger interprets our apprehension of atmospheres in terms of “feeling” and “feeling into” them, in the other accounts mentioned, which were developed in the phenomenological and the Anglo-American traditions, this apprehension has been explained using the model of “perception”.

### 13.5 Edith Stein: Empathy with Others

While Voigtländer and Geiger present radical imaginationist accounts of empathy and explore the particular cases of empathizing with one’s own image and with atmospheres, in her book *Zum Problem der Einfühlung* (1917/1989), Stein presents an account of empathy as a form of social cognition initiated by a perception-like state in which the imagination can play

a role. Unlike the two radical imaginationist accounts of empathy explored in the preceding sections, Stein's moderate imaginationist account has been the object of attention in recent research.

Stein begins her investigation with a distinction (found already in Husserl) between "re-presentative" and "presentative" acts.<sup>17</sup> She observes that empathy, like fantasy, memory, and expectation, is a "re-presentative" (*vergegenwärtigend*) psychological state.<sup>18</sup> In re-presentative states, an object is presented to consciousness "in image", while in "presentative" states, such as perceptions, the object is presented "in person". In this respect, she writes, the content of empathy, like the content of the other "re-presentative" states, is "non-primordial" or "non-original", i.e., it does not have its origins in our present mental state. However, what is particular about the contents of empathy in comparison to the contents of the other "re-presentative" states, such as memory, fantasy, and expectation, is that what is re-presented belongs to the other's experience and not to our own. Indeed, empathy is a form of "re-presentation" (*Vergegenwärtigung*) of the other's experience. As she puts it: "while I am living in the other's joy, I do not feel primordial joy. It does not issue live from my 'I'" (Stein 1989, 11).

In Stein's model, empathy as a *sui generis* "re-presentation" of the other's experience has a procedural nature. More precisely, she identifies three steps of the empathic process, which she describes as follows:<sup>19</sup> "(1) emergence of the experience, (2) the fulfilling explication, and (3) the comprehensive objectification of the explained experience" (Stein 1989, 10). Stein considers that the first and third steps exhibit parallels with perception, while the second level is analogous to having the experience (though the content of this experience is – as stated above – "non-primordial"). Importantly, Stein argues that what we already call "empathy" is what occurs at the first step, without the second and third steps being necessary for the empathic experience.

Let us analyze each one of these steps in more detail. In Stein's model, empathy starts with the apprehension of what the other is going through and as such it has a perception-like character. At this stage, we can grasp the other's experience only vaguely. However, as Stein notes, it is often the case that empathy remains at this stage. In the next step, the other's experience is clarified through of a series of processes by which we come to fill in the gaps about what was first only vaguely grasped. It is here that what we today call imagination comes into play. According to Stein, this clarification takes place when the subject "transfers" (*hineinversetzen*) her "self" into the other's place and explicates the other's experience by re-living it. In Stein, this transfer and re-living takes place while maintaining the self-other differentiation. It is by means of this re-living that the subject experiences something close to the other's experience. There is no fusion with

the other, no becoming one with the other, in Stein's account of empathy. In the final step, the empathizer achieves a more comprehensive apprehension of the other's experience. At this stage, empathy has, like in the first stage, a perception-like character. However, while in the first step the apprehension of what the other is going through is still incomplete, here the empathizer has gained a better grasp of the other's experience and can reflect upon it.

Stein's own example is instructive in illustrating each of these steps: "My friend comes to me beaming with joy and tells me he has passed his examination. I comprehend his joy empathically; transferring myself into it, I comprehend the joyfulness of the event and am now primordially joyful over it myself" (Stein 1989, 13). First, we apprehend the other's joy. Second, we clarify this joy by virtue of transferring ourselves into the other's situation and re-living their experience of joy. Finally, we get a more comprehensive grasp of our friend's joy. Note that in this particular example, at the final stage, Stein herself feels joyful. However, according to her account, to feel empathy it is not necessary that we feel the same as the other with whom we empathize. If that occurs in this particular example, it is because the other with whom she empathizes is her friend, but we do not always have to feel the same. Rather, for Stein, empathy requires another form of resonance, namely that we feel along with the other.

In Stein's account, empathy starts with the apprehension of the other's sensible expression, given to us as a living body with its fields of sensation, located at a zero point of orientation in her spatial world and as a field of expression of the experiences of the "I" (Stein 1989, 57). By means of seeing the other as a living body, I apprehend implicit tendencies in her movements. These tendencies are discerned through the empathic experience so that we come to experience what the other is going through. A very basic moment of the empathic process is what she calls "sensual empathy" (*Empfindungseinführung*) (Stein 1989, 65). Sensual empathy is possible because by virtue of being living bodies ourselves, we are able to apprehend other living bodies too. For Stein, sensual empathy occurs at different levels. Given that I have a body, empathy with another human body will be easier than with a non-human one. In this respect, it is easier for us to empathize with the pain that another human feels in his hand, than with a dog experiencing pain in its paw. I can see that the dog is in pain but my apprehension of the dog's experience will be less complete than the apprehension of a human being feeling pain. As she puts it: "the further I deviate from the type 'human being', the smaller does the number of possibilities of fulfillment become" (Stein 1989, 59).

Importantly, for Stein, by empathizing with the other as a living body and "transferring" ourselves into this body, we can adopt a new zero point



of orientation and obtain a new image of the world. This “transferring” and the “re-living” of the other’s experience leads the empathizer to a new orientation and image of the world. Yet, for Stein, this is not merely fantasized but “con-primordial, because the living body to which it refers is perceived as a physical body at the same time and because it is given primordially to the other ‘I’, even though non-primordially to me” (Stein 1989, 61–62). As a result, we empathize with the other’s outer perception so that empathy can enrich the way in which we experience the world and lead us to realize that my zero point of orientation is just one point among many. In this vein, in reiterated empathy, we gain new perspectives about the world. Thus, empathy is regarded as the basis for our intersubjective knowledge of the world. Again, here she writes about how the perspectives gained by means of empathy are different from perspectives about the world that are merely fantasized. In her words:

The world I glimpse in fantasy is a non-existing world because of its conflict with my primordial orientation. Nor do I need to bring this non-existence to givenness as I live in fantasy. The world I glimpse empathically is an existing world, posited as having being like the world primordially perceived.

(Stein 1989, 63–64)

Sensual empathy is only a stage in the apprehension of the other. We are also able to empathize with the other’s feelings. Though her concept of empathy does not restrict the object of empathy to the other’s affective states, feelings (in the broad sense) play an important role in her model because they enable us to understand the other as spiritual being. Stein is clear about this:

in every literal act of empathy, i.e., in every comprehension of an act of feeling, we have already penetrated into the realm of the spirit. For, as physical nature is constituted in perceptual acts, so a new object realm is constituted in feeling. This is the world of values.

(Stein 1989, 92)

Given that every feeling is related to values, in empathizing with the other’s affective states we also come to empathize with the way in which the other evaluatively apprehends the world.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear in this description that Stein’s use of the concept of empathy differs from that employed by Lipps. To begin, unlike Lipps, Stein clearly remarks that the differentiation between self and other is a basic condition for empathy. Moreover, while for Lipps, empathy involves feeling into an animate or inanimate object, Stein uses this term for a specific form of

intersubjective encounter with the other in her bodily expressions. In addition, while the target of Lipps's empathy can be either an animate or an inanimate object, the target of Stein's empathy is a "foreign consciousness" (Stein 1989, 11). In fact, for Stein, we already perceive the other as a living body by means of sensual empathy and do not have to feel into the other in order to apprehend him or her as such. That said, it is also clear from the exposition of Stein's three steps of empathy developed above that empathy beyond the second step entails the processes of "transferring" into the other's experience and "re-living" it, which strongly resemble Lipps's idea of projecting oneself into the target and imitating inwardly what the other is undergoing. This makes Stein's account in some respects close to Lipps's idea of empathy as "feeling into". This similarity is particularly intriguing because in her book we can find passages where she explicitly dismisses some of Lipps's claims, in particular central aspects of his Imitation Theory (though as noted by Stueber 2006, 8, her account might be closer to Lipps than she thinks). Yet, as Svenaeus puts it, "Stein is both appreciative and critical of Lipps' theories of empathy and she makes use of them in discussions to characterize her own position" (Svenaeus 2016, 239). In short, to explain this tension, we might consider Stein's rejection of Lipps not as a rejection of processes which can be regarded today as imaginative, such as "transferring" and "re-living" (though Stein does not employ the term imagination; see Svenaeus 2016, 277).<sup>21</sup> In fact, these imaginative processes can (though they do not necessarily have to) play into the empathic experience. For Stein, empathy entails perception-like states but it might also encompass imagination-like states as well.<sup>22</sup> As a result, it can be said that her critique of some aspects of Lipps does not necessarily imply that she cannot be close to today's Simulation Theory. The similarity between her account and today's simulationist accounts concerns precisely the role of imagining in empathy. In particular, the imaginative processes mentioned resemble the simulationist perspective-shifting and re-enactment (in Stein's terms: transferring and re-living) (Moran 2022; Szanto and Moran 2020).

That said, there is an important difference between Stein's account and the Simulation Theory regarding the role of imagining. First, while the Simulation Theory works with the idea that empathy necessarily entails imagining, for Stein, imagination might produce a more complete empathy but it is not required to empathize with others (in fact, empathy often remains at the first stage, which is perception-like). Second, for Stein, what is apprehended in empathy is – as underscored above – how the other perceives the world, and this apprehension is not merely an imagining. Third, the Simulation Theory explains how the empathizer resonates with the other's experience in terms of an interpersonal similarity between the experience of both parties. There are different interpretations of how to understand this condition: on the one hand, some authors argue that an

“affective matching” (Coplan 2011) must take place, i.e., the quality of the empathizer’s state must be identical to that of the other, while for other authors a similarity between both states suffices (Stueber 2016). By contrast, for Stein, we come to resonate with the other’s experience by experiencing something alongside the other, but what we experience is not necessarily the same or something similar. In this respect, and as Svenaeus notes (2016, 243), for Stein, empathy can be improved by a personal concern for the other and it is precisely this feeling that guides the empathizer’s imagination. As Svenaeus argues, imaginative accounts of empathy are incomplete if they cannot explain what guides our imaginings (2016, 233). In his view, Stein suggests that such imaginings are motivated by a feeling toward and a feeling with the other with whom we empathize. Fourth, one of the crucial critiques of Lipps’s Imitation theory is still valid in relation to contemporary Simulation Theory (Burns 2017). Both theories presuppose what they aim at explaining. Indeed, to imitate or simulate the other’s experiences as experiences of a living body presupposes that we already regard these experiences as belonging to an animate entity. Therefore, we encounter the other as already a living body and not as a thing. These differences between Stein’s accounts and the Simulation Theory support Svenaeus’s claim (2018), according to which Stein’s model presupposes imagination rather than “simulation”.

That said, in Stein, the role of imagining is moderate in comparison with the two other accounts presented in the previous sections. Unlike in Voigtländer and Geiger, for Stein, the imagination is not necessary for empathy, though it can play a role in giving us a more comprehensive grasp of the other’s experience. Moreover, Stein works with a concept of empathy which is explicitly much closer to the model of perception than the model of imagining (as we have seen, the first and third steps are described in analogy with perception). In spite of this focus on perception, Stein cannot be regarded as defending a pure Direct Perception Theory. In fact, alongside the role that the imagination played in her account, as demonstrated in this section, Stein was very sceptical about certain aspects of Scheler’s direct perception account (2008), according to which we perceive the other’s consciousness as we perceive our own.<sup>23</sup>

### 13.6 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have analyzed three imagination-based accounts of empathy in early phenomenology. I have divided these accounts into two groups. For radical imaginationists such as Voigtländer and Geiger, imagining is crucial in explaining empathy. Both authors use the term empathy in a sense close to Lipps’s “feeling into”: empathy might target animate as well as inanimate entities and it involves projecting ourselves into the

target, re-living its feelings, and resonating with it. By contrast, for moderate imaginationists such as Stein, empathy describes a form of social cognition in which we experience what the other is going through and in which the imagination might (but need not) play a role in making our perception of the other's experience more complete.

By way of conclusion, some implications can be extracted from the analysis elaborated in this chapter. To begin, while phenomenological accounts of empathy have experienced a revival in the current empathy debate, attention has been focused mainly on empathy as a form of intersubjective experience. Yet, as demonstrated in this chapter, a look into the usages of empathy in early phenomenology shows that the term was also employed to refer to "feeling into" inanimate objects, re-living their feelings, and resonating with them. In so doing, the understanding of empathy in early phenomenology goes beyond the direct perception account. As I have shown, taken as a whole, in the corpus of early phenomenological texts on empathy, the imagination is involved to either a radical or a moderate degree. Therefore, any analysis of empathy in early phenomenology should not lose sight of Moran's (2004) claims, put forward above, according to which there are two meanings of empathy in this tradition: empathy as understanding the other by seeing her expressions and empathy as projecting into the other to understand her.

Furthermore, while the critique of Lipps and the Imitation Theory found in the works of early phenomenologists such as Stein, Husserl, or Scheler, makes it easy to assume that early phenomenologists rejected his approach *tout court*, as we have seen, there is also a Lippsonian interpretation of empathy as "feeling into" in this work, particularly in less widely known authors of the Munich Circle, such as Voigtländer and Geiger.

Finally, the revival of early phenomenology in the debate on empathy has been focused on the potential of the analogy between empathy and perception as found in Husserl and Stein, and in particular of Scheler's account of "Mitfühlen" for the development of the Direct Perception Theory as alternative to the Simulation Theory. However, while Direct Perception Theory has been centred in a form of empathy close to "Mitfühlen", other forms of what we would today call empathy and which are at work in our engagement with fictional works, such as Scheler's "Nachfühlen" (and Geiger's "Nacherleben", mentioned in footnote 12), have received less consideration. Moreover, as I have demonstrated, a more comprehensive consideration of the early phenomenological works would enable us not only to find arguments in support of the Simulation Theory but would also contribute to exploring the value of this theory in explaining our engagement with inanimate objects, such as art works. In so doing, the concept of empathy would regain the explanatory force it had when it was introduced in the German Aesthetics of *Einfühlung* more than 150 years ago.

## Notes

- 1 See, for an overview: Mallgrave and Ikonomou (1994), Matravers (2017), and Petraschka (2023).
- 2 The other kinds of empathy have not been the focus of attention in current research. See, for an exception: Currie 2011.
- 3 Not all proponents of the Simulation Theory regard simulation as involving perspective-taking.
- 4 See, for an overview: Szanto and Krueger (2019) and Schmetkamp and Vendrell Ferran (2019).
- 5 To be clear, Zahavi never claimed that this is the only account of empathy in the phenomenological tradition. However, the focus on the Direct Perception Theory as an alternative to Theory Theory and Simulation Theory for explaining social cognition might easily lead to this impression.
- 6 In contemporary philosophy, as Liao and Gendler (2019) put it, imagining is “to represent without aiming at things as they actually, presently, and subjectively are”. This usage of the terms makes projecting into and re-enacting forms of imagining as it is broadly understood.
- 7 When, in a recent paper, Drummond develops a phenomenological understanding of empathy based on Husserl, Scheler, Stein, and Zahavi (Drummond 2022, 345), he makes clear that this is only “a” phenomenological understanding of empathy, and not the only one. Here I adopt his take on the issue to underscore the main claim of this chapter.
- 8 Stein is not the only early phenomenologist who provided what I call here a moderate imaginationist account. According to Jardine and Szanto (2017) and Jardine (forthcoming), Husserl distinguished between a perceptual and an “intuitive” empathy.
- 9 What I call here genuine and non-genuine can also be translated as authentic and inauthentic. However, Voigtländer’s use of this notion must be distinguished from other accounts of authenticity and inauthenticity existing in the phenomenological tradition, such as those provided by Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.
- 10 This also involves the way that we dress because, in her view, our appearance and the way we feel about it differs according to the clothes we put on.
- 11 The idea of feelings which arise from an image-consciousness is not only present in Voigtländer but also in other authors, such as Scheler. In particular, in the appendix to his work on shame (Zusatz A, B, and C), he analyzes shame in regard to the feelings of honour and repentance, using the idea of an image-consciousness (Scheler 1987, 149). However, unlike Voigtländer, Scheler introduces neither the concept of “mirror feelings of self-worth” nor the concept of empathy to explain how we come to experience ourselves from the perspective of this image.
- 12 In “Das Problem der ästhetischen Scheingefühle” (1914), Geiger examines the way in which we engage with fictional characters in terms of “Nacherleben”. Today we would translate this term as “empathy”, but “Nacherleben” implies a particular usage of the imagination as that through which we re-live what the other is going through by experiencing something similar. In Geiger’s view, this “Nacherleben” generates in us an emotion-like state (to which he refers as “Scheingefühle”, a concept close to what we call today “quasi-emotion”). In this text, he also examines emotion-like states experienced by actors when they embody a character, when we apprehend the mood of a novel, drama, etc., and when we experience emotions evoked by fictional works, such as novels, dramas, etc. (Geiger 1914, 191–192).

- 13 Note that I write “similar” and not “identical”. Geiger argues that the character of the colour spreads over it and, unlike its intensity and quality, is not an element of the sensation. In fact, it is experienced as independent of the sensation of the colour.
- 14 Geiger’s explanation of why we employ the same terms for both phenomena is particularly intriguing. He distinguishes between two moments of the affective state, one subjective and the other objective, to which he refers as “feeling tone” (Gefühlston) (Geiger 1911, 18). For instance, in joy, we feel joyful (subjective moment) and at the same time our joy colours the objects it targets (objective moment). In his view, our affective states have the capacity to impregnate with a coloration (Färbung) the objects targeted (this objective moment of our affective states is usually overlooked). For Geiger, the “feeling tone” (Gefühlston) (objective moment of our affective states) and the “character” (Gefühlscharakter) (the property that spreads over an object and which I call here “atmosphere”) are qualitatively similar. This is the reason why we use the same terms for both.
- 15 In fact, Geiger argues that the effect that the object might have on us is the only aspect of it that interests us. The sentimental attitude in the arts will be object of critique in later writings: “Beiträge zur Phänomenologie des ästhetischen Genusses” (Contributions to a Phenomenology of Aesthetic Pleasure) (1913).
- 16 For an analysis of expressive properties in Austrian philosophy, see Mulligan 2015. I develop a comparison between Geiger and Wollheim in: Vendrell Ferran 2019.
- 17 The term “act” was employed in the phenomenological tradition from Brentano onward in a sense close to what we today call mental state. For the sake of clarity, I will employ this later term.
- 18 I translate the term “Vergegenwärtigung” as “re-presentation” to distinguish it from the term “representation”. In so doing, I underscore that Stein’s model has nothing to do with the representational theories of consciousness circulating in current research.
- 19 See, for a discussion of these steps: Dullstein (2013); Svenaeus (2016) and (2018); Szanto and Moran (2020).
- 20 The role of emotions in Stein’s account of empathy has been strongly emphasized in current research. However, given the importance of the lived body in empathy, emotional empathy is crucially intertwined with sensual empathy.
- 21 Note that what I call here “imagination” cannot be assimilated to “fantasy”. Indeed, while fantasy – as I mention above – refers to the re-presentative mental states in which we create a fictive reality, today’s usage of the term imagination is, as noted in note 6, much broader and involves a wide range of processes which do not necessarily have to do with the creation of new realities but rather with the recreation or re-enactment of existing ones.
- 22 See, for this view: Dullstein 2013; Jardine and Szanto 2017; Jardine forthcoming; Moran 2022; Svenaeus 2016; 2018; Szanto and Moran 2020; Vendrell Ferran 2015.
- 23 In particular, Stein argues against Scheler’s idea that there is an initial neutral stream of experience out of which our own and the other’s experiences are gradually configured. In fact, she argues that an “I-less” experience is difficult to demonstrate.

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# 14 I Feel You

## Toward a Schelerian Conception of Empathy

*Jean Moritz Müller*

### 14.1 Introduction

Among the many threads that run through Max Scheler's (2007) *The Nature of Sympathy*, his thoughts on empathy are one of the most interesting, if puzzling. Scheler conceives of empathy as a specific way of experiencing others' emotions which is characterized by a somewhat unusual phenomenal and epistemic profile. More specifically, on Scheler's account, empathy corresponds to what is termed *Nachfühlen* ("feeling-after") in German and is as such distinguished from *Mitfühlen* (sympathy properly so-called). The former is supposed to be a specific kind of feeling through which we are immediately aware of others' emotions but which, unlike the latter, is not itself an emotion and doesn't require us to have the other's emotion ourselves. Rather than being constitutive of sympathy, feeling-after serves as its cognitive basis by making others' emotions intelligible so as for us to be in a position to sympathetically respond to them. While this conception has some evident echoes with ordinary thought and experience, it is not easy to get a proper grip on. Accordingly, some have questioned its cogency.

This chapter is an attempt at defending Scheler's conception of empathy. More specifically, I respond to what I take to be two key objections. Both put pressure on the very coherence of the idea of feeling-after. According to the first, it is difficult to see how one could feel another's emotion without having her emotion oneself (Landweer 1999; Roughley and Schramme 2018). The second objection targets the epistemic status of feeling-after as a form of interpersonal understanding. On the plausible view that understanding another's emotion is a matter of knowing reasons for which she feels it, it is hard to see how feeling-after could make others' emotion intelligible to us. After all, it is supposed to be a direct awareness of another's emotion and, as such, does not seem to provide access to such reasons (cf. Schutz 1967).<sup>1</sup>

I begin by elaborating on Scheler's proposal and situating it within the contemporary debate on empathy (section 14.2). I then take up and respond in some detail to the first objection (section 14.3). As I argue, it

rests on a confusion between different forms of feeling. To dispense with the second worry, I look more closely at the emotions that serve as intentional objects of empathy (section 14.4). I argue that, on a plausible understanding of their felt character, empathy *ipso facto* affords a minimal grasp of reasons for which these emotions are felt. Within the confines of this chapter, I will not provide anything like a substantial positive account of feeling-after. However, in responding to these worries, I will at least provide some contours for such an account.

As a final preliminary remark, I should note that my project is driven by a systematic interest in those aspects of common-sense psychology that answer to Scheler's most interesting claims regarding feeling-after. As such, it is not primarily aimed at Scheler exegesis. Accordingly, I shall not attempt to do justice to everything Scheler says about empathy in defending these claims against the two objections. In particular, what I will say may be difficult to square with Scheler's remarks on the perception of other minds (*Fremdwahrnehmung*) in the final chapter of *The Nature of Sympathy*. My remarks will speak to the core phenomenal and epistemic properties Scheler ascribes to feeling-after, however. Moreover, I shall forge an intimate connection with the metaethical work of his close friend Dietrich von Hildebrand, who contributed by far the most to elucidating the broader taxonomy of experiences that informs Scheler's distinction between empathy and sympathy. In drawing on von Hildebrand's work, I hope to vindicate the pre-theoretical significance of feeling for interpersonal understanding and make conceptual space for a distinctive experiential access to the reasons for which we sympathize with others.

## 14.2 Feeling-after

In line with the realist approach to phenomenology which Scheler helped inaugurate, his remarks on empathy take their cue from pre-theoretical considerations on interpersonal experience. The German verb "nachfühlen" features prominently in ordinary discourse. While it lacks a direct English translation, its meaning is approximately captured by the use of "feel" in first-person statements like "I feel your pain (distress/joy...)" or simply "I feel you", when given in response to another's report of her emotional response to a particular situation (e.g., "I'm really distressed by the upshot of the Italian general election" – "I feel you").<sup>2</sup>

Understanding "feel" ("fühlen") in its most common sense, Scheler is clear that he does not conceive of empathy as a purely intellectual phenomenon. Feeling-after is a bona fide experience in which another's emotions "attain *full* givenness" (Scheler 2007, 9 [translation modified]).<sup>3</sup> As "given" is used here, it ascribes to empathy what one might call a *pre-ententional character*. In this respect, empathy is analogous to perceptual

experience both phenomenally and epistemically. In empathizing with another's joy or distress, we are *saddled with* a particular content. This direct form of awareness is not supposed to be the upshot of inference, imaginative projection into the other or imitation of her outward behaviour (Scheler 2007, 10–12).<sup>4</sup> Importantly, as Scheler specifies the epistemic import of feeling-after, it goes beyond what its characterization as direct awareness of others' emotions might initially suggest. In accordance with the force of first person-statements like "I feel you (your pain/joy/...)", in feeling-after we also have a sense of *why* the other feels a certain way: it constitutes a form of interpersonal understanding (Scheler 2007, 11–12).<sup>5</sup>

On the face of it, the label "feeling-after" and the idea that empathy puts us in direct contact with another's emotion invite the thought that, in empathizing with her, we share her emotion. However, according to Scheler, this thought confuses empathy with sympathy. In sympathy we feel *with* another, that is, we rejoice in or feel sorry for her joy or distress, respectively. By contrast, to empathize with someone's emotion is not to be in a corresponding emotional state. Despite being an experience of others' emotions, feeling-after is not itself an emotion.

Feeling-after [...] must be sharply distinguished from sympathy. It is indeed a case of feeling the other's feeling, not just knowing of it, nor judging that the other has it; but it is not the same as going through the experience itself. In feeling-after we sense the *quality* of the other's feeling, without it being transmitted to us, or evoking a similar, real emotion in us. The other's feeling is given exactly like a landscape which we "see" subjectively in memory, or a melody which we "hear" in similar fashion – a state of affairs quite different from the fact that we remember the landscape or the melody (possibly with an accompanying recollection of the fact "that it was seen, or heard").

(Scheler 2007, 9 [translation modified])

According to this explication, empathizing with another's joy clearly involves feeling her joy, though without feeling joy oneself. While in empathy the other's joy is registered by us immediately and fully, we are not ourselves filled with joy. Empathy's phenomenal character is to be distinguished from the affective phenomenology of joy much like the phenomenal character of perceptual memory falls short of that proper to conscious perception.<sup>6</sup>

Scheler supports this distinction between empathy and sympathy by appeal to ordinary language. It does not seem infelicitous to say, for example: "I feel you (your distress), but I have no compassion for you" (Scheler 2007, 9 [translation modified]). With this utterance the speaker reports empathy with the addressee whilst denying that she sympathizes with her.

Scheler suggests that this dissociation is characteristic of the psychology of historians, fiction writers, and sadists (Scheler 2007, 9, 14). While they tend to be good at feeling the emotions of those they write about or agonize, respectively, there is no need for them to feel with them. Indeed, sadists characteristically rejoice in their victim's suffering.

Although for Scheler empathy thus constitutes an interpersonal experience very different from sympathy, he is at the same time explicit that the two are intimately related: empathy provides cognitive access to emotions we sympathize with. As a *response* to those emotions, sympathy cannot itself constitute this access, but depends on a prior awareness of them. This is because, as the term "response" is used here, it ascribes something *in view* or *on account of* which we sympathize with others, that is, a reason for which we feel with them. For example, to say that Maria responds to Sam's joy with sympathetic delight entails that she feels delight in view or on account of Sam's joy (Müller 2022b, 4). Since Sam's joy cannot be a reason for which Maria feels delight unless his joy has registered with her, we need some prior intentional episode which brings his joy within her ken. Moreover, this prior access must be such that the emotion becomes intelligible to the sympathizer.<sup>7</sup> In support of this, note that, in responding with sympathy to others' emotions, we respond to their emotions as something to which we can (to some extent) relate (Müller 2022b, 6). This is indirectly confirmed by the observation that the following statements don't make for satisfactory answers to queries about someone's reasons for sympathizing with another:

She is in distress (having a great time), but her distress (joy) is completely alien to me.

She is just so miserable (cheerful), but I can't relate to her feelings at all.

Although, in principle, it makes sense to think of the reported emotion as a reason for which the speaker feels sympathy, the second part of her statement undermines the cogency of the proposed explanation. This indirectly suggest a constraint on its cogency: the other's emotion qualifies as a motivating reason for sympathy only as a state to which the speaker can relate. Since, very plausibly, one can relate to others' attitudes only if they are at least to some extent intelligible to one, on this reading, sympathy depends for its responsive character on understanding the emotion to which it responds.<sup>8</sup> As Scheler characterizes feeling-after, it is apt to provide the requisite understanding. Empathy is epistemically significant in that it affords direct access to others' experiences as something relatable, and thus intelligible, thereby making them available as reasons for sympathy.

In light of the distinctive experiential and epistemic profile of feeling-after, Scheler's conception likely seems unorthodox if not arcane. Indeed,

despite some notable interest in Scheler's remarks on empathy, this still seems to be the dominant impression in the more mainstream Anglophone debate on empathy. Although having echoes with major contemporary views of empathy, Scheler's proposal does not properly align with either of them. Insofar as there is a respect in which, in feeling-after, the empathizer feels what the empathizee is feeling, Schelerian empathy resembles what is known as "affective empathy" (e.g., Maibom 2017). Unlike affective empathy, however, feeling-after is not supposed to involve sharing the other's emotion or having a similar experience oneself. Focusing on the epistemic import of feeling-after, Scheler's conception resembles more closely cognitively more demanding notions of empathy, on which empathy is a method for understanding others' mental states (e.g., Stueber 2006, 2017). But since such notions pick out explicit exercises of sophisticated cognitive capacities like imaginary perspective-taking and inference, which do not seem to possess the presentational character of feeling-after, they do not capture Schelerian empathy either. With a view to Scheler's claim that empathy is presentational, his proposal seems in fact best situated within a (nowadays somewhat less prominent) family of views of empathy as a (quasi-)perceptual access to other minds (e.g., Gallagher 2017). Again, though, on the standard perceptualist understanding, empathy does not possess the epistemic import of feeling-after, but is a direct way of recognizing, rather than understanding, others' experiences (Zahavi 2010, 2012; cf. Schutz 1967, 23–24).<sup>9</sup>

These difficulties of placing Scheler's view within in the current debate on empathy are plausibly indicative of more fundamental concerns. After all, the position he is looking to carve out purports to straddle conceptual boundaries that seem too definite to be crossed. According to the most prominent reservation against Scheler's view, he fails to drive a wedge between feeling another's emotion and feeling that emotion oneself (Landweer 1999, 127–128; Roughley and Schramme 2018). Even though we may have a reasonable grasp of the difference between perceptual memory and conscious perception, it is unclear, to say the least, how one might feel an emotion without feeling the way characteristic of this emotion. According to a further concern, it looks as though feeling-after fails to supply the information essential to genuine understanding: in being directly aware of another's emotions we are not yet aware of the reasons for which she feels them (Stueber 2006, 20–21, 147; cf. Zahavi 2012; Schutz 1967, 23–24). If these worries are warranted, there doesn't appear to be logical space for a view of empathy as distinctive as Scheler's: it is difficult to make sense of a way of accessing others' emotions, which qualifies as feeling proper without being emotional, and which also affords understanding of the sort in the focus of thoroughly cognitive approaches despite being a case of direct awareness of those emotions.<sup>10</sup>

In what follows, I attempt to show that we shouldn't dismiss Scheler's proposal too quickly. Neither of these objections seems to me to succeed. Properly explicated, Scheler's conception reflects a perfectly coherent and familiar aspect of common-sense psychology. Accordingly, I believe that, rather than being hopelessly ambitious or arcane, the notion of feeling-after widens the space of theoretical possibilities to take seriously in thinking about empathy.

### 14.3 First Objection: One Cannot Feel Someone's Emotion without Feeling Her Emotion Oneself

According to the first objection, Scheler's view is incoherent inasmuch as he supposes that we may feel another's emotion without feeling her emotion ourselves. This objection is most clearly voiced by Roughley and Schramme (2018, 12):

There is [...] a serious question here as to how we should precisely understand an agent's playing host to an affective state in a purely "pretend" manner, that is, in a way that does not involve the agent having the emotion in a full sense. [...] According to Scheler, there is an affective feature involved that is absent in mere knowledge or in judgement, but which nevertheless does not amount to the experience of the "real emotion" of the other. There is, he claims, a form of "feeling the other's feeling, not just of knowing it", that is essentially cognitive, an affective grasping of a feeling's quality, which does not actually attain the status of an emotion of the agent herself [...]. It is difficult to suppress doubts as to whether the idea of feeling the quality of an affect without feeling the affect itself is coherent.

Looking closely at how Roughley and Schramme characterize feeling-after, one might take issue with some of their formulations. For example, Scheler does not claim that feeling-after involves having the other's emotion in a "pretend" or less than full sense. Similarly, he never characterizes feeling-after as an affective grasp of others' emotions. By contrast, as I read him, Scheler does claim that feeling-after "amount[s] to the experience of the 'real emotion' of the other" and that it involves "feeling the affect itself". What we experience in feeling-after is a perfectly real emotion possessed by someone else and this experience is tantamount to feeling this emotion itself. What feeling-after does not involve is feeling this emotion *oneself*. However, while terminological precision is important in this context, I do not think these quibbles compromise the intelligibility of Roughley and Schramme's concern. On the face of it, there is clearly something puzzling about the thought that we can feel another's emotion – or its "quality"

– without our having that emotion ourselves. Feeling the quality of another’s joy, say, plausibly amounts to feeling its pleasantness or joyfulness. Yet pleasantness and joyfulness are as such or by their very nature ways one feels – they characterize how one feels in feeling joy (pleasant, joyful).<sup>11</sup> If we suppose (as I believe Scheler intends us to) that in feeling-after, we feel emotional qualities *as such* (rather than under some contingent aspect that just happens to characterize them), then how could we feel the joyfulness of another’s joy without feeling the way characteristic of joy and thus being glad ourselves?

In commenting on Scheler’s observation that we may felicitously claim feeling another’s emotion whilst denying feeling a corresponding sympathetic response, Landweer (1999, 127–128 [my translation]) expresses the same concern in a slightly different manner.

Here, a misleading equivocation seems to me to be produced by the word “feel” (“*nachfühlen*”): When one feels (*(nach)fühlt*) another’s feelings, this expression suggests some resonance with the way one feels (*Resonanz im eigenen Gefühl*). However, this is disputed by the second part of the statement (“but I have no compassion for you!”), or at the very least a crucial step in the overall emotional evaluation of the other’s situation is explicitly not taken since the other person obviously expects compassion which the speaker yet does not and does not want to offer. But if it is only about understanding and comprehensibility of the other’s feelings, then the “feeling”-component of the expression “feeling-after” is misleading. With this Scheler is aiming at the presentation (*Vergegenwärtigung*) of the other’s feeling, at a special vividness that, as he claims, goes beyond the mere knowledge or judgement that the other has a certain feeling.

Landweer’s first and, according to her, natural interpretation of the relevant use of “feel” takes the term to pick out an affect or emotion. Since the speaker denies feeling what would be the appropriate sympathetic emotion (and, I take it, since her overall statement is felicitous), this reading yet doesn’t seem appropriate. However, the second reading she considers and which she attributes to Scheler himself, is not fitting either since, on this reading, the term picks out the presentational character of feeling-after which it shares with perception and thus with phenomena that lack a felt character. Ultimately, Landweer seems to propose, the term is a misnomer. The only appropriate use in this context is for an episode that involves some resonance with the way one feels.<sup>12</sup>

The worry voiced by Roughley and Schramme and Landweer does not seem far-fetched given the categories of experience prevalent in contemporary philosophy of mind and phenomenology. Yet it misses its mark.

Stated more perspicaciously, the objection seems to amount to the following argument.<sup>13</sup>

- (P1) To feel the quality of another's emotion is to feel the way one feels in having that emotion
- (P2) To feel the way one feels in having an emotion is to have this emotion
- (C) One cannot feel the quality of another's emotion without having that emotion oneself

To see what is problematic about this argument, note that it trades on an ambiguity. (P1) is true only on the awareness-use of "feel". By contrast, (P2) is true only on its adverbial use. Accordingly, the argument cannot both be valid and have true premises.

For paradigm examples of the awareness use of "feel", consider the constructions "feel one's heartbeat" or "feel the sadness of a landscape". Here, "feel" is interchangeable with "sense" and ascribes awareness of something. Correspondingly, in the case of the corresponding noun (e.g. "feeling of one's heartbeat", "feeling of the sadness of a landscape"), the preposition "of" specifies an object of awareness. On the adverbial use, "feel" behaves differently. It features in constructions such as "feel warm" or "feel compassionate". This use ascribes a way one feels. Notwithstanding surface grammar, the same goes for the related verbal (e.g. "feel warmth", "feel compassion"), and nominal constructions (e.g. "feeling of warmth", "feeling of compassion"). Here, the direct object does not ascribe an object of awareness, but is used to specify how one feels. In this respect, it works in the same way as the direct object of "make a move" or "wave a farewell" and that of the corresponding nominal constructions. In making a move or waving a farewell one does not act on an object picked out by "move" or "farewell", respectively, but acts (waves/moves) in a particular way.<sup>14</sup>

When "feel" serves to ascribe feeling-after, it is used in the first of these two ways. Accordingly, the locutions "feel another's emotion" and "feel the quality of another's emotion" ascribe awareness of an emotion and its quality, respectively. Since the quality of an emotion is the way one feels in having this emotion, there is also a straightforward sense in which, as (P1) claims, to feel the quality of an emotion is to feel the way one feels as subject of this emotion. Importantly, though, here, "feel" is consistently used in the awareness-sense: in being aware of the pleasantness of another's joy, say, I am aware of the way one feels in being glad. By contrast, (P1) is not true when the second occurrence of "feel" is given an adverbial reading. This is because ascriptions of feelings in the awareness-sense do not entail corresponding ascriptions of ways one feels. Thus, "*S* feels (senses) the warmth of the surface" does not entail that *S* feels warm. This sentence may be true



even if *S* is chilled to the bone. Neither does “*S* feels (senses) the sadness of the landscape” entail that *S* feels sad. (Suppose *S* is contemplating a Caspar David Friedrich painting in a calm state of mind or with aesthetic pleasure (cf. Vendrell Ferran 2022, 63).) But this is precisely the reading of (P1) which is needed for the argument to be valid. For (P2) to be true, “feel” in “feel the way one feels in having an emotion” must be used adverbially: one has an emotion insofar as one feels (oneself) some way, namely that way one feels in (the way which is characteristic of) having this emotion. Thus, if (P1) is to connect with (P2), it ought to be truly interpretable as construing feeling another’s emotion as a corresponding way one feels oneself. Since (P1) cannot be truly interpreted in this way, the argument is unsuccessful.

As far as I can see, to defend their allegation of incoherence, Scheler’s critics would need to insist that, even though there is no entailment of the relevant general sort, when someone’s feeling takes as direct object another’s emotion, we *can* infer to a corresponding way she feels herself. But this would seem ad hoc. After all, here “feel” is used in the very same way it is used in those constructions which clearly do not licence this inference. Moreover, there are additional reasons to maintain that feeling-after cannot be construed as a corresponding way one feels. In particular, while we can sensibly request reasons for which someone feels some way,<sup>15</sup> this is not true of feeling *qua* awareness. Thus, “why do you feel glad/compassionate/angry/convicted...?” construed as a request for motivating reasons is felicitous whilst “why do you feel *S*’s joy/compassion/anger/...?” is not. (The same goes for “why are you aware of *S*’s joy/compassion/anger/...?”.) This strongly suggests that feelings in the awareness-sense are experiences of a different kind than ways one feels.

Now, one might think that, even if the allegation of incoherence is unfounded, it still points to an awkwardness in Scheler’s choice of terms on the lines hinted at by Landweer. Even if Scheler’s use of “feel” in connection with empathy is coherent, it can still seem unfortunate insofar as it is tempting to assimilate it to the term’s use in grammatically analogous (but semantically different) nominal constructions like “feel joy/compassion/anger...”. This impression is reinforced by the fact that we apparently have a less misleading alternative at our disposal. Inasmuch as Scheler is primarily looking to make empathy intelligible as presentational, we might instead use “perceive” to characterize feeling-after and restrict usage of “feel” in this context to the ascription of emotional ways one feels. This is in fact what Landweer (1999, 128) goes on to recommend.<sup>16</sup> In addition to avoiding conceptual confusion, this proposal also seems to sit well with the perceptual account of our access to other minds which Scheler himself offers in the final chapter of his monograph.

But this terminological regimentation, too, fails to properly engage with Scheler’s proposal. Even though in being presentational feeling-after is analogous to perception, the proposal is insufficiently sensitive to the aspect of

common-sense psychological thinking that Scheler seems to be picking up on. Consider, once again, how “feel” is used in statements like “I feel you (your pain/distress/joy...)”. Clearly, this use cannot be assimilated to its standard perceptual use, which ascribes a tactile or proprioceptive experience. Similarly, it does not seem that, in the relevant contexts, the force of “I feel you (your pain/distress/joy...)” is captured without residue by statements of the form “I clearly see that you are in pain/distressed/glad”, “I can see the pain/distress/joy in your face”, “You look pained/distressed/glad”, and the like. As far as I can see, the former statement cannot be paraphrased accordingly since it implies a certain sense in which one can personally relate to this experience, which does not seem to be implied by the latter, perceptual reports. To see this, consider the oddity of responding to another’s report of distress or joy by saying “I feel you (your joy/distress), but I really cannot relate to your joy/distress at all”. By contrast, there is nothing odd to responding with the words “I clearly see that you are distressed/glad, but I really cannot relate to your distress/joy at all”. To suppose that “perceive” does just as well as “feel” in characterizing Schelerian empathy is to ignore this personal rapport. Accordingly, notwithstanding the final chapter of Scheler’s monograph, I think we should resist Landweer’s suggestion and maintain that “feel” is appropriately used in this context.<sup>17</sup>

To provide further support for this and make more explicit how feeling-after differs from a purely perceptual access to others’ emotions, it is instructive to look to a cognate distinction in a different domain of experiences. Developing a parallel proposal concerning awareness of evaluative properties from Scheler’s *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Value* (1973), von Hildebrand (1969b, 133–134 [my translation]) argues that, as forms of value awareness, feeling, and perception come apart:

We must [...] separate within the sphere of intuitive apprehension of value between *feeling value* and *seeing value*. When comparing intuitive value apprehension to the sense of colour above, we were thinking of a way in which value is given that is characterized by a certain distance. But there is also a having of value, which could rather be compared with the way in which a bodily pain is given, with the way in which, say, a burning or stabbing is present to me, which penetrates me. Only in this latter case would it, strictly speaking, be permissible to talk of feeling value.

Von Hildebrand (1969b, 134 [my translation]) elaborates this proposal, using the method of phenomenal contrast:

We sometimes hear a melody and clearly apprehend its beauty, but it does not reach out to our heart, it does not “seize” us. Its beauty is presented to us without us, as it were, entering into personal contact

with it. That this is a case of intuitive apprehension – rather than mere knowledge that it is beautiful – is without question. The beauty of it clearly stands before one so that the recognition (*Erkenntnis*) that it is beautiful can be founded upon it. But it does not properly touch me; I do not feel it. By contrast think of the case in which the beauty moves me “to tears”. Now it clearly speaks to me, it affects me or I really penetrate it.

As von Hildebrand’s explicates the notion of feeling value, it picks out an experience that is similar to perception in having a presentational character. Yet, it is a type of presentation in its own right since it involves a distinctive way in which value resonates with, affects or “speaks to” us. While von Hildebrand takes this to be borne out by the way it contrasts first-personally with purely perceptual forms of value apprehension, the claim is supported also by a further characteristic he goes on to discuss: feeling value admits of degrees of depth. Note that the parallel claim does not seem true of perceiving value. While we can sensibly speak of value being felt more or less deeply, this way of speaking makes no sense in the case of perceiving (seeing, hearing) value.

Von Hildebrand’s distinction clearly requires some unpacking. Even pending further explication, however, it seems to have strong echoes with the observation that uses of “feel” in connection with others’ emotions differ from corresponding uses of perceptual verbs in that they imply a form of personal rapport. There is a similar phenomenal contrast here in that it seems possible for one to see the distress or joy in someone’s face, say, without her emotion resonating with or speaking to one. That said, it looks as though we, once again, confront a difficulty in attempting to make this idea precise. On von Hildebrand’s account, feeling value involves being affected (moved/touched) in some way by an evaluative property. And it is tempting to understand this proposal in terms of the property resonating with the way one feels. One reason for reading von Hildebrand in this way is that we commonly speak of being affected, moved, or touched in describing the felt character of emotion (Müller 2019, 18–19; Mitchell 2021a, 100–103). Another reason is that “be affected/moved/touched by *x*” ascribes a response to *x*, rather than a form of awareness (Müller 2019, 75–76): “*S* is affected/moved/touched by *x*” implies that *S* is affected/moved/touched *in view of x*.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, “by” here expresses the relation of being a motivating reason rather than a mere causal connection (contrast the merely causal use of “by” in: “James’ skin was burnt by the sun”). Thus, it looks as though, in enlisting von Hildebrand’s help to distinguish Schelerian empathy from mere perceptual awareness of other minds, the problem of keeping a safe distance from emotion again rears its head.

However, I believe there is conceptual space to make sense of feeling-after as a specific form of resonance with another's emotion without turning it into an emotional experience.<sup>19</sup> To show how this is possible, let me first try and elaborate on how feelings, in the awareness-sense, and corresponding ways we feel relate to each other from the first-person perspective. To make this vivid, consider the variety of experiences that belong within the wider ballpark of pangs of conscience.<sup>20</sup> Having acted in spite of what you deem morally right, you may sense some form of incongruence with your moral concerns without necessarily feeling bad about yourself. The sensed incongruence is "nagging" and, in this respect, aptly described as feeling. Supposing that incongruence with your moral concerns qualifies as an evaluative property (as a disvalue), this experience is a feeling of value in (broadly) the sense Scheler and von Hildebrand are concerned with.<sup>21</sup> *Qua* nagging, this felt incongruence also makes a claim, as it were, on the way *you* feel. However, suppose that you are in a good mood and keen on keeping it, so you manage to keep what is nagging at bay. Insofar as you are not properly moved or touched, there is a respect in which, from your perspective, your feeling remains *external* to you in your capacity as subject of certain moral concerns. Later, perhaps after some contemplation, things change and the felt incongruence is met with guilt. Now, not only does what you did feel incongruent with your concerns, but you feel accordingly yourself. This novel experience is internal to you in the same respect (it affects you *qua* subject of certain moral concerns). As we might say more colloquially, you are now to some degree *filled with* a feeling of guilt (in the adverbial sense).

Though rough and figurative, this way of distinguishing feeling *qua* awareness from ways we feel in connection with experiences of value helps delineate a notion of non-affective resonance on the lines required to shed light on the personal rapport characteristic of feeling-after without assimilating it to emotion. If what I said about pangs of conscience rings true to common first-person experience, it looks as though, pre-theoretically, there is room for experiences which speak to us *qua* subject of certain concerns without resonating with the way we feel as subject of these concerns. Put somewhat less metaphorically, what we experience in this case puts pressure on our concerns without properly *satisfying* or *frustrating* them. In the specific case at hand, *qua* incongruent with your moral concerns your action negatively resonates with these concerns: there is some pressure in the direction of their frustration, but it does not culminate in their actual frustration. Once you come to feel bad about yourself, these concerns are palpably frustrated. For you to feel guilty is, at least in part, for you to feel frustrated as subject of these concerns.<sup>22</sup>

Moving to interpersonal experience, this distinction between different forms of experiential resonance is applicable, too. To appreciate this, note

that there is a concern with which others' emotions plausibly resonate in empathy. This concern takes as its object their wellbeing. We can indirectly support this claim by returning to the observation that sympathy is a response to another's emotion under a particular aspect, i.e. as relatable for us. As I noted in section 14.2, on Scheler's view, empathy is epistemically significant in that it makes others' experiences relatable, and thus intelligible, to us. While someone's emotion is plausibly relatable only if it is intelligible, there are grounds to think that intelligibility is not sufficient. As is widely acknowledged, sympathy is selective insofar as we tend to feel only with members of a certain in group (e.g., Goldie 2000, 216). While this group may be quite large, it restricts possible targets of sympathy to those that we to some extent identify with or are attached to. In virtue of being attached to those we sympathize with, we are not indifferent to how things fare for them, but care about their wellbeing.<sup>23</sup> This makes it plausible to think that in sympathetically responding to others' emotions *qua* relatable, we also respond to the way their emotions bear on our concern for their wellbeing, i.e. to its being congruent (joy) or incongruent (distress) with this concern. Supposing that empathy plays the epistemic role Scheler accords to it, there is thus reason to think that it picks up on how others' emotions bear on this concern.

If empathy makes us aware of (in)congruence of others' emotions with our concern for their wellbeing and is, in this respect, on a par with feeling value, what I said about the latter in terms of resonance can arguably be generalized *mutatis mutandis* to the former. That is, we might explain the way we feel in sympathizing with others in terms of the satisfaction (sympathetic joy) or frustration (commiseration) of this concern and give a cognate characterization of empathy in terms of non-affective resonance with it. Echoing what I said about feeling (in)congruence with moral concerns, one might propose that feeling-after involves pressure which aims at, but is insufficient for, its satisfaction or frustration. Although feeling-after is plausibly less morally loaded, this analogous treatment is supported by the supposition that in empathy, too, a claim is imposed on the way we feel ourselves. This supposition is based on the observation that *qua* (in)congruent with this concern, the other's emotion is not only a reason for which we sympathize with her, but also a reason *to* sympathize with her (Müller 2022b, 7–8): *ceteris paribus*, how things are going for those to whom we are attached (well or poorly) speaks in favour of a corresponding sympathetic attitude (sympathetic joy, commiseration). Moreover, according to a widely held cognitive constraint on reason-responsiveness, our cognitive access to the reason for which we feel sympathy includes sensitivity to its character as a normative reason.<sup>24</sup> Thus, if we suppose with Scheler that feeling-after constitutes this access, it seems only natural to think there is a normative aspect to the experience.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the thought that feeling-after involves some claim on

the way we feel, which is reflected in how it resonates with our concerns, sits well with independently plausible assumptions about how to explicate empathy's epistemic role.

If this proposal possesses some plausibility, there are thus resources available to make feeling-after intelligible as a genuine case of feeling without assimilating it to emotional experience. On the assumption that the personal rapport which distinguishes feeling-after from mere perceptual awareness of others' emotions is a non-affective form of resonance with our concerns, feeling-after can be clearly distinguished from the ways we feel constitutive of sympathy. No doubt there is more to say in order to establish that we are actually aware of others' feelings in this specific, phenomenally conspicuous sense. However, what I have said should suffice to shift the burden of argument back on those who insist that Scheler's proposal is incoherent or effectively collapses into a perceptual account of empathy.

#### **14.4 Second Objection: Feeling Someone's Emotion Is Insufficient for Understanding It**

The second objection alleges that Scheler effectively conflates being aware of another's emotion with awareness of her reasons for feeling it. The seeds of this objection can be found in Schutz's (1967) discussion of Scheler's thoughts on perceiving other minds. Schutz's core criticism is summarized and endorsed by Zahavi (2012, 81):

Although it might be permissible to say that certain aspects of the other's consciousness, such as his joy, sorrow, pain, shame, pleading, love, rage, and threats, are given to us directly and noninferentially, it does not follow from this that we also have a direct access to the *why* of such feelings. And in order to uncover these aspects, it is not sufficient simply to observe facial expressions and actions; we also have to rely on interpretation, and have to draw on a highly structured context of meaning. In short, if we wish to reach a deeper level of interpersonal understanding, we have to go beyond what is directly available (cf. Schutz 1967, 23–24, 168; cf. Zahavi 2010).

Although this line of thought focuses on a purely perceptual view of empathy, one might think it also speaks to the notion of feeling-after. Feeling-after is a case of passively registering or being receptive to the quality of others' emotions, which is not supposed to be the upshot of inference or projective imagination. Yet, interpretation and situating an emotion within a larger context of meaning is presumably a matter of reasoning (and, arguably, imagination).<sup>26</sup> In this respect, Scheler's conception of empathy seems to illicitly unify distinct cognitive phenomena.

In a similar vein, Stueber (2006, 20–21, 147) notes that what he calls “basic empathy” affords direct recognition that someone has an emotion, but no insight into why she has it.<sup>27</sup> As he seems to suppose, recognition that someone feels some way is insufficient for understanding why she feels this way (cf. also Stueber 2017, 139). According to him, such understanding requires a cognitively more sophisticated form of empathy called “reenactive empathy”, which constitutively involves imaginatively adopting another’s perspective so as to assess which aspects of her psychology are situationally relevant to determining her motivating reasons as well as hypothetically integrating these within our own perspective on the world.<sup>28</sup> Since feeling-after resembles basic empathy in being a quasi-perceptual form of awareness that does not constitutively involve perspective-taking or reasoning, Stueber’s line of thought is incompatible with Scheler’s take on empathy: to say that feeling-after makes another’s emotion intelligible is to underestimate the cognitive wherewithal required for genuine interpersonal understanding.

As I have reconstructed the considerations by Schutz/Zahavi and Stueber, we should keep quasi-perceptual or presentational forms of interpersonal cognition apart from those that constitutively involve or are the direct upshot of explicitly exercising rational or imaginative capacities. There is clearly a valid point here. Yet I do not think that this distinction coincides with the distinction between direct interpersonal awareness and interpersonal understanding. To assess the problem which seems to arise for Scheler’s proposal in view of their considerations, I shall suppose it can be put more explicitly in terms of the following argument:

- (P1) As a direct awareness of the quality of another’s emotion, feeling-after is not an awareness of the reasons for which the other has this emotion
- (P2) Understanding why someone has an emotion requires awareness of the reasons for which she has it
- (C) Hence, feeling-after is not a way of understanding why the other has this emotion

To show that this argument is unsound, it is useful to take a closer look at the emotions we are supposed to be aware of in feeling-after. Given a few plausible assumptions about the qualities we are directly aware of according to Scheler, (P1) turns out false.<sup>29</sup>

I noted previously that the quality of another’s emotion is plausibly the way one feels in having this emotion. As some further reflection suggests, emotional ways one feels are not purely phenomenal properties or qualia, but essentially related to evaluative properties. More specifically, they are essentially responses to such properties (von Hildebrand 1969a, 37–43; Müller 2019, 63–75; Mitchell 2021a, 101–103). As such, they are felt *in view of* a particular (dis)value and thus for a reason provided by this property.

This conception of emotional qualities is supported by my earlier remarks on the way they relate to our cares and concerns. As I suggested in the foregoing section, emotional ways one feels are ways of feeling satisfied (frustrated) as a subject of particular concerns. If this is correct, it follows that they are essentially responsive: in having an emotion we feel satisfied or frustrated *by* something or other. Although the “by”-locution might suggest a purely causal connection, its present use is, once again, to be distinguished from paradigm causal uses of “by”. In line with my remarks on “being affected (moved/touched) by *x*”, here “by” specifies a reason for which we feel some way: “*S* feels satisfied (frustrated) by *x*” implies that *S* feels satisfied (frustrated) in view of *x*.<sup>30</sup> What is more, for us to feel satisfied (frustrated) *qua subject of a particular concern* what satisfies or frustrates us must do so under a particular aspect: it must purport to be (in)congruent with this concern. This makes it intelligible that we should respond positively (by feeling satisfied) or negatively (by feeling frustrated). Hence, on the account of emotional qualities I have been working with, they are essentially responses to the apparent exemplification of an evaluative property (concern (in)congruence). Thus conceived, they are constitutively ways one feels for a particular reason.

Supposing the qualities we feel in feeling-after have this responsive character, it does not seem that direct awareness of another’s emotion and awareness of the reasons for which she feels it are necessarily distinct. If emotional qualities are constitutively responsive, then, contrary to (P1), feeling the quality of another’s emotion *does* amount to awareness of a reason for which she feels as she does. On this view, what we feel in feeling the pleasantness of another’s joy, say, is a way one feels *in response to* a particular evaluative reason (congruence with a specific concern). Since, as Scheler seems to suppose, feeling-after presents emotional qualities *as such* and their responsive character is part of their nature, this character is also registered by us in feeling them. On Scheler’s conception, empathizing with another’s emotion in and of itself involves awareness of the other’s emotion as being felt for a particular reason. The second argument against Scheler’s proposal thus seems unsuccessful, too.

One might be tempted to respond to this that the motivating reason which, I have argued, is built into emotional qualities is somewhat peculiar. In particular, in being constitutive of such qualities, this reason does not seem to contribute much to making the corresponding emotion intelligible. In learning that someone is glad because something or other purports to be congruent with her concerns we don’t seem to understand a great deal. Effectively, this comes down to the realization that she is glad because of something apparently positive for her, which looks much like a conceptual truth (Müller 2019, 69–71). By contrast, statements such as “I understand you (your pain/joy/...)” or “I feel you (your pain/joy/...)” usually report understanding of a more substantial sort. In light of this,



Scheler's critics might maintain that, with some minor modifications, the objection stands. Even if direct awareness of another's emotion involves awareness of one of her motivating reasons, this motivating reason isn't of the right kind. Genuine interpersonal understanding, they might insist, requires awareness of reasons of a less trivial sort. Accordingly, one might modify the above argument by imposing a constraint on the motivating reasons mentioned in (P1) and (P2) such that these must not be reasons which are constitutive of the emotions they are reasons for.

This reply is based on a fair observation. No doubt the understanding conveyed by direct awareness of emotional qualities as such is limited. Yet I don't think we should discount it as a genuine form of interpersonal understanding. Even though statements like "S is glad because of something purportedly congruent with her concerns" are not very informative, they are bona fide explanatory statements, and perfectly cogent as such. In this context, "because" is used in the standard explanatory sense. (This use contrasts with its evidential use, cf. e.g. "Someone must have been here before because there are footprints all over the path".) Accordingly, they explain why someone has a particular emotion by citing a reason for which she has it and, accordingly, make intelligible why she has that emotion. What is conferred by this reason doesn't do much more than secure the intelligibility of the emotion *as such*. Still, despite being comparatively shallow, the understanding conferred is understanding in the very same, reasons-related sense commonly expressed by statements of the form "I understand you (your joy/pain/...)" or "I feel you (your joy/pain/...)".

Moreover, and importantly, conceived as interpersonal understanding in this minimal sense, feeling-after supplies the requisite intelligibility for others' emotions to be psychologically available as motivating reasons for sympathy. To see this, compare the following two statements, given in response to the reason-request "why do you sympathize (commiserate) with her?":

She is in distress, but her distress makes absolutely no sense to me.

She is in distress, but that's really all I know.

Of these two explanations, the first one leaves us puzzled, while the second sounds fine. More specifically, the oddity of the first statement suggests that there is a requirement of intelligibility on others' emotions as reasons for sympathy, while the felicity of the second statement suggests that this requirement can be satisfied merely by being aware that they have an emotion of the relevant type. This suggests that the understanding required to sympathize with others need not be any more substantive than what is afforded by awareness of emotional qualities as such. As a presentation of a way one feels in response to evaluative properties, feeling-after satisfies the epistemic role Scheler accords to it.<sup>31,32</sup>

Given what I have conceded in answering this reply, an important issue remains to be addressed, though. I admitted that a statement such as “I feel you (your joy/pain/...)”, given in response to another’s report of her emotion, reports more substantive understanding than is conferred by direct awareness of her emotion’s quality. The type of empathetic access to others’ emotions expressed by the ordinary notion of *Nachfühlen* does not seem to be confined to feeling emotional qualities *qua* responses to concern (in)congruence, but may involve understanding of a deeper sort. Accordingly, if an account of feeling-after is to do justice to such statements, the picture presented thus far remains incomplete. Moreover, given the considerations offered by Schutz/Zahavi and Stueber, there is pressure to think that awareness of the motivating reasons required for this more substantive understanding draws on more intricate cognitive capacities, including imagination and reason. Such understanding is not conferred simply by an evaluative property to which the other’s emotion is essentially responsive, but also by those non-evaluative features in virtue of which this evaluative property is (or purports to be) instantiated: to fully understand why another is distressed we also need to understand what it is about her circumstances that she views as incongruent with her concerns. And this plausibly requires relating her emotion to a complex context, including situational features, and further aspects of her psychology. Hence, if we are to accommodate for the pre-theoretical notion of empathy in the background of Scheler’s proposal, our account may be threatened by a tension on the lines articulated by the proposed modification of the above argument after all. In accounting for the relevant cases, it is much less clear that we can hold on to Scheler’s central claim that empathy is direct awareness of others’ emotions and may need to concede that awareness of the relevant motivating reasons requires inference, and/or imaginative projection.<sup>33</sup> Correspondingly, we may end up with a conception of empathy that significantly overlaps with the more thoroughly cognitive notions propounded by Schutz/Zahavi and Stueber.

I shall here not try to rebut the claim that more intricate cognitive capacities play a non-negligible role in attaining substantive understanding of others’ emotions. I believe that the considerations found in Schutz and Stueber do make a strong case for this. Still, I don’t think this undermines the prospect of a more comprehensive account of feeling-after which retains Scheler’s core contention that empathy is a form of direct awareness. In accepting that such understanding depends on more sophisticated forms of cognition, including inference and perspective-taking, we are not forced to deny that, in the relevant cases, feeling-after is a presentational access to others’ emotions and their reasons.<sup>34</sup> Correspondingly, I don’t think that, once amended to accommodate for such cases, our account collapses into a cognitivist view on which empathy consists in explicit exercises of such forms of cognition.

In support of this, note first that there is room to maintain that, when affording more than the minimal intelligibility strictly necessary for sympathy, feeling-after is still a case of receptivity to the qualities of others' emotions, rather than (the upshot of) an explicit exercise of inference or imagination. To be fair, if we read Scheler as denying *any* role to inference and projective imagination as possible mental antecedents of feeling-after, then a comprehensive account of feeling-after may have to depart from the letter of Scheler's conception. There is a weaker reading, though, which is still in the spirit of Scheler's view. On this reading, feeling-after is a direct form of awareness insofar as it is not *formed* by concluding an inference or going through an imaginative procedure. This weaker reading directly falls out of the claim that feeling-after is a form of presentation and, as such, a way of being saddled with content. Being saddled with content is not a case of explicitly exercising reason or imagination. Unlike the conclusion of an inference or a content we generate imaginatively, presentational content is not put before our mind *by ourselves*, so to speak, but content we receive. But this is compatible with the claim that exercises of reason and imagination may still serve as *enabling conditions* for feeling-after and, in this respect, play a non-negligible role in connection with empathy. Clearly, presentational states may be enabled by exercises of these capacities. To illustrate this, consider the experience of being struck by the validity of an inference. In order to enjoy this experience and be presented with the inference's validity, one needs to exercise inferential abilities. Still, being struck by its validity is not itself inferential: it is not an act of concluding an inference.

Note, further, that, since the relevant first-person statements involve the awareness-use of "feel", the awareness that is reported by such statements is plausibly conceived as presentational: such uses are naturally interpreted as reporting an experience of registering how the other feels. This awareness is a matter of being saddled with a particular content, rather than being formed by concluding an inference or going through an imaginative procedure. We can think of what is presented here as the way the other feels in response *both* to an apparent evaluative property *as well as* to certain non-evaluative aspects of her situation that apparently exemplify this evaluative property. In order for us to feel this more complex response, the simple presentation of an emotional quality *qua* response to concern (in-)congruence will plausibly need to be cognitively enriched. However, this is not to say that, in this case, empathy *itself* is constituted by explicitly exercising reason or imagination or is the direct upshot of their exercise.

To elaborate this thought, one might, again, look to ways of substantiating the cognate notion of feeling value. Arguably, the aspect of ordinary experience that answers to Scheler's and von Hildebrand's conception of feeling value is a form of cognitively informed presentation. More specifically, this experience can usefully be modelled on a particular type

of aspectual presentation. This aspectual presentation is structurally on a par with simple cases of seeing-as: it is a type of *construal* in which some object or situation is apprehended in terms of a specific psychological background.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to simple seeing-as, however, it presents the subject's situation as (in)congruent with her concerns in virtue of being informed by a complex psychological background, which involves those concerns (Müller 2019, chapter 5, 2021). Given the parallels between feeling value and feeling-after made explicit in section 14.3, there is some *prima facie* reason to think this approach to the former might also prove useful in developing a more substantial account of the latter. If it can be suitably extended, then we can allow that intricate cognitive capacities are required for us feel other's emotions in a more substantive sense without compromising its character as presentation and direct awareness.<sup>36</sup> Since, on this account, the subject's concerns take centre stage among those aspects of her psychology that may inform feeling-after, it also does not seem as though, in choosing this approach, we risk assimilating empathy to a purely perceptual phenomenon. Since the relevant type of construal is *concern-based*, there are resources to account for the personal rapport which, as I suggested in section 14.3, renders feeling-after a distinctive type of interpersonal experience.

Thus, while we may need to acknowledge that sophisticated cognitive capacities play a non-negligible role in paradigm cases of *Nachfühlen*, there are options available for developing a comprehensive account of feeling-after which retains the core contours of Scheler's conception. On this account, empathy constitutes epistemic access to motivating reasons for sympathy, which is presentational and yet affords genuine interpersonal understanding.<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Schutz conceives of Scheler's view of empathy in purely perceptual terms and does not engage with the notion of feeling-after. However, one might see a more general worry here for views of empathy as direct awareness of others' emotions. In this connection cf. also Stueber (2006, 20–21, 147) and Zahavi (2010; 2012).
- 2 In this connection, cf. also Slote (2018, 133).
- 3 The original translation has it that others' emotions are "completely realized" in empathy. It strays quite far from the German original.
- 4 Arguably, that it is presentational implies that it is not the upshot of inference or imaginative projection. Presentational states are not *formed* in the manner of inferentially based beliefs or imaginary contents that we create by going through a particular procedure. In this connection, cf. Bengson (2015). Cf. also section 14.4.
- 5 Such statements have much the same force as "I get you". Similarly, the German "Ich kann dir das (deinen Kummer/deine Freude/...) nachfühlen" expresses understanding of the emotion picked out by the direct object pronoun.

- 6 There are echoes here with Stein's conception of empathy (what she calls "Einfühlung"). Cf. Stein (1989, 11, 14-15). She is more cautious than Scheler about the comparison with remembered experiences, though.
- 7 On the necessity of understanding for sympathy, cf. also Goldie (2000, 180).
- 8 I say more about relatability in sections 14.3 and 14.4.
- 9 In this connection, cf. also Stueber's (2006) distinction between basic empathy and reenactive empathy. I explain this distinction in section 14.4.
- 10 I shall set aside a further concern based on the observation that "nachfühlen" is suggestive of an act of reproduction or imitation (Zahavi 2010, 289). Since Scheler denies that feeling-after constitutively involves reproduction or imitation, this can make his proposal look incoherent in a further respect. However, although this is clearly part of the etymology of the verb, I doubt it is part of its current meaning. Consider the lexically related verb "nachvollziehen" ("understand", "comprehend"). Despite having a similar etymology, it is often used synonymously with "understand" and thus without implying any particular method of understanding. The same, I believe, is true of "nachfühlen". Corresponding uses of "I feel you (your pain/joy/...)" do not seem to carry this suggestion either.
- 11 Following Scheler's (1973) axiology, one might instead think of the (un)pleasantness of an emotion as an evaluative property. For discussion, cf. Mulligan (2010, 492-495). This view is committed to an implausible account of the felt character of emotion. On this account, the way one feels in joy is a feeling (in the awareness-sense) of the value of pleasantness. This view is guilty of the same confusion that invalidates the present objection against Scheler's conception of empathy (see main text below).
- 12 This reading is confirmed by Landweer's (1999, 128) subsequent terminological suggestion.
- 13 This argument is closer to Roughley and Schramme's line of thought. However, what I say in response also invalidates Landweer's suggestion that to feel another's emotion is for that emotion to resonate with the way one feels (and hence to feel the way characteristic of that emotion oneself).
- 14 In this connection, cf. Ducasse (1942), Douglas (1998).
- 15 At any rate, this is true when the way one feels is specified by an adjective lexically related to a type of emotion.
- 16 In a similar vein, Clauß (1958, 240) assimilates feeling-after to a largely perceptual form of presentation in which the other's experience is apprehended "with the eyes of an observer".
- 17 Scheler does not distinguish sufficiently clearly between feeling-after and a purely perceptual access to other minds. Here, he ought to have been more precise. Cf. also Zahavi (2010, 289).
- 18 Cf. also Mulligan's (2009, 155) observations on von Hildebrand's notion of being affected (Affiziertwerden).
- 19 The following proposal has some echoes with Clauß's (1958) notion of "resonating-with" ("Mitschwingen"). Clauß (ibid, 238-240) distinguishes resonating-with both from feeling-after and from sympathy. He seems to think of feeling-after as a mere perceptual phenomenon, though. Cf. n. 16.
- 20 This example is inspired by von Hildebrand's (1969a) discussion of conscience, esp. p. 143, n. 1.
- 21 This account of evaluative properties does not align with von Hildebrand's own axiology. I defend the claim that (in)congruence with concerns is an evaluative property in (2022a).

- 22 This understanding of the satisfaction/frustration of concerns takes its cue from Wollheim (1999, Lecture I) and Roberts (2003, 157). I elaborate on it and defend the attendant account of emotional ways one feels in Müller (2019, chapter 4).
- 23 Roberts (2003, 295) likewise argues that compassion is based on a concern for another's wellbeing. Cf. also Blum (2018) on the connection between fellow-feeling and others' wellbeing.
- 24 It is widely held that motivating reasons are apprehended as corresponding normative reasons. In defence of this constraint, cf. e.g. Singh (2019).
- 25 On the idea that the force of normative reasons may register with us experientially, cf. Müller (2021). In this connection, cf. also Siegel (2014) and Mitchell (2021b) on what they call "experiential mandate".
- 26 Putting the worry in this way may not exactly align with Schutz's original line of thought, though it takes some inspiration from it. On imagination and contextualization, cf. my remarks on Stueber's notion of reenactive empathy in the main text below.
- 27 Stueber focuses on understanding actions performed for reasons. However, he claims that understanding why someone feels an emotion is beyond the reach of basic empathy, too.
- 28 While this proposal has obvious echoes with Schutz/Zahavi in respect of the need for contextualization, it also resonates to some extent with Goldie (2000, 185–189).
- 29 My response in what follows is somewhat congenial to Bailey (2020), who likewise clarifies the nature of emotions in order to defend the claim that in empathy we directly apprehend the intelligibility of others' emotions.  
Bailey's defence focuses on the idea that we empathetically apprehend the apparent representational accuracy or fittingness of emotion. This defence is different from the response I offer below in that it does not make explicit the responsive character of emotion and the role of motivating reasons in this context, which strikes me as crucial in order to appreciate that what is at stake is genuine understanding *why* someone feels as they do.
- 30 As I argue in (2019, 101-105), in the case of emotion, being affected (touched, moved) by something is tantamount to being satisfied or frustrated by it qua subject of particular concerns.
- 31 According to another reply, inspired by Schutz's and Stueber's emphasis on contextualization, genuine understanding requires that the other's response be adequately related to specific features of her situational context and/or further aspects of her psychology. However, this is not needed for the specific understanding at issue: since the reason that confers this understanding is built into the emotion *qua type*, this understanding is independent of the other's situational context and her individual psychology.
- 32 This is not to deny that sympathy may differ in depth depending on the depth of our understanding of others' emotions.
- 33 As far as I can see, Schutz and Stueber do not provide grounds for thinking that imitation of others' outward behaviour is required in order to empathize with their emotions. However, if Stueber (2006) is right, reenactment of (some of) her thought processes may well be.
- 34 This reply assumes that there is a reasonably robust sense in which awareness qualifies as direct simply in being presentational. There are rivaling conceptions (e.g., Gallagher 2017, 165), but I think this one captures a pre-theoretically important notion of directness (see main text below).

- 35 On the notion of a construal and the specific type of construal relevant in this context, cf. Roberts (2003).
- 36 I say more about why construals qualify as presentational in Müller (2021).
- 37 *Acknowledgments*. I would like to thank the editors for their helpful written comments. I am also grateful to the audience of the workshop “Empathic Understanding”, held at Duisburg-Essen University in May 2022, for their useful feedback on an earlier version of this material.

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# 15 “Theirs Is the Future Way of Studying Aesthetics”

## Vernon Lee and the German Aesthetics of Empathy

*Thomas Petraschka*

### 15.1 Introduction

When Edward Titchener (1909, 21) chose to translate “Einfühlung” with the newly coined term “empathy” in his *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Processes* in 1909, he introduced a concept into the English-language debate on aesthetics that had been dominant in the German-speaking countries for quite some time.<sup>1</sup> Although similar concepts had been around in German aesthetics at least since Herder, the term “Einfühlung” was used first by Robert Vischer (the son of the renowned philosopher Friedrich Theodor Vischer) in his dissertation *On the Optical Sense of Form (Über das optische Formgefühl)* in 1873. The so-called “Einfühlungsästhetik” (“aesthetics of empathy”), which was a psychological branch of aesthetics based on the concept underlying Vischer’s terminological invention, quickly became increasingly popular in Germany in the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1907, two years before Titchener’s translation, Karl Groos (1907, 489) decreed it the “predominant branch of aesthetics”<sup>2</sup> and many other philosophers, for example Moritz Geiger, shared his impression. “In recent times”, Geiger (1911, 58) explained during an important keynote at the *Fourth Congress of Experimental Psychology*, “the view that empathy is one of the sources of aesthetic pleasure has generally become the dominant one in German aesthetics”.<sup>3</sup>

Before Titchener’s translation (and, for the most part, even after it) English-speaking aesthetics was not really interested in empathy. The German debate was either neglected, in many cases simply because of the language barrier, or dismissed. There was, however, one most notable exception: Violet Paget, better known today under her pseudonym Vernon Lee. Paget, almost fluent in German herself, immersed herself in the complex German discussion well before 1909 – and did so “with astonishing zeal”, as René Wellek (1966, 237) has rightly noted. Although she was unique in this sense, Lee’s relations to the German aesthetics of empathy have only very recently come into the focus of academic research. In the anthology *Vernon Lee. Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, for example, the

editors Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (2006, xi) acknowledge a growing interest in Lee’s work, but at the same time lament the prevalent neglect of her “still largely unassessed work on empathy and on physiological aesthetics”.

I can only speculate about the reasons for this disregard of Lee’s thoughts on psychological aesthetics and especially on the aesthetics of empathy, but a combination of two factors seems plausible to me: first, the key thinkers of the German tradition like Theodor Lipps, Johannes Volkelt, Oswald Külpe, and Karl Groos have in part been forgotten altogether, and only a small proportion of their work has been translated into English. In addition, their writing style is sometimes rather cryptic and prolix, which makes their ideas difficult to grasp even for native speakers.

Second, there is a rather widespread tendency to underestimate Lee’s work in aesthetics. When it is recognized at all, it is mostly belittled. As Wellek (1966, 250) puts it: “Vernon Lee [...] wanted to become a scientist, an empirical psychologist, but never could make a great impact, as her work was not original enough to impress the German specialists and was too isolated within the English tradition”. Vineta Colby (2003, 167) argues in a similar vein that Lee “made no major contribution to psychology or to aesthetics”, and Christa Zorn (2003, xviii) adds that her “impressionistic style won her the admiration of Pater and James, but it was not ‘scientific’ enough to impress pedantic German scholars”. Sometimes it is even insinuated that Lee was simply naïve in this regard and embraced “a theory that, following Ruskin, we might call the ‘empathetic fallacy’” (Morgan 2012, 41).<sup>4</sup>

Because I do not think these claims are entirely correct, I want to pursue a somewhat revisionary goal in the following chapter. I want to show that Lee’s work in aesthetics has been unjustly underestimated for two reasons. First, I will show that her ideas were much more sophisticated and had a considerably larger impact on the supposedly unimpressed pedantic German scholars than Wellek, Colby, Zorn, or Morgan suspect. Second, I think that Lee’s relation to the German aesthetics of empathy is not only interesting from the point of view of aesthetics or intellectual history, but also extremely important to understand Lee not only as a thinker, but also as an artist, an aesthetic practitioner, and even as a person. So even if one is not convinced that Lee’s work in the aesthetics of empathy is interesting in and of itself, there are still good reasons to take a close look her relations to the German debate.

My chapter is structured as follows. I will first detail Lee’s *personal relations* to German aestheticians as prominent as Oswald Külpe, Karl Groos, or Max Dessoir. Lee exchanged many letters (and even Christmas presents!) with them, visited them on several occasions in Germany and was in turn visited in Florence, gave talks at the very same international conferences, and was even asked to help (by Dessoir, in this instance) with the internationalization of German aesthetics.

The second part of my chapter (sections 15.3 and 15.4) is devoted to *systematic connections* between Lee's work in aesthetics and the German aesthetics of empathy. I will do two things here: first, I will provide a short reconstruction of Lee's early views – especially of her theory of empathy as “bodily induction” – and discuss the major claims she makes in her paper ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ from 1897 (for an analysis of the impressive scope of Lee's mature views see Prinz in this volume). I will then turn to a significant systematic reaction to Lee's work by the most renowned (and most pedantic, for that matter) of all the pedantic German scholars: the extensive review of ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ by Theodor Lipps, published in his *Dritter ästhetischer Litteraturbericht* (‘Third Report on Aesthetic Literature’) in 1900. I will detail the arguments he made against Lee and discuss their plausibility. In the third part of the chapter (section 15.5), I then will show how Lee responded to Lipps's criticism and briefly sketch how important it was for her work and for her personality. She not only reacted to Lipps in the sense that she accepted or refuted his arguments, but also in the sense that she tried to construct an image of herself as hybrid between a philosopher/scientist and an artist/poet. My conclusion is, as I just mentioned, that an understanding of Lee's relations to the aesthetics of empathy (and especially to Lipps) is not only important for anybody interested in Vernon Lee as an aesthete or philosopher, but for anybody interested in Vernon Lee.

## 15.2 Lee and the Aesthetics of Empathy – Personal Relations

In an attempt to empirically validate the introspective aesthetic considerations she had laid out in ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ (I will return to those in sections 15.3 and 15.4) Lee started sending a self-designed questionnaire to several experts in the field of aesthetics. Among them was the Tübingen-based philosopher Karl Groos, who was at the time considered a very influential voice in the German debate on *Einfühlung* and the most prominent advocate of a theory that explained empathy via means of “inner mimicry” or “bodily induction”.

Lee exchanged letters with Groos over a period of 28 years (February 1901 to January 1929). Their letters can by no means be reduced to an exchange between an “unimpressed” academic expert on the one hand, and an annoying autodidact, whose unoriginal inquiries are only reluctantly answered, on the other. Groos and Lee established a relation among equals that came very close to being a friendship. Groos, for example, openly complains at some length – some things in academia apparently never change – about the “many term papers”<sup>5</sup> (15 February 1901) he has to grade, Lee sends Groos a cheque as a Christmas present for “underprivileged students of the philos[ophical] faculty” (2 December 1923) in Tübingen, and the two agree to meet in person in Florence in the spring

of 1902. A return visit to Tübingen by Lee is “a very pleasant prospect” for Groos, who offers that she can “of course stay with us [with Groos and his wife]” (15 June 1919) and does not need to book a hotel room in Tübingen. Both regret the nationalist frenzy of the war years and hope that international relations will return to normal.

Of course, what is more interesting here is the scientific exchange between the two. Although it is not extremely detailed, it must have been important for Lee. Groos refers Lee, for example, to empirical experiments conducted by Dessoir, who had instructed his students to record their emotional experiences after reading a certain scene from Goethe’s *Faust*, and to works by the German philosophers and/or psychologists Hermann Lotze, Hermann Ebbinghaus, Hugo Münsterberg, Carl Stumpf, Volkelt, or Külpe (see 20 July 1901). He also expresses appreciation of her “outstanding aesth[etic] receptivity” (20 July 1901) and discusses Theodor Lipps with her several times. “The main difference between Lipps and me”, he explains to Lee, among other things, “is that [...] he always wants to causally explain things (through unconscious processes), whereas I limit myself more to description, comparison, classification”. Above all, Groos sees in Lee an allied representative of a theory of bodily induction. “I am firmly convinced”, he writes in this regard, “that Lipps, in his struggle against the recognition of bodily sent[iments] in aesth[etic] enjoyment, will not ultimately win” (28 May 1907).

In 1906, Dessoir himself contacted Lee, whose postal address he received from Groos, in order to persuade her to contribute to his *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*. Dessoir, too, was aware that debates in the aesthetics of empathy were concentrated in the German-speaking world, and Lee seemed to him to be the key to internationalization. “So far, only Germans have collaborated”, he accordingly wrote to her, “but I very much hope that researchers from other countries & languages will gradually join in” (9 May 1906). The contribution entitled ‘Weiteres über Einfühlung und ästhetisches Miterleben’, which Lee later submitted, contains the aforementioned questionnaire that led her to contact Groos in the first place. Dessoir, however, was not satisfied with the essay at first: “I just want to confess right away that I cannot find my way around it at all”, he writes to her and continues:

I have not succeeded in clearly identifying the actual train of thought. The many repetitions, the continued references to the writing of B. & U. [Beauty and Ugliness; T.P.], the insertion of the questionnaire etc. confuse the picture for me. It further seems to me that the constant reference to your personal development eclipses what is essential, namely the factual problem. In short, I do not succeed in recognising a clear progress of thought, a real argument.

(7 October 1909)

Oswald Külpe was also personally acquainted with Lee. He invites her to the “Institutskolloquium” (a series of workshop-like lectures) in Bonn, where he taught before he succeeded Lipps as chair of Systematical Philosophy in Munich. As was customary with respected guests, he picked her up at the hotel a good while before her associated lecture in order to “introduce her to our seminar and institute” (11 July 1911). After the visit, Külpe wrote that he was thankful to Lee for her explanations of Ruskin’s analysis of aesthetic judgements and laid out how much he regretted that Lee was unable to take up an offer for a longer research-stay with him in Germany. He “eagerly awaits [...] the aesthetic book of which you have spoken” and declared, on behalf of his entire philosophical institute, that they were quite prepared “to let your research influence our problems and our work” (15 August 1911).

While it is difficult to determine exactly how much of this is politeness or mere flattery, several things are becoming clear: Lee was well connected to several of the German experts in the area of the aesthetics of empathy, and they all treated Lee with respect and expressed genuine interest in her work. It is of course true that Dessoir was very critical of the essay Lee submitted. But to conclude from this that “pedantic German scholars” were therefore simply unimpressed or disinterested seems premature. Dessoir, I would argue, recommended what today would be called “accept after revisions”. And Lee did in fact revise and resubmit her paper and Dessoir was happy to publish it in the *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* later.

However, the friendly personal relations and the short episode surrounding her publication of ‘Weiteres über Einfühlung und ästhetisches Miterleben’ in Dessoir’s journal do not really tell the story of how Lee’s ideas were received in the specialized philosophical debate itself. Interestingly enough, the German specialists also responded in quite some depth to her work and the systematic claims she made. Before I turn to those reactions, I want to briefly sketch what Lee’s early claims on empathy’s role in aesthetics were about.

### 15.3 Lee’s Theory of Bodily Induction in ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ (1897)

Vernon Lee became interested in empathy and psychological aesthetics in the early 1890s (see Lanzoni 2018, chapter 1). In 1892 she attended the International Congress of Experimental Psychology in London, during the winter of 1893 she read William James’s *Principles of Psychology*. She was especially impressed by the well-known Jamesian idea that bodily reactions are essential for emotions, or that emotions are in fact bodily reactions. As James (1884, 190) had famously put it: “We feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, not that we cry, strike,

or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be”. Lee expanded on this idea. She argued that bodily reactions are not only a necessary condition for emotional reactions, but also for aesthetic experience. Together with Clementina “Kit” Anstruther-Thomson she fleshed out this thought in their 1897 paper ‘Beauty and Ugliness’. Briefly, Lee’s and Anstruther-Thomson’s idea was to record any bodily reactions they experienced while immersed in aesthetic contemplation. One example will suffice to get the gist:

While seeing this chair, there happen movements of the two eyes, of the head, and of the thorax, and balancing movements in the back [...]. There is a feeling as if the width of the chair were pulling the two eyes wide apart during this process of following the upward line of the chair. [...] These movements of the eye and of the breath were accompanied by alterations in the equilibrium of various parts of the body. At the beginning the feet were pressed hard on the ground in involuntary imitation of the front legs of the chair, and the body was stretched upwards.

(Anstruther-Thomson and Lee 1897, 548)

Anstruther-Thomson and Lee go on to analyze their reactions (mostly Anstruther-Thomson’s reactions, who acts as a test subject in the experiment, while Lee supplies the theoretical background) while confronted not only with the chair from the example above, but with a jar, a cathedral, and with famous paintings from the early sixteenth century, like Vincenzo Catena’s *Saint Jerome in his Study* (1514) and Titian’s *Sacred and Profane Love* (1514). Their analyses are extremely detailed and interesting. They conclude, for example, that perceiving two “straight lines meeting (but not crossing) at an acute angle can be seen while following the eye with the breath”, but two “straight lines crossing each other at random and irregularly are followed by the eye and the equilibrium, but not by the breath” (Anstruther-Thomson and Lee 1897, 553–554). Apart from such detailed claims they arrive, as far as I can see, at three rather ambitious general conclusions:

- (1) Bodily reactions are inseparable from the act of aesthetic contemplation

Anstruther-Thomson and Lee do not consider their bodily reactions as something individual or even as something one person might have while another might not. According to them, without appropriate bodily reactions, aesthetic experience is almost impossible. Not only are they sure that the perception of properties like height, width or bulk are “impeded

by voluntarily contrived bodily adjustments of opposed character” (Anstruther-Thomson and Lee 1897, 550). They also claim that reactions like breathing in a certain way while observing an aesthetic object are important “to such an extent that if while trying to visualize an object with shut eyes we refuse to let ourselves breathe, the act of seeing the form in memory becomes impossible” (Anstruther-Thomson and Lee 1897, 550). If we were unable to remember other instances of perceiving certain forms, and we were somehow prevented from having bodily reactions, we “should not see Form at all” (Anstruther-Thomson and Lee 1897, 550).<sup>6</sup>

- (2) There is a stable relation between certain aesthetic properties and the according bodily reactions

Their second claim is as ambitious as the first. Lee and Anstruther-Thomson are convinced that certain properties of artworks, such as “being round”, lead to certain reactions; and that such connections are objective, in the sense that they remain constant across different observers of an artwork. In their own words:

So, in the opinion of the authors of this paper, can the subjective states indicated by the objective terms height, breadth, depth, by the more complex terms round, square, symmetrical, unsymmetrical, and all their kindred terms, be analysed into more or less distinct knowledge of various and variously localised bodily movements.

(Anstruther-Thomson and Lee 1897, 545)

- (3) Bodily reactions to an aesthetic object are the reason for aesthetic pleasure

This claim is one of the main reasons why Lipps disagreed so strongly with ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ in his review. The claim is not about the act of aesthetic contemplation as such, but rather about the reason why we appreciate artworks and enjoy contemplating them. For Lee and Anstruther-Thomson bodily reactions are once more key here. Lee (1910, 154) herself identifies their idea clearly in her later paper ‘Weiteres über Einfühlung und ästhetisches Miterleben’: “The essay ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ contains a hypothesis claiming that the aesthetic apperception of visible forms is pleasant or unpleasant because it involves changes in important organic functions, mainly in the field of respiratory and vestibular activity”.<sup>7</sup> Not only are bodily reactions a necessary condition for aesthetic contemplation, they are at the same time the reason why we enjoy it.

Those claims contradicted the ideas of the *grand seigneur* of *Einfühlung* himself: Theodor Lipps.<sup>8</sup> Lipps located empathy in the mind, not in the body. For him, empathy consisted in the mental projection of the self (or,

as he sometimes put it: the self’s inner sense of activity or “Thätigkeit”) into the contemplated aesthetic object. He understood bodily sensations or actual movements of the muscles as negligible by-products of empathy, not as part of empathy itself.

Lipps promptly set about picking apart Lee and Anstruther-Thomson’s ideas in his own, thoroughly competitive way. This is something to keep in mind while examining his extensive critique of ‘Beauty and Ugliness’: the rather sharp, sometimes even condescending tone was by no means unusual for Lipps. Lipps (1905, 478) did not hesitate to characterize even renowned opponents like the philosopher Stephan Witasek, who was Alexius Meinong’s assistant at the time, as of a “weird nature” (“sonderbares Gemüt”) and “unable to distinguish the aesthetic pleasure of tragedy from the pleasure of a good lunch”.<sup>9</sup>

#### 15.4 Reactions by the “German Specialists”: Theodor Lipps’s Review of ‘Beauty and Ugliness’

Lipps’s review of ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ is part of an extensive three-part review of the “who’s who” of German aesthetics of the time: Johannes Volkelt, Oswald Külpe, Karl Groos, Konrad Lange, and several other well-known figures are all reviewed by Lipps. With a length of six pages, his review of Lee and Anstruther-Thomson is longer and more detailed than his reviews of such important works as Volkelt’s *Zur Psychologie der ästhetischen Beseelung* or Külpe’s *Ueber den associativen Faktor des ästhetischen Eindrucks*.

Lipps (1900, 385–386) starts out by stating that Lee’s and Anstruther-Thomson’s analyses are “not without grace” and, according to him, reveal “a certain subtlety of feeling. The ideas are also based on a correct intuition”.

Immediately thereafter, however, his thorough criticism begins: “The cult of bodily sensations has become a mania. All puzzles are to be solved by bodily sensations. It can be assumed that this mania will continue for some time. [...] But then disillusionment will set in. One will realize that bodily sensations are just that – bodily sensations. People will go back to psychology instead of fantasizing” (Lipps 1900, 385).<sup>10</sup> Apart from such general strictures there are four major arguments he makes against Lee and Anstruther-Thomson:

##### (1) The terminology is vague

First of all, Lipps is unhappy with the sloppy terminology. Especially the central term “bodily sensation” strikes him as ambiguous and not clearly separated from other terms like “feeling”. “The ‘bodily sensation’ of ‘lightheartedness’, i.e. the feeling that my heart is light”, he claims, “is not



a bodily sensation, but simply a feeling (“Gefühl”)” (Lipps 1900, 390). Such inaccuracies make it difficult for him to follow Lee’s and Anstruther-Thomson’s train of thought.

(2) The introspective observations are merely idiosyncratic

Lipps also claims that Lee and Anstruther-Thomson’s observations are idiosyncratic. He is not convinced by the conclusions they derive from their observations simply because he does not experience the very things they claim to experience during aesthetic contemplation:

I have tried to find certain movements that supposedly accompany aesthetic contemplation within myself, such as breathing with one lung, breathing with different parts of the lungs, breathing forwards and backwards, certain movements of the head, etc., and I have not succeeded.

(Lipps 1900, 388)<sup>11</sup>

If the very premise from which all the above mentioned conclusions are derived (“we have bodily reactions of such and such kinds during aesthetic contemplation”) appears to be false, or true only for Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, their whole idea of providing an analysis of aesthetic contemplation *as such* – in contrast to a mere analysis of the peculiarities of a single person’s way of contemplating aesthetic objects – collapses.

(3) There is no connection between aesthetic pleasure and bodily sensations

Lipps goes on to deny Lee and Anstruther-Thomson’s claim about the supposed connection between bodily sensations and aesthetic pleasure. He presents two different arguments here: first, he argues that the bodily movements and the bodily sensations that accompany them are not noticeably pleasurable at all. Recalling the chair-example given above, Lipps obviously has a point here. It is not immediately clear why sensations like “pulling the two eyes wide apart”, “alterations in the equilibrium of various parts of the body” or the sensation that “the feet were pressed hard on the ground” (Anstruther-Thomson and Lee 1897, 548) should be pleasurable. And even if we suppose they were, and this is Lipps’s second point, the pleasure they provide would not be *aesthetic* pleasure. Aesthetic pleasure, as Lipps suggests we understand it, is something granted explicitly by aesthetic objects. Bodily sensations like the above, however, can easily be reproduced under other circumstances, such as by observing something different from an aesthetic object. And since the supposedly pleasurable sensation we experience in such a trivial case would be the same sensation

we experience while observing an aesthetic object, the kind of pleasure in question cannot be specific to aesthetics.

(4) The methodology is paradoxical

Lipps's last major point against 'Beauty and Ugliness' concerns Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's methodology. Since aesthetic contemplation means (according to Lipps) immersing oneself (or even "drowning") in the act of perceiving the object, any introspective observation of one's bodily sensations from some kind of meta-level in real time is bound to end the act of aesthetic contemplation. Since this is exactly what Anstruther-Thomson does during their experiments, Lipps considers her observations as largely irrelevant, because they do not (and cannot) in fact describe what happens during "fully immersed" aesthetic contemplation. Lipps (1900, 390) concludes: "I will not pursue these matters any further. It is forgivable if a witty thinker like [William, T.P.] James pursues somewhat baroque ideas once in a while. But one should refrain from endlessly pursuing such matters."<sup>12</sup>

That Lipps does not see Lee on a par with James in terms of philosophical brilliance is evident. His tone in the concluding section is also rather harsh. However, as I noted above, this tone should not obscure the fact that Lipps engages in an in-depth professional discussion of Lee's positions. Lipps argues against Lee's claims in the same way as he had argued against the claims of Groos, Witasek or James (who, for that matter, is also patronized as someone wasting his undeniable wit on non-serious, "baroque" follies in the passage just quoted). What the review proves first and foremost is that Lee certainly had a notable standing in the aesthetic discussion within the German expert circles.

One last brief point in support of this view: when Moritz Geiger (a former student of Lipps and Husserl, who later became a professor of philosophy in Munich, Göttingen, and later in Stanford) published a widely read and comprehensive survey essay on the most important theories and ideas in the field of the aesthetics of empathy in 1911 ('Über das Wesen und die Bedeutung der Einfühlung'), he not only referred readers to all the well-known German professors. Quite naturally, he included Vernon Lee in this list. "R.[obert; T.P.] Vischer, Vernon Lee, Groos" are, according to Geiger (1911, 62), the most important representatives of a theory which "considers the sensations of movement and inner experiences ("Bewegungs- und Organempfindungen") triggered by empathy or involved in the mechanisms of empathy as part of aesthetic pleasure". In another paragraph, Geiger (1911, 56) labels such theories as theories of "bodily induction" and once again refers his readers to the representative work of "R. Vischer; Groos; [Wilhelm; T.P.] Wundt; Vernon Lee".

This brings us back to the revisionary conclusion stated in the introduction: Lee's work in the aesthetics of empathy has been unjustly

underestimated. First of all it is innovative at least in the sense that Lee (and Anstruther-Thomson) took the idea of introspective analysis seriously and raised such analyses to a level of detail that was previously unknown. As we have seen, Groos and Lipps both were impressed by the outstanding aesthetic receptivity displayed in these experiments. Even ten years later, renowned empirical aestheticians such as Külpe were still conducting experiments that resembled enhanced versions of what Lee and Anstruther-Thomson attempted in the years leading up to ‘Beauty and Ugliness’. Külpe (1907, 21) notes, for example, that his assistant employed “a pneumograph and a plethysmograph” to “record the breathing and pulse of a subject absorbed in the contemplation of comic images”.<sup>13</sup>

The assessment that the “pedantic German scholars” were “unimpressed” by Lee’s work in aesthetics, and that her work made “no impact” on specialized discussion of an aesthetics of empathy turns out, I would therefore argue, to be exaggerated. As we have seen, the “German specialists” engaged with Lee, both on a personal and a professional level. They took Lee’s work seriously, published her papers, argued against her claims in just the same way as they argued against each others’ claims and even included her in the ranks of the most notable participants of the specialized debate.

### 15.5 Lee’s Reactions to Lipps’s Critique

In the last parts of my paper I want to show how Lee reacted to Groos’s and others’ input and especially to Lipps’s critique of her early work in aesthetics. She seems to have reacted in two ways. On the one hand, she acknowledged Lipps’s critique and directly addressed several of the points he made against her, while on the other, she started to conceive of herself as some sort of hybrid between an artist and a philosopher.

In her aesthetic work following ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ Lee reacted to Lipps on several occasions – in her 1912 volume *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics*, for example, she mentions Lipps or the adjective “Lippsian” a staggering 149 times.<sup>14</sup>

Not only did she repeatedly address the “brilliant Lippsian analyses” and the “outstanding mastery” (Lee 1910, 148) of his aesthetic works, she also directly answered the review I have discussed above: “I would like to acknowledge how much I have learned from Lipps’s relentless but not entirely undeserved criticism of *Beauty and Ugliness* in the *Archiv für systematische Philosophie* Bd. VI, Heft 3, 1900” (Lee 1910, 158),<sup>15</sup> she explains, and goes on to discuss the arguments Lipps had put forward.

(1) Reaction to objection 1: The terminology is vague

Lee’s reaction to this objection is very straightforward. She simply acknowledges the point – “Professor Lipps picked out with pitiless clearness all that was confused, fantastic, illogical, presumptuous, and untenable” (Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 1912, 65) – and promises to do better. In her later philosophical work she devoted passages to terminological and conceptual clarification, and explained that she did not want to repeat her earlier “carelessness in thinking” (“Nachlässigkeit des Denkens”) – “The study of Lipps has cured me of that” (Lee 1910, 158), she says.

- (2) Reaction to objection 2: The introspective observations are merely idiosyncratic

We have already seen how Lee sought to counter that claim – she tried to base her work in empirical psychology and not merely in individual introspection. To this end, Lee circulated a questionnaire among the participants of the *Fourth International Congress of Psychology* in Paris and asked them to record their bodily reactions during aesthetic contemplation. Because she did not get as much feedback as she had hoped for, she later sent out the questionnaire to colleagues and friends. As we have seen, this was how she got into contact with Groos (Lee collected 48 responses in total, about half of which recorded bodily reactions). In a later paper on ‘Aesthetic Empathy and its Organic Accompaniments’ she addressed Lipps’s review once again and agrees that her introspective claims should have been backed up with more reliable data: “[T]he observations [in *Beauty and Ugliness*; T.P.], which were due to my collaborator, ought to have been verified by experimentation and the method of *Questionnaires*” (Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 1912, 65).

- (3) Reaction to objection 3: There is no connection between aesthetic pleasure and bodily sensations

Lee’s reaction to this argument is substantial. Lipps’s comments actually led her to fundamentally reconsider her position. In ‘Weiteres über Einfühlung und ästhetisches Miterleben’ she wrote directly on this point:

If I had been aware of Lipps’s brilliant analyses at the time of my work on “*Beauty and Ugliness*”, I would [...] have realised, as I do now, that the phenomenon [...] of “aesthetic empathy” does not require the presence of a muscular adaptation either for its confirmation or the explanation of its existence [...]. The phenomenon of empathy – insofar as it refers to visible lines and forms – can be explained by such purely psychological facts as Lipps himself collected with outstanding mastery in his analyses of “Raumästhetik” and related parts of his other works.  
(Lee 1910, 148)<sup>16</sup>

The paramount importance of Lipps is clearly evident. Lee gave up her earlier body-centric view of aesthetic empathy and went on to work out a much more nuanced picture that has been laid out in an admirably concise way by Jesse Prinz (in this volume; for a very short overview see also Lanzoni 2018, 43). Only formal-dynamic empathy, which she differentiates from other related concepts in her mature views, directly refers to Lipps's understanding of empathy not as "inner mimicry" (this is how Groos had put it), but as more abstract motor ideas. What is even more important than the systematic details of her later views for the aims of this chapter is this: the entirety of her adapted and mature views on empathy's role in aesthetics directly go back to her involvement with the German debate on the aesthetics of empathy and especially to Lipps's critique.

(4) Reaction to objection 4: The methodology is paradoxical

Lee's reaction to Lipps's final argument is once again significant and far-reaching. In this case, however, she refused to just accept his criticism. Instead, she turned Lipps's criticism of her and Anstruther-Thomson's concept of aesthetic introspection around. She argued that the very idea of involving the body in their understanding of aesthetic empathy must have been "repugnant to the wholly intellectual, if not wholly spiritualistic, aesthetics of Professor Lipps" (Lee 1912, 64). Lipps's dismissal, however, strikes her as unwarranted for two reasons. The first reason is philosophical. Lipps himself, she claimed, failed to come up with a better solution. As we have seen, he merely points out that he considers any awareness of bodily reactions during fully immersed aesthetic contemplation impossible. The wholly intellectual aesthetics of Lipps comes with its own methodological problems, which Lee pointed out clearly:

And does it not seem that one catches a glimpse in Professor Lipps's thought of the vague entity of a homogeneous *ego*, separate and almost material, leaving the realm of reality (imagined in some way as dimensional space) to take up its abode in "the work of art", to participate in its life and to detach itself from its own, after the fashion of the Lenten retreat of a Catholic escaping from the world and purifying himself in the life of a convent?

(Lee 1912, 59).

This is indeed a vulnerable point in Lipps's thought. His ubiquitous metaphorical talk of "projecting" oneself into the contemplated artwork during fully immersed "Einfühlung" comes with this kind of metaphysical baggage. Although Lipps is not always entirely clear on this matter, he indeed seems to think a metaphysical "self" or "ego" is transferred into the object

of aesthetic contemplation. He argues that it is not the “‘real’ self” (“dies ‘reale’ Ich”), which empathizes with the character Faust’s desperation, but “a self you might call an ideal one” (“Ich, das man ein idelles nennen mag”) (Lipps 1905, 478). His further explanation of this idea is “characteristically obscure” (Matravers 2017, 127):<sup>17</sup>

Whenever I immerse myself in Faust while I observe him, I am in this moment only the observing ego. And this observing ego is in Faust, or it is Faust; it is entirely inside him and only inside him. It lives inside him. No wonder it partakes in his experiences. In contrast, the other ego, the real ego, is no longer there at all, it has been left behind.

(Lipps 1905, 478)<sup>18</sup>

Lee is correct in pointing out the problems with this way of conceptualizing empathy, and she is by no means the only contemporary troubled by Lipps’s metaphysical obscurities.<sup>19</sup> There is, however, also a second way in which Lee reacted to Lipps’s fourth objection. She not only criticized his views from an abstract, philosophical point of view, she also criticized Lipps himself as an academic alienated from aesthetic practice – a detached ascetic in a “Lenten retreat”, as she polemically put it. And because she very much considered herself the aesthetic practitioner that Lipps fails to be, she inferred a kind of practice-based validation for her introspective insights. Directly addressing his fourth objection she wrote:

Professor Lipps’s testy criticism on *Beauty and Ugliness*, to the effect that *it is impossible* to be aware of bodily sensations while absorbed (*Versunken*) in the joyful contemplation of a Doric column, therefore shrinks into mere evidence to an individual incapacity either for self-observation or for such complex impressions as associate in other folk’s minds the visual image of the Parthenon columns with the smell of sunburnt herbs on the Acropolis and the tinkle and bleating of sheep that rise from the valley below. It is quite possible that Professor Lipps’s individual aesthetic contemplation at least of Doric columns may be of that absolutely unfluctuating and unmixed type which, in the case of very acute and massive emotion and of intensive intellectual preoccupation, defies all knowledge of its own concomitants; nay characteristics. But such impassioned or Archimedianly concentrated contemplation is, I will venture to say, by no means inevitable in our daily and loving commerce with beautiful things.

(Lee 1912, 349)

Although Lee still acknowledged Lipps’s intellectual ability, she rejected his way of understanding aesthetics. Her point is this: aesthetics is not

only about the distanced and wholly intellectual analysis of the beautiful as such. Artworks are no mere material triggers for abstract thoughts, they are meant to be appreciated and enjoyed. We are supposed to engage in “daily and loving commerce with beautiful things”, as she put it. Lipps’s criticism has convinced Lee that he is unable to do this. And this is why she finally realized that she will have to follow her own path. In the preface to her *Beauty and Ugliness*-volume from 1912 she states this realization most clearly:

I have come away with the conviction not only that theirs [the German aestheticians; T.P.] is the future way of studying aesthetics, but also that is the way in which, alas! I can never hope to study them. My aesthetics will always be those of the gallery and the studio, not of the laboratory.

(Lee 1912, viii)

Lee considered herself a practitioner of aesthetics, and as we have just seen in her sarcastic comment on the “Archimedianly concentrated contemplation” of which only theoreticians like Lipps are capable, she, albeit hesitantly, embraced her role. She did no longer strive to be an academic philosopher herself, but instead, as Colby (2003, 155) has put it so aptly, tried “to reconcile the artist/poet and the scientist” in herself. This led Lee to concentrate on what she was best at: aesthetic practice. At least for some time she refrained from abstract and general claims about aesthetics (although she returned to aesthetic theory in her later work) and concentrates, for example, on her *Gallery Diaries*, where she noted the results of her own aesthetic contemplation of paintings and statues in several northern Italian museums. And while she still claimed to be “gratefully acknowledging [...] all that the study of Messrs. Lipps and Groos has done to enrich and clarify my ideas subsequent to my collaboration in *Beauty and Ugliness*” (Lee 1912, 241), she confidently insisted that some more appreciation of the individual process of aesthetic contemplation would also benefit said “Messrs.”:

Aesthetic receptivity or (as the *Einfühlung* hypothesis suggests our calling it) aesthetic *responsiveness* is a most complex, various, and fluctuating phenomenon and one upon which we must now cease to generalise until we have analysed and classified its phases and factors and concomitants in the concrete individual case.

(Lee 1912, 241–242)

This is exactly what Lee set out to do. Although she did not give it up entirely, she no longer constrained herself to abstract thought about aesthetics, but also embraced aesthetics as concrete and “loving commerce

with beautiful things”, as it is laid out, for example, in her *Gallery Diaries*. Understanding the origins of this urge to combine the scientist’s, philosopher’s, artist’s, and poet’s ways of thinking about art and aesthetics is essential not only for an understanding of Lee’s work in aesthetics, but for an understanding of Vernon Lee as a whole.

## 15.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have pursued two goals. I wanted to show that Lee’s work in aesthetics has been unjustly underestimated and that an analysis of her relations to the German aesthetics of empathy is important for an appropriate understanding of Vernon Lee and her work as a whole. As it turned out, Lee entertained personal relations with several of the most prominent figures of the contemporary discussion. The German professors treated her with respect, invited her to Germany for talks, asked her to publish in the most relevant journals of the time, and extensively discussed her philosophical arguments. Lee then reacted in all kinds of ways to the criticism levelled against her ideas. She adapted her views, gave up some of her early ideas, and came up with intelligent counterarguments and criticism when she was not convinced. As she realized that she wanted not only to think about art in the abstract way Lipps did, but to actually engage with, enjoy, and appreciate it, she ultimately decided to forsake the aesthetics “of the laboratory” for her own aesthetics “of the gallery and the studio” (Lee 1912, viii). In a way, it is particularly interesting – and somewhat ironic – that Lee became the multi-faceted personality we remember her as today for the very reason that she immersed herself so deeply in the highly specialized thought of the one-dimensional “pedantic German scholars” of the aesthetics of empathy.<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

- 1 It is sometimes insinuated that Titchener was directly translating Lipps here. This is not the case. Titchener is talking about “Einfühlung” in a broader sense. A footnote after the paragraph in which the term “empathy” is introduced refers the reader not to Lipps, but to the “Würzburg school” (Titchener 1909, 21) of German experimental psychology. The history of the term “empathy” is explained in a little more detail in the introduction to this volume.
- 2 “Die psychologische Behandlung der Ästhetik ist gegenwärtig im Besitze der Vorherrschaft”. To make the paper more accessible, I have translated all hitherto untranslated German passages into English. Whenever I have translated longer passages or established philosophical terminology, and in cases where I was unsure about the best way of translating certain expressions, I have provided the original German quote in the endnotes.
- 3 “In neuerer Zeit ist im Allgemeinen in der deutschen Ästhetik die Ansicht die herrschende geworden, daß die Einfühlung eine der Quellen des ästhetischen Genusses sei.”



- 4 At least Colby (2003, 167) puts her statement into perspective a little later and adds: “although her [Lee’s] writings on empathy are not without significance”. A notable exception to this tendency to underestimate Lee’s work in psychological aesthetics and especially her relation to the German tradition is Burdett 2011, who explicitly states: “Though some of them [the German aestheticians] may have wished for more compressed and tidy prose from her, none failed to take Lee seriously” (Burdett 2011, 5).
- 5 The letters are written in German and are as of yet unpublished. All translations are my own. I would like to thank Somerville College, Oxford, for the opportunity to have a look at them and Kate O’Donnell in particular for her kind assistance. I have quoted from the letters by referring to their date.
- 6 Looking back, Lee (1910, 152) similarly identifies a central hypothesis in ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ that states that “aesthetic perception of visible forms is dependent not merely on images or imaginations, but on inner and outer muscular adaptations and bodily movement” (“die ästhetische Wahrnehmung sichtbarer Formen nicht bloß von Bewegungsbildern oder -Vorstellungen abhängig ist, sondern von inneren oder äußeren Muskelanpassungen, von einem körperlichen Vorgang“).
- 7 “Der Aufsatz ‘*Beauty and Ugliness*’ enthält [eine] Hypothese, die besagt, daß die ästhetische Apperzeption sichtbarer Formen angenehm oder unangenehm ist, weil sie Veränderungen in wichtigen organischen Funktionen hauptsächlich auf dem Gebiete der Atmungs- und Gleichgewichtstätigkeit involviert. ”
- 8 This is especially true for claims (1) and (3). The idea that there is a relatively stable relation between certain forms and an observer’s reaction to these forms was, at least to some extent, also entertained by Lipps (1897, e.g. 39) himself.
- 9 As Koss (2006) has rightly pointed out, there was, at least in some respects, something decidedly elitist about the German aesthetics of empathy. Johannes Volkelt (1908, 364), the second most relevant figure in the field, declared for example that true aestheticians did care about “silly nonsense” (“läppischer Schwachsinn”) like the popular operettas of the time. Such “clumsy, witless, vulgar, impertinent things” (Volkelt 1908, 364), he argued, were only for the “simple-minded” (Volkelt 1908, 359).
- 10 “Der Kultus der Körperempfindungen ist zur Manie geworden. Alle Rätsel sollen durch Körperempfindungen gelöst werden. Es ist zu vermuten, daß diese Schwärmerei noch eine Zeitlang andauern wird. [...] Dann aber wird die Ernüchterung kommen. Man wird einsehen, dass Körperempfindungen eben – Körperempfindungen sind. Man wird wieder Psychologie treiben, statt zu phantasieren”.
- 11 “Ich habe mich bemüht, gewisse Begleitbewegungen der ästhetischen Betrachtung, welche die Verf. statuieren, bei mir aufzufinden, etwa das Atmen mit einer Lunge, das Atmen mit verschiedenen Teilen der Lungen, das Vorwärts- und Rückwärtsatmen, gewisse Bewegungen im Kopf etc.; und es ist mir nicht gelungen. ”
- 12 “Ich verfolge die Sache nicht weiter. Es ist verzeihlich, wenn ein geistreicher Kopf wie James auch einmal barocke Einfälle behaglich ausspinnt. Aber das endlose Weiterspinnen derselben sollte man unterlassen”.
- 13 However, not much seems to have been achieved with these experiments, as Külpe (1907, 21) later notes: “Apart from dubious beginnings even less than usual has been achieved while using this method”.
- 14 I am grateful to David Romand for pointing this out to me.
- 15 “Ich möchte anerkennen, wie viel ich von Lipps’ unbarmherziger, aber nicht absolut unverdienter Kritik an ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ im Archiv für systematische Philosophie Bd. VI, Heft 3, 1900 gelernt habe. ”

- 16 “Wenn mir die großartigen Lippsschen Analysen zur Zeit meiner Mitarbeit an ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ bekannt gewesen wären, [...] ich würde erkannt haben, wie ich es jetzt tue, daß diese Erscheinung, die ich der Kürze halber mit dem Lippsschen, höchst irreführenden Namen ‚ästhetische Einfühlung‘ belegen muß, weder für die Bestätigung noch für die Erklärung ihrer Existenz des Vorhandenseins einer solchen Muskelanpassung bedarf [...]. Das Phänomen der Einfühlung – soweit es sich auf sichtbare Linien und Formen bezieht – läßt sich an solchen rein psychologischen Tatsachen erläutern, wie sie Lipps selbst in seinen Analysen der ‘Raumästhetik’ und verwandten Teilen seiner anderen Werke mit hervorragender Meisterschaft gesammelt hat. ”
- 17 Matravers’s (“relentless but not entirely undeserved”, one might want to put it, echoing Lee) criticism of Lipps is not restricted to the passage I quoted here.
- 18 “Gehe ich aber betrachtend in dem Faust auf, dann bin ich in diesem Moment nur dies betrachtende ich. Und dies betrachtende Ich ist *in* dem Faust oder *ist* der Faust; es ist ganz und gar in ihm und nur in ihm. Es lebt in ihm. Kein Wunder, wenn es da sein Erleben miterlebt. Dagegen ist jenes andere, das reale Ich, jetzt gar nicht da; es ist zurückgeblieben”.
- 19 For a more in-depth criticism of this aspect of Lipps’s views see e.g. Witasek (1901).
- 20 I had the opportunity to present earlier drafts of this paper at the Universities of Duisburg-Essen and Cambridge, UK. I benefited greatly from the discussions, and I am thankful for all the helpful input I have received, especially from Sally Blackburn-Daniels, Derek Matravers, Jesse Prinz, and David Romand. An extended German version of this chapter, which also reflects on how Vernon Lee’s thought on empathy may have influenced her literary writing, can be found in Petraschka (2023).

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# 16 Vernon Lee's Aesthetics

## Empathy, Emotion, and Embodiment

*Jesse Prinz*

### 16.1 Introduction

Though more celebrated in literary studies, Vernon Lee (born Violet Paget) was a prolific and formidable aesthetic theorist. Her ideas about aesthetic psychology have been underappreciated and deserve close study. Lee is recognized as the first English-language author to make extensive use of “empathy”, the English translation of *Einfühlung*, which has become a popular construct in *fin-de-siècle* German aesthetics. A casual reader might be forgiven for thinking that Lee was simply sharing these developments with English audiences, but there is nothing journalistic about her work. Lee’s inquiries into aesthetic experience are probing, original, and, at times, polemical. Her mature account draws on others’ insights, but consistently reflects Lee’s careful observations and strongly held opinions. Lee puts empathy to work, but this is just one component of her theory. The overall picture that emerges is rich, provocative, and plausible. Lee anticipates some recent trends in aesthetic psychology – especially those that emphasize embodiment. Her views have much to offer today.

Despite all this, Lee’s literary biographer, Vineta Colby (2003, 174), has an unflattering view of Lee’s contributions to aesthetics:

Determined to be a polymath, to speak and write authoritatively on every conceivable subject, she had scattered her talents. She was not satisfied to be a sensitive, articulate critic of the arts: she had to master the fundamental principles of art and aesthetics, to penetrate the science of psychological aesthetics without having even established that such a science existed. As a result she squandered her energies [...].

Evidently, Lee ultimately adopted a similar stance towards her own work. In a letter to Roger Fry written two years before dying, Lee dolefully concludes that, “nothing comes of aesthetics as carried on by my late friend Miss Anstruther-Thomson and myself [...] my books have been those of an amateur and jack of all trades” (quoted in Colby 2003, 311). Lee refers here to Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, her collaborator and erstwhile

romantic partner. Their 1897 article, “Beauty and Ugliness”, was an early foray into empirical aesthetics, which served as a springboard for Lee’s evolving theoretical views over the next couple of decades. This work was informed by Lee’s interest in Williams James, and later by her close reading of contemporary German aesthetics, but is also highly original, and offers a robust theory of aesthetic experience that rewards close attention. My aim here is to explicate Lee’s theory, and make a plea for its enduring value.

## 16.2 Vernon Lee on Aesthetic Experience

### 16.2.1 *Setting the Stage: Prior Work on Aesthetic Experience*

Modern aesthetics emerged in the eighteenth century, and, by the time of Lee’s birth in 1856, was a thriving field of study. Contributors to this field investigate the nature of aesthetic experience. What, if anything, characterizes our psychological states as we contemplate art aesthetically? To pinpoint the phenomenon, Schopenhauer points out that we can adopt an aesthetic stance towards anything, “a landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building, or anything else” (Schopenhauer 1818/1969, I.ii. 34). Imagine looking at a rock in different ways: as a geological specimen, as a weapon, as a paving stone, etc. One can also view it aesthetically. Lee (1913, 8–10) uses a similar device to get at the phenomenon; she imagines three wayfarers viewing a city from a distance. The practical wayfarer thinks about the ideal mode of transit to reach their destination, the scientific wayfarer comments on the volcanic origin of the surrounding hills, and the aesthetic wayfarer pauses to take in the beauty.

In considering such contrasts, the key theoretical question is: what happens in the mind when we take up an aesthetic stance? Some authors posit special attitudes: Schopenhauer says we lose ourselves in the object, and he is heir to the Kantian aesthetic tradition, which emphasizes indifference. Others posit special emotions. David Hume implies that there are distinctively aesthetic forms of delight, and these count among the “calm passions”. Francis Hutcheson has a similar view, but also posits special features that we look for in aesthetic contemplation: unity amidst variety. Some authors posit special faculties. Herbert Spencer, for example, links aesthetic pursuits to an instinctive faculty of play.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, another proposal emerged in Germany. Herder (1778, 92) posits what he calls inner sympathy (*Innere Sympathie*), which he characterizes as, “Feeling and transposing our whole human ego into the form” (“Gefühl und Versetzung unseres ganzen menschlichen Ichs in die durchtastete Gestalt”). Similarly, Lotze (1858/1885, 586) says that, in “aesthetic enjoyment [...] we sympathetically expand our sentience beyond the limits of our body”. Other authors began to explore

related ideas using the German word *Einfühlung*, literally in-feeling, which would later be translated (reportedly, by Edward Titchener) as empathy in English. Friedrich Theodor Vischer and his son, Robert Vischer, were especially influential in the adoption of this term, though the idea was taken up by many other authors, perhaps most fully developed in the work of Theodor Lipps. A closely related view was articulated by Karl Groos, who also used the term *Innere Nachahmung* (inner imitation). For Groos (1892, 93), inner imitation is an “animating power” (“beseelende Macht”) that enlivens perceived forms by the projection of our “personalities” (Groos 1892, 98). Aesthetic perception, as opposed to ordinary perception, occurs when such inner imitation occupies the “summit of consciousness” (“Gipfel des Bewusstseins”) (Groos 1892, 99). Groos applies these ideas to theatre, poetry, music, architecture, nature, and visual art.

The empathy theory serves as account of what we do when we adopt an aesthetic account, and also a theory of aesthetic success – what is sometimes called “beauty”, though Groos (1892, 108) eschews the word because ugly things can be aesthetically pleasing. Groos implies that aesthetic forms are those that allow for pleasurable experiences of inner imitation. Lipps (1903, 129) distinguishes inner imitation from empathy (*Einfühlung*), and expresses his preference for the latter term. For Lipps, empathy is not an experience of physical sensations. Rather, we experience “the entire inner condition or manner of inner behavior from which individual acts of wanting and doing emerge” (“die gesamte innere Zuständlichkeit oder Weise des inneren Verhaltens, aus welcher die einzelnen Akte des Wollens und Tuns hervorgehen”) (Lipps 1903, 132). Like Groos, Lipps calls this a projection of the personality. He also notes that *Einfühlung* can be “positive” or “negative”. Positive empathy arises when the empathetic projection is experienced as life-affirming (*Lebensbejahung*). Here he echoes Herder (1778, 104) who refers to “flowing life” and “human health” (“wallendes Leben, menschliche Gesundheit”).

The *Einfühlung* theory is not the first or only account of aesthetic experience and aesthetic success to implicate bodily projections. Hogarth, for example, says that beautiful forms are those that afford pleasing ocular movements: “[T]he serpentine line, by its waving and winding at the same time different ways, leads the eye in a pleasing manner along the continuity of its variety” (Hogarth 1773, 38–39). Bain, who is referenced in Lee’s letters to Anstruther-Thomson, goes into even greater detail: “Light and Shade give pleasure by the alternation of the excitement and repose of the eye [...] [and in] the muscular sensibility of the eye, we encounter an extensive group of aesthetic effects [a]nalogous to Time and Beat in music” (Bain 1859, 263–264). Sublimity, Bain (1859, 274) says, “is appreciated wholly through the muscular system – the swing of the limbs, and the sweep of the eyes”. Berenson adopts a similar view,

saying we experience movement in visual art “by the stimulation of our tactile imagination, only that here touch retires to a second place before the muscular feelings of varying pressure and strain” (Berenson 1896, 50).

Berenson was a neighbour of Lee’s in Italy, and accused Lee and Anstruther-Thomson of plagiarizing his ideas (Colby 2003, 162). That charge is likely baseless; they seem to have arrived at their initial formulations before reading Berenson’s work. Moreover, Lee and Anstruther-Thomson offer a much more detailed, encompassing, and theoretically articulated analysis. In any case, Berenson is hardly one to complain, having taken sole credit for a book that was co-authored by his mistress, Mary Whitall Smith.

Lee and Anstruther-Thomson also developed their early ideas without awareness of the *Einfühlung* school. As an English expatriate specializing in literature and Italian art, German aesthetics was on Lee’s radar, and Anstruther-Thomson had been an art student, with little exposure to theory. Their work was noticed by Lipps, and, when Lee learned about the *Einfühlung* theorists, she read their publications voraciously, translated them, and incorporated some ideas. She also sought out members of this group, and had some contact with Groos, especially (see Petraschka’s meticulously researched contribution to this volume). Still, she did not regard herself as a mere importer of German aesthetics. She resolutely presents her work as reflecting her own considered opinions.

When comparing English-language views to their German counterparts, one noteworthy difference is that the Germans place less emphasis on actual bodily changes. This, we will shortly observe, became a matter of contention between Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, with Lee downplaying the body. Still, I think her mature account can be described as embodied. To see this, let’s explore Lee’s ideas, which evolved over several decades.

### 16.2.2 *Vernon Lee’s Evolving Views*

Vernon Lee began reflecting on the nature of art early in her career, though there were various shifts in her intellectual development. To fully appreciate Lee’s mature views, it is helpful to trace their history. Here I offer a chronology. (For a more detailed summary of her early career, see Petraschka, this volume.)

In 1881, Lee publishes *Belcaro*, a collection of essays that includes a critique of Ruskin’s moralism, and defends a formalist approach, locating aesthetic value in form, rather than moral worth, imitation of nature, or expression. Lee would retain this emphasis on form throughout her career, though she would later grant that other factors contribute to art’s

“artistic” or “non-aesthetic” value (Lee 1912, 4, 1913, 99). In this early work, Lee doesn't provide a theory of good form (or “beauty”), but she tells us that this should be the primary aspiration of art.

Lee's ideas evolve in 1885, when she gives a lecture called *Art and Life* (later published as *Laurus Nobilis*, 1909). In these lectures, Lee backpedals a bit on her opposition to moralism, and, more importantly, draws a connection between beauty and organic processes:

Beauty, the essential power therefore of art, is due to the relations of certain visible and audible forms with the chief mental and vital functions of all human beings; relations established throughout the whole process of human and, perhaps, even of animal, evolution; relations seated in the depths of our activities, but radiating upwards even like our vague, organic sense of comfort and discomfort.

(Lee 1909, 13)

Lee (1909, 16) refers to the “vitalising touch of the Beautiful”, implying that aesthetic experience imbues us with a sense of vitality. This is a significant shift towards her embodied aesthetics.

A further shift is set in motion in 1887, when Lee meets Clementina “Kit” Caroline Anstruther-Thomson (1857–1921). They form a personal and professional relationship that lasted until the end of the century. In 1894, Anstruther-Thomson notices changes in her breathing as she looks at art.

1897 is a watershed moment for Lee. She and Anstruther-Thomson publish ‘Beauty and Ugliness’. The paper develops a theory of aesthetic experience based on Anstruther-Thomson's introspective observations of her responses to visual forms. While observing a blank wall, shapes, furniture, artefacts, and artworks, Anstruther-Thomson reports changes in her eye-movements, respiration, and muscular comportment. These “adjustments in highly vital processes” echo features of perceived objects, so that forms are not merely recognized but also realized in our bodies (Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 1897, 554). When such realization is agreeable, e.g., when our bodily responses are balanced and harmonious, we experience a form as beautiful. Lee and Anstruther-Thomson do not cite Berenson or German aesthetics. Instead, they relate their account to an 1894 book by the anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi (*Principi di Psicologia: Dolore e Piacere, Storia Naturale dei Sentimenti*). In his remarks about aesthetics, Sergi draws on the James-Lange theory, which defines emotions as bodily sensations. This aligns with the theoretical orientation of Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, since they propose that visual forms impact the body, and that such changes result in positive and negative feelings.



Around 1899, Lee learns about the *Einfühlung* school, and Lipps publishes a critique of *Beauty and Ugliness* in 1900, claiming there is too much emphasis on actual physiological changes. Around this time, Lee also ends her relationship with Anstruther-Thomson. This allows Lee to side with Lipps, claiming that the emphasis on physiology derived from Anstruther-Thomson's observations, which were not consistent with her own. During this period, Lee also begins keeping a gallery diary, and she downplays bodily changes. These developments result in her 1904 paper, *Recent Aesthetics* (reprinted as *Anthropomorphic Aesthetics* in Lee 1912). In this paper, Lee abandons the conjecture that our bodies must literally mimic perceived forms. Instead, our empathetic responses may be ideational. Following members of the *Einfühlung* school, Lee proposes that actual physiological responses are more likely to occur in individuals of a "motor type" (the term derives from Francis Galton and Jean-Martin Charcot, and was applied to aesthetic experience by Richard Baerwald). Lee speculates that Anstruther-Thomson belongs to this class of people and that physiological responses to art may be less common in others, including herself. For similar reasons, Lee distances herself from the James-Lange theory, suggesting emotions may be causes of bodily changes rather than effects (Lee 1904, 440).

Crucially, Lee is not abandoning embodied aesthetics here. Rather, she is following Lipps in distinguishing actual bodily changes and ideas thereof. This is a subtle point, and the terminology can be confusing. In viewing a form aesthetically, Lee continues to insist that "our motor activities rehearse the tensions, pressures, thrusts, resistances, efforts, the volition, in fact, the life, with its accompanying emotions, which we project into the form and attribute to it" (Lee 1904, 439). But she denies that "motor activities" are necessarily tantamount to physiological changes. She contrasts "dynamical conditions" and "organic conditions" – where the former are mental and the latter are physical. Organic conditions can intensify aesthetic experiences, but are not requisite; they are more apt to arise in motor types. Dynamical conditions, however, arise in all of us. We might think of these as motor images.

In 1907, Lee publishes an essay in French called *La Sympathie Esthétique*, which is far less sanguine towards Lipps (translated as *Aesthetic Einfühlung and Its Organic Accompaniments* in Lee 1912). Though she makes the obsequious remark that Lipps's contributions to aesthetics are as significant as Darwin's contributions to biology Lee also subjects him to withering criticisms (Lee 1912, 68). She calls his view abstract, metaphysical, aprioristic, and even spiritual (Lee 1912, 60). One issue concerns his claim that empathy involves the projection of the self into inanimate objects. In the French version of her article, she uses the phrase "le moi" (Lee 1907, 620), which is rendered as "the ego" in English. Lee implies that the ego

is dubious theological posit, questions the intelligibility of the idea that ego could be projected, and casts doubt on the introspective and empirical plausibility of this claim (Lee 1907, 56–57). Lee's critique focuses on the second volume of Lipps's *Ästhetik Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst* (1906), and her concerns seem valid. Near a passage quoted by Lee, Lipps says that the self "which is also actually experienced in the work of art, is transformed into an ideal one [...] an I of greater power, of greater richness and unified to a special degree [...]" ("zugleich im Kunstwerk tatsächlich erlebtes Ich, in ein ideales sich verwandelt [...] ein Ich von größerer Kraft, von größerem Reichtum, und [...] in besonderem Maße vereinheitlicht") Lipps 1906, 88), and this, Lipps says, results in "aesthetic freedom" ("ästhetische Freiheit") (Lipps 1906, 89). This is either speculative metaphysics or dubious phenomenology, not empirically-grounded inquiry. Lee also chastises Lipps for ruling out bodily aspects of empathy from the armchair. She insists that we should reply on empirical investigation to determine whether bodily states contribute to empathy, augment it, reflect heightened forms of it, or, contrarily, reflect a reduced capacity for it (Lee 1912, 72).

Lee's 1910 essay, *The Central Problem in Aesthetics* argues that many authors, including Groos, Lipps, and herself, have conflated *Einfühlung*, mimicry, and the James-Lange theory. The titular "central problem" asks what theory can best account for aesthetic preferences. Additionally, Lee reports results from a questionnaire study to explore the extent to which bodily processes contribute to aesthetic experience. The essay is largely inconclusive, but we learn something about Lee's own evolving views. Lee identifies as a key and undeniable phenomenon our tendency to attribute dynamic properties to visual forms: "rising up, lifting, pressing down, expanding, going in, bulging out, balancing" and so on (Lee 1912, 102). When we do this, she says, we do not experience local sensations in our bodies, but rather experience these properties as external. She concedes that introspective methods cannot settle whether the body contributes to this, given individual differences in self-reports, but she leans towards the conclusion that such experiences have a mental rather than an organic basis.

Lee reprints these essays in her 1912 collection, *Beauty and Ugliness*, along with translations from German aesthetics and some of her own observational work. Throughout this work, she seems to be groping towards a theory, with plenty of false starts and self-criticism. The volume ends with a "Conclusion" where Lee begins to formulate her mature aesthetic theory. Further features come into focus in her accessible and underappreciated 1913 book, *The Beautiful*. Subsequent essays, including her lengthy introduction to an edited volume of Anstruther-Thomson's papers (*Art and Man*, 1924), reinforce the views arrived at in

these works. In the next section, I will explicate what I take to be Lee's mature view.

### 16.2.3 Lee's Mature Theory

In the conclusion to *Beauty and Ugliness* and her 1913 book, *The Beautiful*, Lee arrives at a theory of aesthetic experience and aesthetic preference that would endure for the remainder of her career. The ideas expressed there build on her 1897 collaboration with Anstruther-Thomson, but also reflect her dissatisfaction with that early effort. She makes use of new terms to articulate her mature theory. Some of these occur passingly in earlier essays, but they attain new emphasis and explication, crystallizing her considered views.

The first new term of note is "formal-dynamic empathy". This refers to not an inner mimicry, much less to outer motor movements, but to "abstractions from innumerable memory-images of movement" (Lee 1913, 354). The idea is that the motor images implicated in aesthetic experience are compiled over numerous prior experiences and stored in memory.

Lee's concept of formal-dynamic empathy is intended to be a notational variant of Lipps's approach. Like Lipps, Lee insists that empathy does not require inner mimicry or physiological changes, but rather more abstract "motor ideas". Still, Lee also departs from Lipps in crucial respects. As noted, she rejects his contention that the ego is projected in empathy, and she also assigns a more significant role to the body. Lee (1912, 354–355) argues that bodily changes play a role in "awakening" formal-dynamic empathy:

Why should these ideas of movement, these abstractions from innumerable memory-images of movement, be awakened in connexion with motionless shapes...? In fact, must there not be in us some present movement however slight, to set [this process of formal-dynamic empathy] going [...]?

In her 1913 book Lee illustrates both these points – the abstractness of our motor images and the bodily awakening thereof – with the example of experiencing a mountain as "rising" from the horizon:

The *rising* of the mountain is an idea started by the awareness of our own lifting or raising of our eyes, head or neck, and it is an idea containing the awareness of that lifting or raising. But [...] [t]hat present and particular raising and lifting is merely the nucleus to which gravitates our remembrance of all similar acts of raising, or *rising* which we

have ever accomplished or seen [...] All these risings, done by ourselves or watched in others, actually experienced or merely imagined, have long since united together in our mind, constituting a sort of composite photograph whence all differences are eliminated and wherein all similarities are fused and intensified.

(Lee 1913, 64–65; see also Lee 1924, 79)

Lee says we are often unaware of the bodily changes that initiate this process. When we see a mountain as rising, we are also unaware that this is a projection from our own memory images. In her edited volume on Anstruther-Thomson, she describes such projection as an, “unintended, indeed unconscious, attribution of our own modes of activity to visible forms” (Lee 1924, 73).

A second important term for the mature Lee is “measurement and comparison”. In the 1913 book, she says that perceived shapes are, in some senses, constructed by these activities: “the perception of Shape depends primarily upon movements which *we* make, and the measurements and comparisons which *we* institute” (Lee 1913, 35). Lee (1913, 40) sometimes described measurement and comparison as an attentional process, but she also makes it clear that bodily activities, such as ocular movements, and motor imagery (Lee 1913, 143) are involved. Measurement and comparison are,

bodily and mental activities of exploring a shape and establishing among its constituent sensations relationships both to each other and to ourselves; activities without which there would be for the beholder no shape at all, but mere ragbag chaos!

(Lee 1913, 129)

This proposal assigns a foundational role to embodied responses. Not only does physiologically triggered bodily imagery impose dynamical properties on visual stimuli, such activities are also essential for perceiving the structure and relationships of forms more generally. Lee is endorsing an embodied approach to perception, and her insistence of measurement and comparison capture her conviction that we play an active role in constructing the visual world.

Another new term in Lee's mature aesthetic theory is “inner drama” (Lee 1912, 355). The term “drama” had already been used passingly in Lee's 1904 essay on recent aesthetic theories. There she remarks:

When we attribute to the Doric column a condition akin to our own in keeping erect and defying the force of gravitation, there is the revival

in our mind of a *little drama* we have experienced many millions of times, and which has become registered in our memory [...].

(Lee 1904, 435 [italics added])

This passage implies that the imputation of strength or aspiration to a column depends on the revivification of many prior experiences of rising and standing tall. There is an allusion to formal-dynamic empathy in this suggestion as well, only now Lee is adding the idea that our memory images can play out inner dramas in our mind.

Lee elaborates on this idea in her 1913 book. She begins with simple cases:

[O]ur acts of measurement and orientation constitutes a microscopic psychological drama – shall we call it the drama of the soul MOLECULES? – whose first familiar examples are those two peculiarities of visible and audible shape called Symmetry and Rhythm.

(Lee 1913, 42)

In calling symmetry and rhythm “dramas”, Lee is implicitly adducing several important features: they involve the interaction of forms, they are experienced in time as we shift attention from one part of an image to another, and they have emotional impact. This is all the more apparent, perhaps, in complex scenes, where we experience multiple projected qualities that play off each other in tension or harmony, as when the same image contains forms that are both rising and falling. Lee elaborates as follows:

[L]ines will have aims, intentions, desires, moods; their various little dramas of endeavour, victory, defeat or peacemaking, will, according to their dominant empathic suggestion, be lighthearted or languid, serious or futile, gentle or brutal; inexorable, forgiving, hopeful, despairing, plaintive or proud, vulgar or dignified.

(Lee 1913, 80)

These very emotional descriptions set the stage for a final element in Lee’s mature theory: her account of aesthetic preference. Recall that she considers this the “central problem” in aesthetics: why are some forms regarded as more satisfying, more likeable, more beautiful than others? An answer can be discerned in this passage:

[S]ince we are their only real actors, these empathic dramas of lines are bound to affect us, either as corroborating or as thwarting our vital needs and habits; either as making our felt life easier or more

difficult, that is to say as bringing us peace and joy, or depression and exasperation.

(Lee 1913, 81)

Lee's vocabulary evokes her early idea that beauty is linked to vitality: certain forms support our "vital needs". Elsewhere, she describes empathetic responses as "invigorating", as adding credit to our "our vital", and as furthering our "life interests" (Lee 1913, 149, 73–74). Such language echoes Herder and Lipps, as well as her own early emphasis on the vitalizing qualities of art. In the passage above, vitality is linked with ease. Lee sometimes suggests satisfying forms are easier to process because they make economical use of attention (Lee 1912, 79, 358). Nevertheless, she resists a simple equation of beauty as ease, saying "some ugly shapes happen to be far easier to grasp than some beautiful ones" (Lee 1913, 52). What matters is the satisfying outcome of empathetic dramas. Lee talks of "victory" (Lee 1913, 52) and refers to resulting emotional states ("peace and joy" in the quotation above).

Lee's theory of aesthetic preference does not end with these dramas. There is a further role for emotions to play. When empathetic dramas instill positive feelings, we arrive at the verdict that the work is beautiful. As I read Lee, the word "beauty" does not express feelings of invigoration, peace, or victory. Rather, it expresses an emotional state that results from such propitious dramas. In several places, Lee even names that emotion: admiration (Lee 1913, 4, 5, 8). She suggests that admiration is an embodied response and characterizes its expression as follows:

The word Beautiful, and its various quasi synonyms [...] [carry] a vague but potent remembrance of our own bodily reaction to the emotion of admiration; nay even eliciting an incipient rehearsal of the half-parted lips and slightly thrown-back head, the drawn-in breath and wide-opened eyes, with which we are wont to meet opportunities of aesthetic satisfaction.

(Lee 1913, 139–140)

Lee's description evokes Charles le Brun's (1702) depictions of admiration, astonishment, and rapture, and also aligns with Adam Smith's (1795, 12) description of wonder (*admiratio* in Latin). Lee doesn't always use the word "admiration"; sometimes she simply refers to "aesthetic emotion". In any case, she seems to be suggesting that we can distinguish the emotions that arise directly from inner dramas, and the emotion that results in cases where those dramas succeed. The recognition of beauty, we can presume, requires both.

Lee is quick to point out that beauty is not universal. It not only depends on the viewer, including the viewer's prior experiences and cultural conditioning, it also depends on the viewer's current mood (Lee 1912, 348, 1913, 82–83). Lee had already noticed the impact of moods in her gallery diaries, and this may indicate a further effort to distinguish her position from that of Lipps. In her 1907 essay on Aesthetic *Einfühlung*, she credits Lipps with the view that our empathetic reactions “crystallize” into “laws” (Lee 1912, 61–62). The observation about moods underscores Lee's commitment to the view that beauty depends on emotional responses. She is, in that sense, an aesthetic sentimentalist, as well as a relativist. Beauty is in the eye, or heart, of the beholder.

Interestingly, Lee elsewhere implies that beauty is not experienced as an inner feeling, even though it derives from emotional responses. Quoting Coleridge, Lee (1912, 247, 1924, 91) says, we “see, not feel, how beautiful” things are. This echoes Lee's claim that, when we see a mountain as rising, we attribute that property to the object, rather than experiencing it as inside of our own minds or bodies. There is a kind of projective illusion. Both the rising of a mountain and its beauty seem to inhere in it, though they derive from us. Despite this parallelism, it should be noted that the dynamic property and the emotional projection are not, for Lee, results of the exact same process. The former she calls empathy, but she cautions: “Empathy deals not directly with mood and emotion, but with dynamic conditions which enter into moods and emotions” (Lee 1913, 80). I read her as suggesting that the emotional impact of a form results from prior attribution of dynamic properties. In Lee's language, form gives rise to little dramas and those dramas have emotional effects.

Lee's mature theory can be summarized as a sequence of psychological responses to a sensory stimulus. First, features of the stimulus trigger subtle movements in us, especially in the eyes and head, though Lee also mentions cardiovascular changes among others. This is not mimicry (outer or inner), but simply a kind of orienting response to visual cues. The bodily changes then initiate the reactivation of abstract motor images, and these are projected onto the stimulus. Ocular movements and motor images impose structure on the image. This structure includes shapes and their relationships (both internal and relationships to us). But motor imagery does not stop there. We also impose more complex, dynamic features. These include “simple” properties, such as rhythm, as well as movements: rising, falling, expanding, and so on. All these features, shapes and their dynamic properties, enter into little dramas: they unfold in tension or harmony over time. We impute significance to these: brutality, futility, and tranquillity, for example. This process involves motor imagery as well as emotions. These emotions unfold in time: there are emotions that arise during the dramas and other that might be regarded as dramatic outcomes, as we register

victory of defeat. When inner dramas are experienced as positive, or “life-corroborating”, an aesthetic emotion results. Lee sometimes identifies the aesthetic emotion as admiration. Whatever we choose to call it, the aesthetic emotion is what we express with the word “beauty”. The feeling of beauty is embodied, but we don't necessarily experience it as a state in ourselves. As with dynamic properties, beauty is projected onto the stimulus.

If this summary is right, then we can see Lee's account of aesthetic response as containing three major stages, which may overlap in time. The first can be described as perceptual: we experience a stimulus as containing forms, and we experience those forms as having a range of dynamic properties. This stage can be captured using the term empathy. Then there is a stage we might call dramaturgical: dynamic forms play off each other dramatically in ways that we experience as emotionally significant. Finally, there is an evaluative stage, wherein the dramas evoke aesthetic emotions. The dramaturgical stage is both empathetic and affective; it serves as a bridge between formal properties and evaluations. The first two stages involve motor imagery, but the evaluative stage may not. It is embodied, but not necessarily linked to action, much less to emulation of forms. It would be misleading to call this empathy. At this stage we are not experiencing forms as such, but rather their impact. Phenomenological, aesthetic emotion might be said to inhere in the forms but the underlying process reflects post-perceptual emotional reactions. Thus, while empathy remains the linchpin of Lee's mature aesthetic theory, she actually implicates two psychological constructs: empathy (formal-dynamic empathy, to be exact) and emotions. As such, it can be described as a hybrid theory, combining *Einfühlung* and sentimentalism.

Lee is not the only empathy theorist to assign a role to emotions. As noted, Groos discusses aesthetic pleasure, and Lipps implies that empathy can be positively experienced. That said, Lipps criticizes Lee's early work for yoking empathy and preference too closely together (Petraschka, this volume). Lee's mature theory may be a concession in this direction, but the sentimental component remains closely linked to the empathy component; she calls empathy “the chief factor of preference” (Lee 1913, 67). Moreover, the details of her account are unique. It is a rich process model that lends itself to empirical testing. Lee rejects the apriorism of Lipps and bases her proposal on careful observations. She admits that her methods (questionnaires and diary studies) cannot settle the details, but she aims for empirical tractability, hoping that psychology will ultimately devise methods that can test her various claims. With this in mind, we can now examine Lee's mature theory against the background of contemporary psychological aesthetics. We may still be far away from testing her specific predictions, but I want to suggest that Lee's mature theory resonates with many proposals that are currently being investigated. Her theory is less



vague than some current proposals, and could provide a path forward in the formulation of a testable empirical aesthetics.

### 16.3 Vernon Lee and Contemporary Embodied Aesthetics

#### 16.3.1 *Lee's Aesthetics and Embodied Psychology*

Psychological interest in aesthetic responses dates back to the earliest days of psychology, with founding figures such as Wundt and Fechner making important contributions. Lee herself can be described as a pioneer, though her work gained too little recognition within psychology to qualify as seminal. It did not spawn follow-up research, and her status as an amateur and her gender probably contributed to her marginalization. Lipps and Groos both acknowledged her work, but neither was an active experimentalist, and neither was prepared to admit any influence or modify their ideas in light of her criticisms. Lee actively followed the experimental work of her age, as well as contributing to it. Her 1912 book included detailed, up-to-the-minute reports of laboratory studies. For example, she describes ongoing work by Oswald Külpe. He conducted studies using measures that bear on physiological aspects of Lee's theory (see Petraschka, this volume), but technology at the time did not allow direct measurement of dynamic motor ideas that lack physiological effects. Much of Lee's theory depended on speculation and introspection. Külpe, as it happens, was embroiled in debates that undermined the credibility of introspectionist psychology, further reducing the likelihood that Lee's empirical work would gain scientific uptake, since it relies heavily on self-report. Through much of the twentieth century, empirical interest in aesthetics dwindled as well, pushing Lee further into obscurity. Recently, however, there has been a revival of interest in aesthetic psychology, so Lee's work is ripe for reassessment.

In addition to the renewed interest in aesthetics, there has been growing interest in embodiment within psychology. Numerous research programmes have emerged that implicate bodily changes in psychological processes. Work in empirical aesthetics lags behind these developments. There are some embodied approaches within aesthetic psychology (as we will see below), but most of the embodied approaches have been developed for other explanatory ends. These research programmes provide an enticing menu for future work in aesthetics, since there have been few attempts to systematically relate each of them to aesthetic experience and aesthetic evaluation. Here, I want to suggest that Lee's aesthetic theory lends itself to such a marriage. Indeed, her account aligns with each of the prevailing approaches in embodied psychology. I will begin by surveying those approaches and then returning to Lee.

The first embodied approach I will mention is the theory of affordances (Gibson 1979). Advocates of this view propose that, when we see an object,

we spontaneously potentiate motor responses that would facilitate interaction with that object. When we see a computer keyboard, for example, motor programmes associated with typing are potentiated. The keyboard is said to “afford” such responses.

A second embodied approach is called grounded cognition (Barsalou 1999). Here the main idea is that our concepts include sensorimotor information. Thus, when we think about dogs, for example, we bring to mind the sensory features as well as motor programmes that get used in our canine interactions: e.g., petting and playing fetch.

A third approach conceives minds as dynamical systems (Thelen and Smith 1994). The focus here is only the role of bodily responses in problem solving, with an emphasis on processes that unfold dynamically in real time.

A fourth research programme is called situated cognition (Brooks 1991). Its practitioners remind us that cognition takes place in physical contexts. Rather than internally modelling the external world, we can solve problems by interacting with external objects.

A fifth approach posits mirror neurons (Gallese 2007). These are cells in the brain that are activated both when we are perceiving actions and planning to act. Similar proposals have been made about emotion recognition (Adolphs 2002): seeing emotions may engage some of the mechanisms involved in having emotions, including neural systems associated with action.

A sixth approach is the motor theory of vision (Hurley 2001). According to this research programme, perception is “constitutively” dependent on knowledge of sensorimotor contingencies (Hurley 2001, 22). That is, when we see a visually presented object, the content of our perception depends on our knowledge of how it will change when we shift our gaze or move around it. This knowledge is accessed via motor commands, which guide our responses and are, in turn, reciprocally impacted by resulting visual inputs.

A seventh approach is predictive coding (Clark 2016). The basic idea is that perception essentially involves memory. When we see an object, we call up stored records of similar objects and these enhance and inform our perceptual response. These records are often thought to include records of physical interactions.

The last approach I'll mention is enactivism (Varela 1992). Enactivists say that our motor responses are “meaning-making”. Our embodied responses endow the world with significance. As Varela (1992, 235) puts it, cognition is the “capacity for *bringing forth* meaning: information is not pre-established as a given order, but regularities emerge from a co-determination of the cognitive activities themselves”. Enactivists also claim that cognition is “autopoietic” (Maturana and Varela 1980). This term refers

to any system that “continuously generates and specifies its own organization through its operation as a system of production of its own components” (Maturana and Varela 1980, 79). They see this as the hallmark of living systems. Autopoietic processes are those that sustain themselves and thus sustain life. For example, when a paramecium detects algae it brings forth the meaning that the algae is edible, and, in pursuing it, contributes to sustaining its own existence.

With this survey in hand we can turn to Lee. I want to briefly suggest that her ideas relate in interesting ways to each of these research programmes.

The theory of affordances is anticipated by Lee. She claims that we often react to visually presented objects in a practical way, preparing ourselves for utilitarian interactions (Lee 1913, chap. XIII). These reactions depend on our expertise, and often involve the exercise of learned skills. Lee contrasts practical responses with aesthetic responses, so, in some sense, her theory sees affordances as an obstacle to aesthetic contemplation. But she is quick to complicate this picture. She argues that the practical response to objects may be an evolutionary precursor to the aesthetic response, and she also notes that those with skills for using various tools and objects also tend to regard them aesthetically. There is thus an interplay between practical affordances and what might be called aesthetic affordances.

Lee’s theory can also be described in the language of grounded cognition. Throughout her work she explores concepts that we use in characterizing works of art and other visual displays. Her example of “rising” mountains can be described in this way, and her account of that concept aligns naturally with the idea that concepts contains sensorimotor information.

Lee also anticipates aspects of dynamical systems theory. Many of the features that interest her most are dynamic, and these should be understood as having a temporal dimension. A strong formulation of this idea appears already in her 1897 paper with Anstruther-Thomson. They introduce the concept of “tie and time” which is the principle that elements of a picture are tied together in a temporal way. They say, “every particular pattern of form tallies with a particular pattern of being in time” and “the quality of tie and the quality of time are so closely interdependent that we never find the one conspicuously present without the other” (Lee 1912, 229–230). The theoretical tools of dynamical systems theory might lend themselves to investigating these ideas.

Lee can also be regarded as a forerunner of situated cognition in that her theory implies an interplay between visual stimuli (e.g., pictures) and our responses. Lee emphasizes our active role in picture perception, but it is crucial to remember that the features we impart are created in collaboration with the pictorial surface. We can think of picture perception as involving mind, body, and world working collectively, just as proponents of situated cognition might propose.

Lee does not postulate mirror neurons, but she sometimes comes close, implying a close relationship between the neural substrates of perception and bodily response. When she was still enamoured with Sergi's Jamesian approach to aesthetics, she mentions the "mixing up of the sensory nerves with the nerves regulating respiration and circulation" (Lee 1912, 171). Relatedly, she postulates a neural link between colour and respiration: "the colour of the picture, by stimulating certain of our nerves connected with breathing, gives to the air which we inhale a sort of exhilarating power" (Lee 1912, 231). The term "mirror neurons" also brings the concept of mimicry to mind, which is important to Lee's early aesthetic theory, though perhaps later abandoned.

As for the motor theory of vision, we can find related ideas in Lee's account of measurement and comparison. Recall that these concepts refer to the processes by which we perceive shapes, and they involve both ocular responses and motor imagery. Like contemporary motor theorists, Lee seems to think that the visual perception of objects depends constitutively on motor responses.

Measurement and comparison also point to a connection between Lee's theory and predictive coding. Recall that motor images are created by compiling together experiences. These compiled memories are then used to make sense of perceived inputs. Lee (1913, 45) expresses this in a way that could come straight out of a recent text on predictive coding: "shape-perception is a combination of active measurements and comparisons, and of remembrance and expectations".

Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, Lee anticipates core aspects of enactivism. Lee makes much of the idea that our embodied responses endow sensory inputs with meaning and aesthetic value. On the opening page of her 1913 book, Lee announces that she "accounts for Beauty not inasmuch as existing in certain objects and processes, but rather as calling forth (and being called forth by) a particular group of mental activities and habits". This remark could have been penned by an enactivist. There is even a link between Lee's ideas and autopoiesis. Aesthetic perception is self-sustaining in that the application of motor ideas simultaneously occasions the further entrenchment of ideas as a new stimulus contributes to a history of memories that comprises existing concepts. Moreover, Lee's insistence that aesthetic response involves the registration of things that matter for our vitality implies a connection between aesthetic experience and the maintenance of life.

All these points of contact are suggestive. It would not be a stretch to describe Lee's work as prophetic. Many of her theoretical moves forecast ideas that have recently come into vogue. Embodied cognition is a thriving trend in cognitive science, and also a varied one, subsuming multiple research programmes. Here we have seen points of contact between

Vernon Lee and each of the prevailing approaches that fall under this broad umbrella. These research programmes were not developed in the context of aesthetics. Lee's work shows that they might be deployed in such contexts; she helps identify future directions for an embodied aesthetic psychology.

### 16.3.2 *Is Lee's Theory Plausible?*

I just noted that recent work in embodied cognition has largely neglected aesthetics. This makes it difficult to assess whether a merger of Lee's theory and these research programmes would be fruitful. The empirical work used to support those programmes may seem too far removed from art to provide direct support. There is, however, an emerging body of literature exploring embodied aesthetics empirically. Details of Lee's theory have not been tested, but, in this final section, I want to suggest that recent findings are broadly consistent with her approach. The extant literature is limited, but suggestive.

To set things up, it will be helpful to recall that Lee's mature theory can be divided into three stages. The perceptual and dramaturgical stages postulate an embodied approach to visual forms, with structural and dynamic features being imposed by motor imagery. The third stage then assigns a role to embodied emotions in aesthetic evaluation. Recent empirical work provides some evidence for all of these theoretical commitments.

First consider the claim that our responses to visual forms are embodied. Work on embodied cognition outside aesthetics already lends itself to this possibility, but what about in aesthetic contexts, which are Lee's primary concern? Do bodily responses play a role in the perception of art? A number of studies suggest a positive answer. One influential study, which is a bit removed from Lee's focus, investigates the neural activity that arises while viewing dance. Calvo-Merino et al. (2005) report that, when dancers watch dance, there is activity in their motor systems, suggesting that familiarity with visual forms can potentiate motor responses. Turning to visual art, Freedberg and Gallese (2007) hypothesize motor responses to paintings that imply action. In particular, they consider Jackson Pollock's action paintings and Lucio Fontana's cut canvases (canvases with large slices in them). Testing these predications using electroencephalography, Umiltà et al. (2012) report evidence for motor responses when viewing Fontana's work. This study, unfortunately, assumed that conventional paintings would not generate motor responses, so it is not an ideal test of Lee's theories, though the findings are suggestive.

To take one more example, Seeley (2010) presented participants with a reproduction of Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*. The painting shows a woman sitting in a grassy field in the foreground with a house in the distance. Some participants were informed that Christina was a disabled

woman who could not walk; others did not learn this fact. All participants were asked to draw the painting from memory after it was removed. Those in the informed condition recreated the image with a larger distance between Christina and the distant house. Seeley proposes that participants were spontaneously simulating Christina's journey to the house, and their motor imagery imposed a larger visual distance when they expected this journey to be an arduous crawl.

None of these studies directly support any aspect of Lee's theory. For that, more research is needed, guided by her proposals. Still, the studies mentioned here do provide some support for the conjecture that motor responses contribute to our experience of visual features. This is consistent with Lee. What about her contention that embodied emotions contribute to aesthetic evaluations? There is some suggestive evidence here as well.

First consider a classic study by Valins (1966). Participants rated the attractiveness of photographs while listening to what they believed was their own heartbeat. In reality, these were prerecorded, and some participants heard an increasing heart rate, while others heard a decreasing heart rate. There was a significant difference in attractiveness rating, indicating that people use bodily feedback to make aesthetic judgments. In a more recent study, Eskine et al. (2012) asked participants to rate abstract paintings after startling them. Startle made the paintings seem more sublime. Seidel and Prinz (2018) manipulated posture by asking participants to evaluate artworks that were hung at one of three different heights: eye-level, below eye-level, and above. Aesthetic ratings went up significantly with each condition. Such behavioural findings gain further support from neuroimaging. Emotion areas in the brain and motor areas are both active when people evaluate art (Kawabata and Zeki 2004; Ishizu and Zeki 2013).

None of the studies surveyed here provides direct support for Lee's account. Still, they align with her contention that aesthetic perception engages bodily responses, and aesthetic evaluation engages embodied emotions. The absence of more direct support may seem disappointing, but it serves as a reminder that empirical work in aesthetic psychology could benefit from more theoretical guidance. With detailed theories in hand, experiments can be designed to test specific predictions. Lee's account makes specific claims about the processes underlying aesthetic experience and aesthetic evaluations. Each of these could be investigated. For example, when people report that a mountain appears to be rising is there motor imagery or motor responses associated with elevation? Can visual stimuli be designed to include both rising and falling slopes, and would such a tension have measurable emotional effects? Do people mistake embodied emotional responses for aesthetic qualities of external displays?

Do aesthetically induced emotions increase viewers' sense of vitality? Aesthetic psychology is an underdeveloped field, and most existing studies are exploratory and open to many interpretations. Studies that explicitly emphasize embodiment tend to focus on stimuli that have an overt connection to motor activity, like Fontana's cut canvases. If we want to investigate Lee's theory, we need to test whether motor responses are implicated more generally and in the specific ways that she proposes. It is a testament to her theoretical prowess that her account has enough specificity to guide future research.

#### 16.4 Conclusions

In the aforementioned letter to Roger Fry, Vernon Lee bemoans the fact that her work in aesthetic psychology did not have more impact. "I haven't had the recognition from my equals (or betters!)", she writes; more troubling still, she worries that, "my work on aesthetics [was] utterly wasted" (Colby 2003, 311). These anxieties were not entirely off base. Lee remains a largely unknown and unsung contributor to aesthetic psychology. But it is not too late to correct that neglect. Here I have tried to show that her account of aesthetic experience and aesthetic preference is rich, distinctive, and highly relevant to current theoretical and empirical research.

Lee's account shares much in common with the *Einfühlung* tradition. She believes that visual forms engage motor imagery, and this imagery is then projected outward, impacting our perception of shapes. But she tries to steer a course between two extremes: on the one hand, she rejects the conjecture that we imitatively enact what we are perceiving, and, on the other, she rejects the idea that we project a disembodied ego. She commits to embodiment in two senses, physical and ideational. Actual motor responses initiate empathy and abstract motor imagery plays the key role in perceptual experience. Lee's emphasis, however, is not on resonance between embodied responses and visual forms, but rather on dynamic features. These features are often absent in the images we view and entirely imposed. She also emphasizes the dramatic interplay of these projected dynamic features and the ensuing emotional significance. Emotions also play a role in her account of aesthetic preference; satisfying forms are those whose emotional impact is linked to vital needs. In this respect, her account is not just an empathy theory, but also a sentimentalist theory. It is a unique hybrid.

These specific hypotheses await empirical investigation, but the overall picture anticipates theoretical trends in contemporary psychology, including a range of theories that have been classified under the umbrella "embodied cognition". Some recent experimental results in empirical aesthetics are consistent with the basic spirit of Lee's account. Given this theoretical

and empirical alignment, her proposals are ripe for operationalization and testing. Vernon Lee's importance is both historical and current. She did more than anyone to make the German *Einfühlung* tradition accessible to English readers, and her efforts on that front remain unsurpassed. But Lee is no intellectual journalist. She does not merely report on the aesthetic psychology of her day, she contributes to it. Though untrained in empirical methods and without a lab or university affiliation, she was able to produce pioneering empirical and theoretical research. The proposals that she advanced deserve to be taken very seriously. They should be studied and tested. Vernon Lee deserves both a firm place in history and a role in guiding ongoing research.<sup>1</sup>

## Note

- 1 I am indebted to Sally Blackburn-Daniels, Derek Matravers, and participants of the 2022 Vernon Lee workshop at Cambridge. I also benefitted from close readings by Tom Petraschka and Christiana Werner. I am grateful for their feedback, inspiration, support, and patience.

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# 17 Empathy and Enjoyment

## On the Use of Reproductions in School Practice after 1900

*Joseph Imorde*

Where to begin? Maybe with an invective with which, in 1931, Walter Benjamin tried, among other things, to denigrate the achievements of the art education movement. With sharp phrasing, he vented how fed up he was with the societal relevance of popular art history. He thought that particularly the term “Verlebendigung” (enlivening/animation) bore the signature of modern art writing and that this swamp of popular science harboured “the hydra of school aesthetics” with its seven heads, “creatorship, empathy, removal from time, reproduction, witnessing, illusion, and enjoyment of art” (Benjamin 1990, 285; Tietze 1980).

The invective aimed at both the theoreticians of an aesthetics of empathy and the pedagogical practitioners who had thirty years earlier, at the “First German Art Education Day”, laid the foundations for a reform of the curricula through visual means. At this conference, held on 28 and 29 September 1901 in Dresden, pedagogues, artists, art historians, and politicians joined forces to – as Otto Beutler put it – “make art, and in particular our German national art, accessible and understandable to our people’s youth and to those milieus that live detached from cultural centers” (*Beutler* 1902, 14).

At this time, the principles of instructional treatment of works of fine art in schools deeply changed (Warnecke 1902, III),<sup>1</sup> away from looking at images as auxiliary tools toward conveying the formal and substantive qualities of works of art. The starting point of this development was the wide dissemination of all kinds of art-historical printed matter.

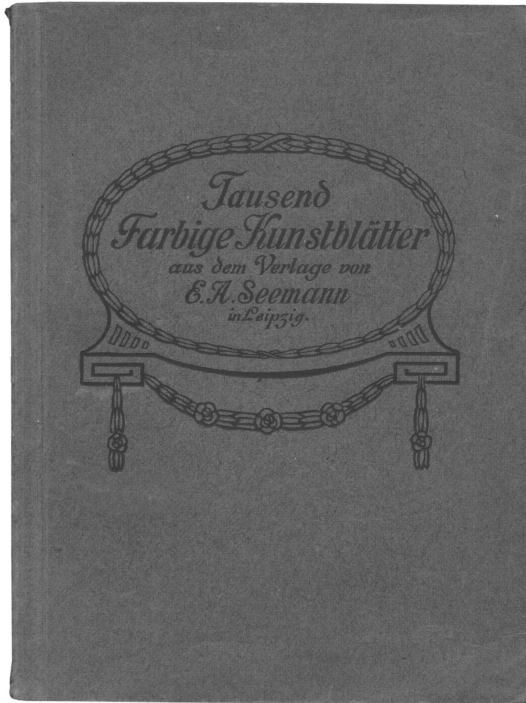
The availability of reasonably priced book series and portfolios of reproductions grew rapidly (Kitschen 2021). What emerged was a market for cheap images. Publishing houses expressed the goal to bring the uneducated into closer contact with “high art”. Persuading the masses to “painterly vision” or empathy was seen as one of the most important aspects of popular education. This applied to German households as well as to schools (Muther 1900, 273).<sup>2</sup> Those who hoped to profit from this development sold art reproductions as the new medium of aesthetic edification.

One example was the publisher Artur Seemann. In 1903, in an article for the *Allgemeine Deutsche Lehrerzeitung* titled “Bildende Kunst in der

Schule” (fine art in school) (Seemann 1903; Seemann 1901), he argued for separating the use of images for instructional purposes from the pure enjoyment of art. Seemann complained that images were still employed too much as educational tools, for example in history or philology classes. He instead favoured the disinterested contemplation of images and the perception of the aesthetic effect of the work of art (Seemann 1903, 305; see fig. 17.1 and 17.2).

Only this approach to reproductions could convey the “pleasure in art” and gradually guide the young students to an aesthetic understanding of old masters (Seemann 1903, 306). Seemann stressed the importance of keeping the age of the children and their “adequate art proficiency” in mind. The path led from the simple to the complex. Nothing could be accomplished with a few glimpses into the history of art. He proposed the circulation of large numbers of reproductions and demanded the wide distribution of inexpensive pictures “as an aesthetic popular nourishment as cheap as potatoes” (Seemann 1903, 306).

In the discourses that focused on “art in school”, the trend shifted from the merely instructional use of images to the appreciation of the artistic



*Figure 17.1* E. A. Seemann, Tausend Farbige Kunstblätter, 1908.

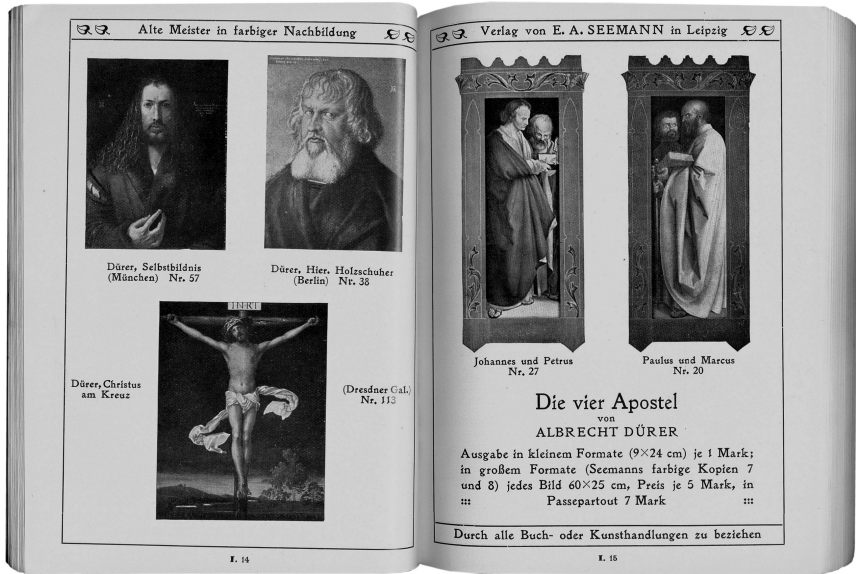


Figure 17.2 E. A. Seemann, Tausend Farbige Kunstblätter, 1908: 14–15.

value of art works (Diptmar 1907, 6).<sup>3</sup> Educators counted on the intrinsic interest of young students and, as Georg Warnecke put it, advocated for the faculties of experience and feeling, which “force the predominant rational culture and the mechanical exercise of memory to be supplemented with the education of sensibility” (Warnecke 1902, III).

In 1908, the *Gymnasium* teacher Hans Diptmar defined the term “artistic image” in his memorandum “Das Bild in der Schule” (the picture in the school).

For him such images were “depictions that do not pursue the purpose of didactic instruction, but that address a broader circle of art-appreciating and art-receptive people and strive to have an effect solely by the power of their inherent artistic value” (Diptmar 1908, 9). Works by famous artists were favoured (Anonymous 1903, 323). An example of how this looked in practice was the decoration of the *Realschule* of the israelitische Gemeinde (Jewish community) Philanthropin (see fig. 17.3) in Frankfurt am Main with reproductions.

Those responsible laid down some guidelines:

Only images with artistic value may serve as wall decoration; didactical, technical or subject-related auxiliary purposes are eliminated, because wall decoration should not instruct, but bring joy and lift the spirit; it should shape the classes and corridors into pleasing, cheerful,



*Figure 17.3* Realschule Philanthropin, 1909. After Galliner 1909.

atmospheric spaces. It serves solely the ideal purpose of sensitizing children to the creations of art, of opening their eyes to the beauties of nature, so that their taste is refined and that the desire is developed to design their own domestic surroundings pleasantly and perhaps also artistically.

(Galliner 1909, 22)

The mass of the material used was structured in two groups: one comprised reproductions of works by old and modern masters; the other, coloured lithographs specifically intended as decoration for school walls from publishing houses like Teubner and Voigtländer.

In the distribution and arrangement of the images, attention was paid to ensuring that every corridor and every classroom took on as uniform a character as possible. Naturally, as Artur Seemann, among others, had called for, the respective age groups of the children were taken into account (Galliner 1909, 22). The treatment of wall decoration in Frankfurt

exemplified the opinion that the Director of the Stuttgart school of applied arts, Franz August Otto Krüger, had expressed in 1901 at the First German Art Education Day in Dresden:

The artists create works out of moods and feelings; the images affect the feelings and moods of the children. The artist who creates the work often cannot put into words himself what he wants to express with an image, and it will be very difficult for the explaining teacher to express this mood content in words. Hang only works of art that affect the children solely by themselves and directly: with the little ones, those that tell them something; with the bigger ones, those that are also decorative and give the children an idea of how they might later decoratively adorn their own living spaces. But as an artist, I beg of you: leave out the explanations; let the images have their effect without a mediator. A good work of art speaks for itself.

(Galliner 1909, 23; Krüger 1902)

The desired atmospheric effect of the wall decoration was conveyed in the drawing hall of the Frankfurt school (see fig. 17.4) primarily via self-portraits by Dürer, Rembrandt, and Böcklin and by two larger reproductions of paintings, namely Meindert Hobbemas' *The Avenue at Middelharnis* and Jacob Ruisdael's *Great Waterfall*.



Figure 17.4 Realschule Philanthropin, Drawing Hall, 1909. After Galliner 1909.

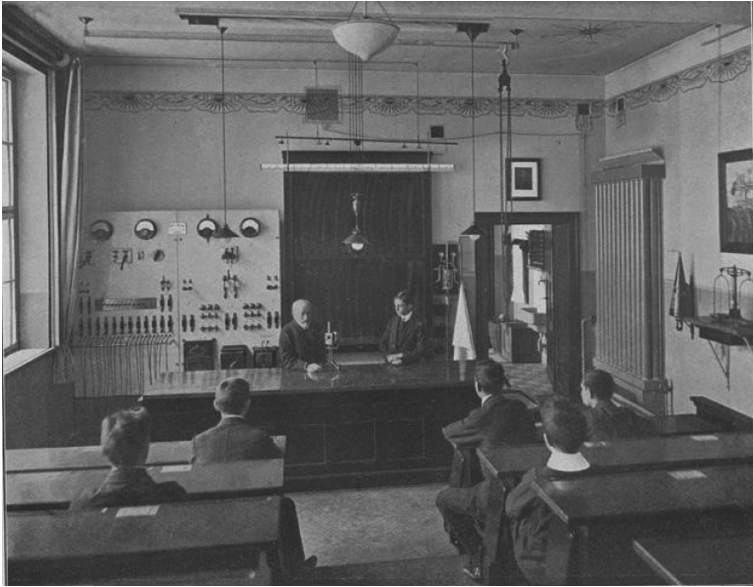


Figure 17.5 Realschule Philanthropin, Physics Hall, 1909. After Galliner 1909.

Interchangeable frames were also available that could be fitted as needed with hand drawings, woodcut prints, copperplate engravings, and etchings, but also with reproductions of paintings.

In the physics hall (see fig. 17.5), the pupils saw, in addition to portraits of Newton and Helmholtz, painted scenes from the industrial present, like Adolf Menzel's *Iron Rolling Mill*, but also the *Vulcan Shipyard* by Ludwig Dettmann, a colour lithography sold by the publishing house Teubner.

Classroom IV, an instruction room for daily use, was thematically devoted to historical motifs (see fig. 17.6 and 17.7). There, the young students could enjoy a view of Paestum, Achenbach's *Constantine's Triumphal Arch*, Cornelius' *The Destruction of Troy*, and Michelangelo's *Jeremiah* from the Sistine Chapel (Galliner 1909, 25).

The décor sought to offer moods and to atmospherically affect the children's imaginations and emotions. For successful empathy, the artistic wall adornment had to be left unexplained – at least that was the opinion of Elisabeth Toussaint (1906, 729; see Möhn 1902, 176) in an article in the magazine *Die Lehrerin in Schule und Haus* (the teacher in school and home): “The images should not be discussed; they should provide neither visual aid nor themes for essays. They should not loudly preach, but should have a very quiet and secret effect, like very refined, quiet children”.





Figure 17.6 B. G. Teubner, *Künstlerischer Wandschmuck für Haus und Schule*, ca. 1910.

Resistance to such a thoroughly passive aesthetic of empathy, which vehemently rejected every explanation of what is artistic (Ernst 1904, 38),<sup>4</sup> arose not only among schoolteachers (Siech 1904, 195), but also within the wider academic community. In 1903, the art historian August Schmarsow (1903, 8–9) took a stand against opinions voiced at the First German Art Education Day in Dresden: things were not right in a school if one wanted to mount works from artists' hands on the walls, but to forbid the teacher from making them objects of instruction. True enjoyment of art was not to be understood as passive devotion, but as an activity. Schmarsow (1903, 17) believed that every proper enjoyment of a work of art was based on an inner re-creation and that this process of emulation or empathy transformed the work of another into one's own truly subjective experience. The capacity to enjoy presupposed active empathy in which the top priority was the registration and enjoyment of one's own emotional exuberance that was difficult to reproduce in words:

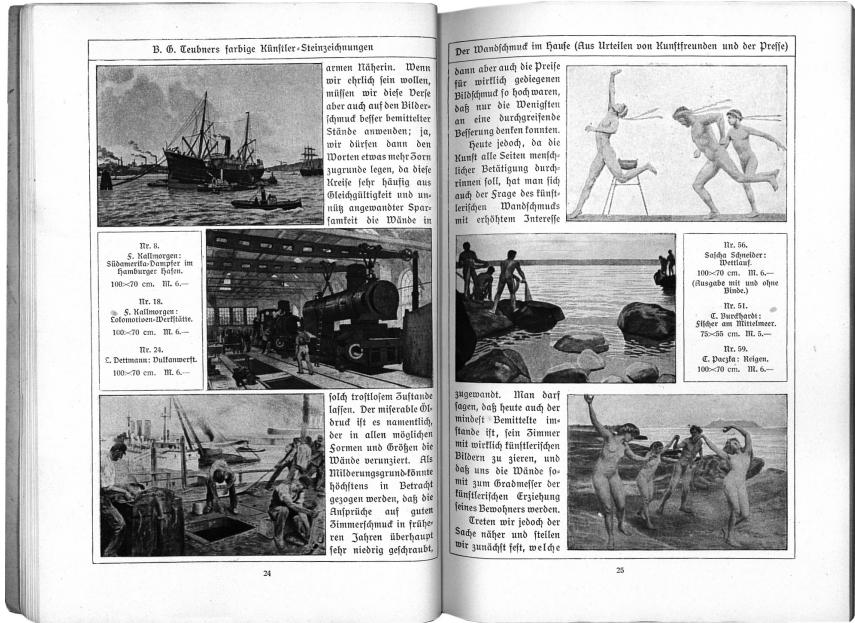


Figure 17.7 B. G. Teubner, Künstlerischer Wandschmuck für Haus und Schule, ca. 1910: 24–25.

Born from emotion, art can be grasped also only with feeling, the genuinely inborn feeling for art. What is essential in the work of art cannot be reproduced with words. What can be seen, observed, understood, described is only the outermost garb of what is artistic. The word can help only to eliminate the disturbances that stand in the way of clear seeing and empathy, of creating a direct connection between the work of art and the viewer. But the word can never replace the enjoyment of art.

(Diem 1919, 228)

After 1900, ideas like those quoted here advanced to become central assumptions of aesthetic education. Since it was “born from feeling”, art could only be “grasped by feeling” (Spanier 1905, VI). And the good reproduction, whether viewed at home or at school, had no other purpose than to produce aesthetic pleasure (Krannhals 1910, 11).

These aesthetic considerations led to, among other things, demands to now also furnish the “schoolroom with artistically valuable images”. Educators went even further. Everything should now be made to serve aesthetic education: the school building, the corridors and classrooms, the teaching materials, and even the lessons, of which not a few people

expected increased consideration of beauty. One focused on placing the children from an early age in a kind of artistic atmosphere that stimulated the enjoyment of and the ability to empathize with the beautiful (Linde 1902, 205–206).

Those who hoped to create an artistic atmosphere by mounting reproductions of works of art in the schoolroom were not counting on a rapid learning success, but on persisting effect (Spanier 1901, 56; Müller 2006, 19).

Because the pupil is entirely unpracticed in viewing the works of art, he generally stands at a loss before the many depictions presented to him. Usually the time for viewing is too short. And yet, everyone knows from his own experience that only repeated, intense viewing can draw out all the beauties from the work of art. It follows that the depictions must remain in the classroom for a longer time, so that the pupils can familiarize themselves at their leisure with all the essential characteristics of the image.

(Tittel 1904, 509–510)

The opinion increasingly prevailed that the educational system in Germany had emphasized the transmission of knowledge for too long and too one-sidedly. Now the formation of the senses should be favoured, with a cultivation of feeling and an appreciation of artistic perception and sensibility (Gurlitt 1902, 178). Children should be able to view the works of art without pedantic discipline and external drill. For only an unforced perception of art would offer “primarily enjoyment, and that’s why the education for viewing art should also be primarily enjoyment” (Lange 1902, 34). In 1906, Leipzig’s teachers association was able to pointedly formulate this new principle in a programmatic brochure titled “Bildbetrachtungen” (image contemplations): the sole “goal of regarding pictures” is the “enjoyment of the work of art” (Goldhagen 1906, 10). Secondary goals are inspiration to observe nature, cultivating the sense of seeing, and the formation of the pupils’ taste. A carefully selected adornment of walls had the task of offering aesthetic experiences and “to gradually let them become the children’s inner possession” (Galliner 1909, 21).

Like August Schmarsow before him, the artist Hermann Obrist was angered by these excesses of aesthetic education. In the magazine *Kunst und Künstler*, he criticized in 1907 the “hysteria” of contemporary “art education suggestions” with their “instructions for enjoying art”: “[...] art in the life of the nation, art in the life of the child, art in the life of the servants, etc. We see hundreds of teachers and civil servants, ill with chronic systematitis, plunging themselves with lamentable zeal into the newest pedagogical trend” (Obrist 1907, 208–209).

This anger was not conjured up out of thin air, because in those days, art education was indeed shaped by “didactomaniacs”, as Obrist called

them, with a sense of mission, who were trying to bludgeon the capacity to enjoy art into German youth and beyond that into the German nation (Linde 1902, 205). School was to instil “the receptive ability to enjoy” (Lange 1902, 28), to make the pupils responsive to the beauties of art (Toussaint 1906, 723). At the same time, “the education to enjoyment of art” was meant to be directed also toward the lower classes, for one ought to ignite a torch for the “poor and oppressed” to artistically brighten the dark “valley of their joyless existence” (Rissmann 1902, 5).

One of the most uncompromising proponents of the “educational honing of the ability to enjoy” was without a doubt Ferdinand Avenarius (1889–1890, 2), the “art guardian” who took up the banner of presenting, through his own efforts, “the greatest possible sum of happiness and well-being and the least possible of aversion”. For him, this included all societal strata, because the enjoyment of art had a moralizing side (Lublinski 1904, 211–212).<sup>5</sup> Avenarius, invoking Schiller, contended that artistic education was charged with the task of improving the general morality. But that was not all: aesthetic enjoyment should be opened up to the “Volk”, the nation or populace, because this could contribute to pacifying – for example – the unruly working class. Overall, Avenarius (1889–1890, 1) saw macroeconomic advantages, because the enjoyment of art cost “practically nothing”, or at any rate *could* cost practically nothing. Goethe’s or Schiller’s poems could be had for just ten or twenty Pfennigs; and for whomever had learned to see the tones of colours and the play of light, the sky and the land would every day perform a free concert and an art exhibition, entirely without an admission fee.

The question that Avenarius repeatedly sought to answer in the magazine “Kunstwart” (art guardian) was how to achieve the general goal of fostering the capacity for aesthetic enjoyment of the many. Of course, the finest nuances of an aristocratic enjoyment of art could only remain inaccessible to the masses; but with the receptivity of the soul came the ability to see, hear, and “feel through” one’s surroundings, and for Avenarius (1889–1890, 2), this – cost-neutral – perception and feeling was the starting point for true education – an education that did not one-sidedly emphasize knowledge or content, but strengthened thinking, feeling, and imagination. “[...] thorough enjoyment, [...] enjoyment with the whole, undistracted soul” was a necessity for this form of education. What was crucial, however, was not the abundance of what was offered; but rather the select and valuable should come into view. “A single little poem by Goethe or Mörike, a single little song by Hugo Wolf, a single woodcut by Dürer enjoyed with genuine immersion produces a crystallization point for the enjoyment of art and for pure joy of existence [...]” (Avenarius 1900, 90).

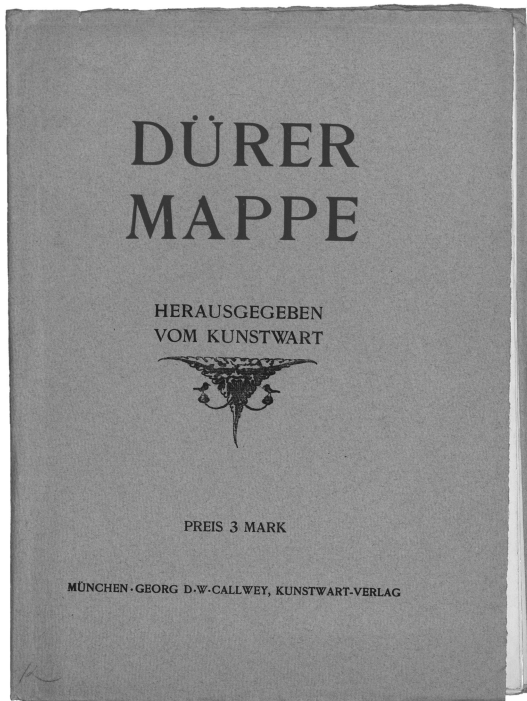
That meant: not to follow some “weak ‘aestheticism’”, but to submit oneself to the true enjoyment of art, because it alone is the “guide to enjoying life, to enjoying life in the highest sense, of course” (Avenarius 1898,

361). Here, an overestimation of art-historical knowledge was countered with a concept of education whose starting point was the ability of each individual to feel subjectively.

Avenarius (1902, 4) understood this empathy or “immersion in individual works of art” as the royal road to the cultivation of aesthetic feeling; and for him, there was no “true insight” without such deep feeling, without the ideal enjoyment of art (see fig. 17.8 and 17.9).<sup>6</sup>

How this was supposed to be understood and indeed was understood was explained, for example, by the dedicated pedagogue Bertha Jordan at the General Assembly of the Landesvereins Preußischer Volksschullehrerinnen (Prussian Association of Women Primary Schoolteachers) in 1906. In her report, she raised the enjoyment of art to the loftiest heights of mystical experience:

Whoever enjoys artistically forgets himself, abandons himself; he loses himself to an Other; the ego is suspended through devotion to something more beautiful, deeper, richer, a whole that, with its truth, is at the same time something eternal; and this self-abandonment is an



*Figure 17.8* Kunstwart, Dürer Mappe, ca. 1910.



bliss of love – they all flow into this feeling [...] being part of the whole [...] the spirit of allness [...].

(Avenarius 1910, 426)

One could assert with some justification and from a comparatistic perspective that this was nothing other than a romantic emphasis. When he spoke of the enjoyment of art, Avenarius propagated religious feelings “of a non-churchly kind” (Avenarius 1910, 426) – a sentiment that was – for example – already propagated in 1797 by Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck in their *Outpourings of an Art-loving Friar*. In this pamphlet the authors compared the “enjoyment of the more noble works of art” to the practice of prayer (Wackenroder and Tieck 1997, 72).

To understand the enjoyment of art as the loss of self in the Other, or to put it in a more modern way, to define it as total empathy or immersion, opened perspectives into the history of religion. Reminiscent were, for example, the ideas of Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher (1920, 74), who, in his influential book *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* of 1799, had celebrated the dissolving of oneself into the eternal as the highest affirmation of existence: “In the midst of finitude, becoming one with the infinite and being eternal in a moment – that is the immortality of religion”.

But the romanticism of such feeling reached back much further, of course, perhaps as far as to Augustine’s theology of emotion. He, too, understood religious experience as turning one’s self over to an entirely Other and evaluated this beautiful “being outside of oneself” as *fruitio Dei*, as enjoying God. What was perceived there and came to itself was the “sensory-extrasensory contact with the divine that shines forth in the blissful sensation of the fullness of life and overcoming the limits of the self” (Scholz 1911, 211) – concretely, the feeling of a “grace” that is realized in evaluating the antecedent contemplation. Only by looking back and reflecting on the experienced empathy or immersion could the extraordinariness of the personal feeling be validated as enjoyment and this “creation of value” be lastingly ideologized. In the history of Christianity, this pleasurable experience of oneself was attributed an effect constitutive of belief; in the times when an art religion established itself, aesthetic manifestation was to imprint the memory as an ideal state of being – namely by shifting attention from the distinct object to the feeling of the individual who was aware of himself (Koss 2006, 139), precisely in the sense of the often-cited dictum of the theoretician of empathy, Theodor Lipps (1924, 152, 1906): “aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment”.<sup>7</sup>

Around 1900 the public’s feelings came under the gaze of an experimentally proceeding science (Ziche 2006), as well as into the clutches of a

blossoming “cultural industry” that set out to earn money with an “art for everyone”. The aesthetic of empathy was tied to commercialization insofar as the assertion of the viewing individual’s emotional autonomy made art history suitable for the masses. What was placed on the market was no longer the artefact itself, but that deep feeling that, at best, should set in when viewing even a mediocre reproduction. After 1900, pedagogical interests turned to this aesthetically legitimated self-perception. The increasing emphasis on the aesthetic side of viewing works of art in the school context was essentially connected, to say it once again, to the significant increase and wide distribution of reproductions. The rapid technological development of the printing trade was what first enabled the emergence of the new “Anschauungsunterricht” (visual instruction) in schools. It changed educational approaches and established didactical methods that championed an aesthetic understanding of art through empathy and enjoyment.

## Notes

- 1 “Die Grundsätze für die unterrichtliche Behandlung von Werken der bildenden Kunst, soweit dieselbe nicht wissenschaftlichen Zwecken dient, sondern auf die Belehrung und den Genuß der heranwachsenden Jugend unserer höheren Schulen sowie des großen bildungsfreundlichen Publikums abzielt, haben in den letzten vierzig bis fünfzig Jahren eine tiefgreifende Wandlung durchgemacht, die, fast könnte man sagen, von einem Extrem zum anderen geführt hat”. (The principles of the treatment in schools of works of visual art – to the degree that these do not serve scholarly purposes but aim to teach and delight the adolescent youth of our higher schools and the broad public interested in learning – have undergone a far-reaching transformation that, one could almost say, have led from one extreme to the other.)
- 2 “‘Alte Meister in farbiger Nachbildung’ lautet der Titel eines Sammelwerkes, das, wie die ‘Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst’, die Litfass-Säule des Seemann’schen Verlages, verkündet, ‘in der Erziehung der Massen zu malerischem Sehen einen der wichtigsten Factoren der Völkserziehung erblickt und in Anbetracht des billigen Preises auf die weiteste Verbreitung in der Familie, den Schulen und Lehranstalten aller Art wird rechnen dürfen’. Quod Deus bene vertat!” (*Old Masters in colored reproduction* is the title of a collected edition that, like the *Magazine for Visual Art*, the advertising pillar of the Seemann’schen publishing house, announces that it regards them, “in educating the masses to painterly seeing, one of the most important factors in popular education and, considering the low price”, that it can count on “the widest distribution in the family, the schools, and instructional facilities of all kinds”. Quod Deus bene vertat!)
- 3 “Wenn man nun die Erscheinungen des modernen Bildermarktes vom Standpunkt der Schule aus betrachtet, wobei ich hier zunächst das humanistische Gymnasium im Auge habe, so zeigt sich ein unverkennbares Zurücktreten des rein lehrhaften Bildes”. (If one now views the phenomena of the modern picture market from the standpoint of the school, whereby I am initially considering the *humanistische Gymnasium* [college-prep high school with instruction in Greek and Latin], what we see is an unmistakable retreat of the purely didactic image.)
- 4 “Stimmung ist ein Zusammenwirken teilweise und gleichmäßig verdunkelter Vorstellungen, die Erklärung aber setzt grelle Lichter auf Stellen,



die künstlerisch oft die unwichtigsten sind, und verscheucht dadurch die Stimmung. Kunststunden sind überhaupt keine Unterrichtsstunden, sondern Erlebnisstunden". (Mood is an interaction among partly and evenly darkened imaginings; explanation, however, casts bright lights on passages that are artistically often the least important and thereby chases away the mood. Art classes are not hours of instruction at all, but hours of experience.)

- 5 "Ursprünglich trat freilich mehr der Segen der Kunstwartarbeit hervor, (212) ursprünglich begnügte sich die Zeitschrift damit, eben nur die Unmündigen zur Kunst zu erziehen. Der Herausgeber, Ferdinand Avenarius, entfaltete ein hervorragendes pädagogisches Talent. Er wusste die Augen aufzuschließen, dass sie die Farben und Schattierungen der Gemälde, die plastischen Linien der Bildwerke sehen und nachfühlen lernten, und darüber hinaus lenkte er den Beschauer zu dem seelischen Gehalt hin" (Of course, the blessing of the Art Guardian came more to the fore, (212) originally the magazine contented itself with training only the immature in art. The editor, Ferdinand Avenarius, developed an outstanding pedagogical talent. He knew how to open eyes so that they learned to see and emotionally understand the colours and nuanced tones of the paintings and the plastic lines of the visual works, and beyond that, he guided the beholder to the spiritual content).
- 6 "Und das dürfen wir nicht vergessen: es gibt auch kein wirkliches Erkennen in künstlerischen Dingen, wenn der Genuß daran nicht vorhergegangen ist. Kunstwissenschaft, von dem gescheitesten Menschen ohne Kunstgefühl betrieben, ist nie sicher, auf die Zwecke zu zielen, weil jede Bürgschaft fehlt [...]. Ohne kraftvoll nachgestaltenden Kunstgenuß ist Kunstwissenschaft ihres Stoffes unsicher [...]." (And this we must not forget: there is no true knowledge in artistic matters, if pleasure hasn't preceded it. The study of art, pursued by the cleverest person without a feeling for art, is never certain to aim at the purpose, because every warranty is lacking [...]. Without powerfully reconstructing art enjoyment, the study of art cannot be sure of its subject matter [...].)
- 7 "Es gibt drei Arten, genauer gesagt, drei Richtungen des Genusses. Ich genieße das eine Mal einen von mir unterschiedenen dinglichen oder sinnlichen Gegenstand, zum Beispiel: den Geschmack einer Frucht. Die zweite Möglichkeit ist die: Ich genieße mich selbst, zum Beispiel: meine Kraft oder meine Geschicklichkeit. Ich fühle mich etwa stolz in Hinblick auf eine That, in der ich solche Kraft oder Geschicklichkeit an den Tag gelegt habe. Zwischen diesen beiden Möglichkeiten aber steht, beide ein eigenartiger weise verbindend, die dritte: Ich genieße mich selbst in einem von mir unterschiedenen sinnlichen Gegenstand. Dieser Art ist der ästhetische Genuß. Er ist objektiverer Selbstgenuß". (There are three ways, or more precisely, three directions of the enjoyment. I enjoy, once, a thing or sensory object that differs from me, for example: the taste of a fruit. The second possibility is this: I enjoy myself, for example: my strength or my skill. I feel proud of a deed, in which I have evinced such strength or skill. Between these two possibilities, however, stands the third, combining both in a peculiar way: I enjoy myself in a sensory object distinct from myself. This way is aesthetic pleasure. It is objectified enjoyment of oneself.)

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# 18 “Polar Juxtaposition”. Worringer, Lipps, and Der Blaue Reiter

*Robin Rehm*

## 18.1 Aesthetics and Polarity

Defining the parameters of a work of art has always been a focus of theoretical reflection. It had long been held that the fine arts were predicated on the imitation of nature (Blumenberg 2012, 55–57; Panofsky 1993, 1–4). Jacques Rancière proposes in response that this nature-imitating tradition be named the “representative regime” (Rancière 2016, 16; Kleesattel 2016, 58–75). Ever since antiquity, according to his arguments, the traditional “laws of mimesis determined an ordered relationship between a mode of doing – a *poiēsis* – and a mode of being – an *aisthēsis* –” (Rancière 2016, 16).

However, with the emancipation of the subject towards the end of the eighteenth century, the tradition of the imitation of nature began to dissipate. All that was left behind after the dissolution of mimesis was the relation of the artistically created form (*poiēsis*) to the content apperceived by the senses (*aisthēsis*). For modern painting from the period around 1910, which takes in both expressionism and naturalism, the relationship between these two poles continues to be definitive. There are numerous publications on painting, dating from this period, which reflect on the said relationship: Wassily Kandinsky’s *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*) of 1912 as much as Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Les Peintres Cubistes* (*The Cubist Painters*) dating from 1913 and Umberto Boccioni’s *Pittura, Scultura Futuriste* (*Futurist Painters and Sculptors*) of 1914 (Kandinsky 1912; Apollinaire 1913; Boccioni 1914).

As in painting, there are corresponding writings that address said polarity concerned in design and architecture, too. Two of these in particular are given prominence by Rancière (2009, 120):

The masters of this theoretical discussion such as Alois Riegl – with his theory of the organic ornament – and Wilhelm Worringer – with his theory of the abstract line – have become the theoretical guarantors of the abstraction of painting through a series of misunderstandings: as an art whose sole aim is to express the will – the idea – of the artist through symbols which function as signs of an inner necessity.<sup>1</sup>

Within the groundwork that was fully laid out around 1910, Worringer’s theory, mentioned by Rancière, acquires particular relevance in the German-speaking discourse. Worringer’s *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (*Abstraction and Empathy*) was published in 1908 by R. Piper & Co. Verlag. It had been accepted as a dissertation by Artur Weese at the University of Bern two years earlier. The text is considered one of the most influential writings of modernism (Silaghi 2013; Helg 2015, 1–14).

Its significance is articulated in the 1912 controversy between Franz Marc and Max Beckmann about the conditions for modern art (Öhlschläger 2005, 23–33; Treichler 2021, 33–47). In his essay *Die konstruktiven Ideen der neuen Malerei* (*The constructive ideas of the new painting*), published in Paul Cassirer’s weekly magazine *Pan* along with other articles from this controversy, Marc (1912a, 530) refers to Worringer’s book:

Today, to the best of my knowledge, only two attempts at laying foundations for such a dogmatics are in existence. One is the brilliant

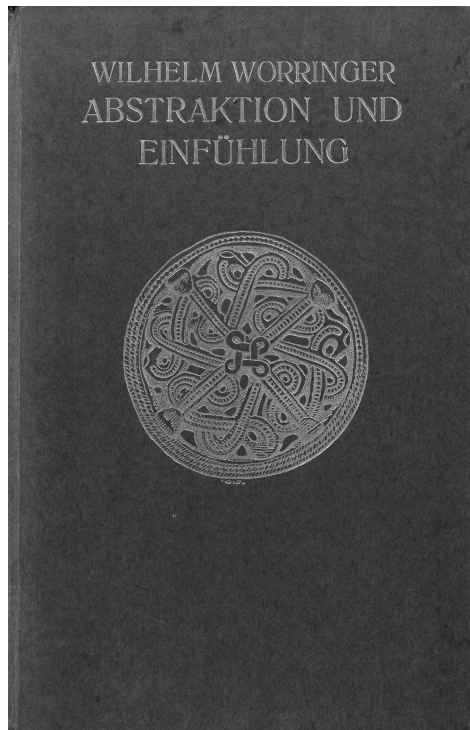


Figure 18.1 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, book cover, fifth edition: 1918 [1908]

book by *Wilhelm Worringer*, *Abstraction and Empathy*, which today deserves the most universal respect and in which a stringently historical intellect has written down a train of thought which might cause some upset to the anxious opponents of the modern movement. The other, “On the Spiritual in Art”, is written by the *painter W. Kandinsky*; it includes ideas on a *theory of harmony in painting*, in which the laws on the effects of forms and colours as we understand them today are specified and have simultaneously taken the liveliest shape in his pictures.<sup>2</sup>

Marc evidently ranks Worringer’s publication alongside Kandinsky’s treatise, an appraisal which is highly relevant for the *Almanach des Blauen Reiter* (*Almanac of the Blue Rider*) published two months later by Marc and Kandinsky (Behr 2020, 34–50).

Marc’s paintings, which are frequently populated by animals, seek the motivation for their genesis in the world of feelings.

In the painting *Tierschicksale* (*Fate of the Animals*), offered on the art market at the time together with other works by Herwarth Walden’s Berlin gallery *Der Sturm* (*The Storm*), such feelings are given pictorial expression (Küster 2016, 98–119). In 1920, Eckart von Sydow (1920, 107) refers to Marc’s animal pictures and compares them with Max Liebermann’s: “There is nobody who could come close to him, – and certainly: there are other animal painters galore, in all shapes and sizes, some living, some not – the Krönens and Liebermanns”.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 18.2 Franc Marc, *Tierschicksale*, 1913, Oil on canvas, 195 x 263,5 cm, Kunstmuseum Basel, reproduction: von Sydow 1920

In contrast to Liebermann, however, what stands out in Marc’s paintings is their emphasis on the emotional side of painting. In this regard, Marc’s conception of painting follows Worringer, who sees the essential momentum of art in such an expression of feeling. This emphasis on feeling goes to the heart of the aforementioned difference of opinion between Marc and Beckmann. Indeed, the two positions scarcely allow for any rapprochement. For unlike Marc, Beckmann expressly emphasizes form as the main criterion of his painting, which does not portray feeling but the activity of thinking (Weisner 1982, 157–173; Schneede 2011; Rewald and Walter 2016). As Dietrich Schubert argues, Beckmann’s position is close to the theoretical reflections of Adolf Hildebrand in *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* (*The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture*) (Hildebrand 1910; Schubert 1983, 226).

Beckmann considers the form as essential, since it renders the “composition [...] rhythmic and balanced” (Beckmann 1912, 500). For example,

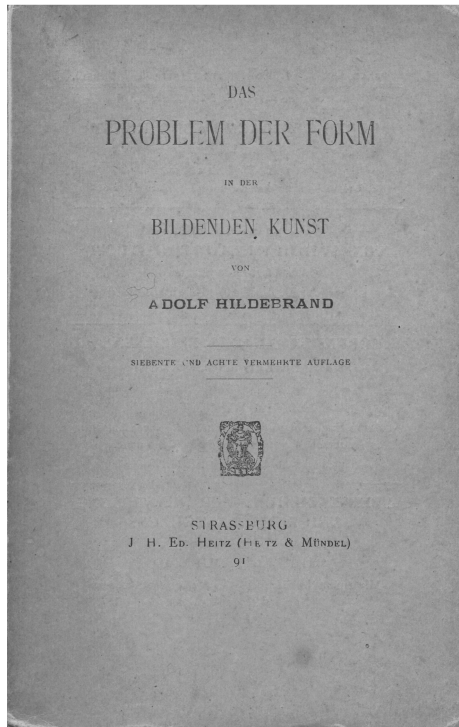


Figure 18.3 Adolf Hildebrand, *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst*, book cover, seventh and eighth edition 1910 [1893]



Beckmann's *Amazonenkampf* (*Battle of the Amazons*) succeeds in showing the spatial unfolding of a "drama", as Hans Kaiser puts it (Kaiser 1913, 42–43).

Modernist painting thus discriminates in terms of whether a painting is motivated by emotional expression or purely formal criteria. Worringer's book *Abstraction and Empathy* ran to several reprints within a short time, and according to Marc, commanded a special position in the art theory of this period because it reflects on the significance of feeling – and particularly on empathy (Koss 2006, 145–151). Worringer, who like August Endell and Rainer Maria Rilke attended lectures by Theodor Lipps at the Maximilians-Universität in Munich, links empathy with special concerns of modern art (Meyer 2013, 25–33; Rehm 2009, 76–89). In his assessment of Worringer's dissertation, dated 14 July 1906, Weese underlines the relevance of Lippsian aesthetics: "In a theoretical section, the author deals with the problem of empathy and its relationship to modern aesthetics, namely to Theodor Lipps".<sup>4</sup> Worringer makes no bones about the fact that Lipps's essay *Einfühlung and ästhetischer Genuß* (*Empathy and aesthetic enjoyment*), published at the beginning of 1906 in the magazine *Die Zukunft* (Lipps 1906a, 100–114), was the starting point for his dissertation (Friedrich and Gleiter 2007, 16–19). As Worringer (1918, 4) explains:



Figure 18.4 Max Beckmann, *Amazonenkampf*, 1911, Oil on canvas, 250 x 220 cm, private collection, reproduction: Kaiser 1913

“The following attempt at characterization recounts the basic ideas of the Lippsian theory, to some extent verbatim in the phraseology Lipps himself used to convey them in a summary of his theory, which he published in January 1906 in the magazine ‘Zukunft’.”<sup>5</sup> Eckart von Sydow is quick to condemn Worringer’s limited source literature on empathy.<sup>6</sup> *De facto*, however, Worringer additionally consults the first part of Lipps’s prodigious book *Ästhetik. Psychologie des Schönen and der Kunst* (*Aesthetics. Psychology of Beauty and Art*), published in 1903. Evidence of this fact are the book title and page numbers, inserted in brackets (Worringer 1918, 7–8; Lipps 1903, 247). In 1906 the second part of Lipps’s *Aesthetics* is published but Worringer makes no reference to it. The volume only reaches the book shops as Worringer submits his dissertation to Weese at the University of Bern (Lipps 1906b).

Nevertheless, Lipps’s essay published in *Zukunft* at the start of 1906 provides a resumé of this second part (Meyer 2013, 127–138). The interest of others besides Worringer is awakened by the condensed presentation of this second volume of Lipps’s *Aesthetics*. As late as 1923, a shortened version of the text is reprinted in Emil Utitz’s *Ästhetik* (*Aesthetics*), which was published in the *Quellenhandbücher der Philosophie* (*Sourcebooks of Philosophy*) series on behalf of the Kantgesellschaft (Kant Society) (Lipps 1923, 152–167). What distinguishes Lipps’s essay in the context of the Kant Society is its orientation to aesthetic concerns of art. Indeed, Lipps ensures that his aesthetic theory affords a workable connection to art. He does so by orientating it to the subjective connection of the aforementioned polarity between the beauty of form and the receptivity of sensation. In this way, Lipps furnishes a contribution to what Rancière calls the “aesthetic regime of art” (Rancière 2016, 17). Herein lies the explanation for Worringer’s principal reliance on Lipps’s 1906 essay in his work on empathy (Schuster 1912, 104–116). Lipps does actually make a statement in that essay which, on account of its aesthetic principle, is significant for Worringer. This is the principle whereby empathy is rendered compatible with art and its associated rules. In the relevant passage, Worringer talks about a “polar juxtaposition of empathy and abstraction” (Worringer 1918, 132). The connection to art is thus established by means of a statement referring to this polarity, which is where Lipps’s essay comes to bear. When Worringer attests in *Abstraction and Empathy*: “The simplest dictum [...] is this: aesthetic enjoyment is objective self-enjoyment”,<sup>7</sup> then he subscribes almost verbatim to Lipps’s classification of enjoyment as a prerequisite for empathy (Worringer 1918, 4). In Worringer’s best-seller, the comment gains the status of a figure of thought, and recurs in his book constantly, like a mantra. Worringer (1918, 8) justifies this repetition: “For we thereby come to understand that dictum of such importance to us, which is to serve as our foil for the arguments that follow, and which

we therefore repeat at this juncture: Aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment”.<sup>8</sup> Just a few pages later, he revisits the dictum once again:

That even the need for empathy, as the starting point for aesthetic experience, is essentially an instinct for self-externalisation, will be all the more difficult to comprehend at first, unless we still have that dictum ringing in our ear: “Aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment”.

(Worringer 1918, 31)<sup>9</sup>

He detaches empathy from the externality of form and restores it to internality. Elsewhere he continues with the same refrain:

The psychological precondition, then, was not the playful, banal pleasure in the harmony between the artistic representation and the object itself, but the need to feel delight in the mysterious power of organic form, in which one’s enjoyment of one’s own organism was heightened. Art, clearly, was objectified self-enjoyment.

(Worringer 1918, 36–37)<sup>10</sup>

The reiterations of the dictum call to mind the concept of internalization that is germane to the theory of empathy: after all, Worringer espouses a theory of art based not on the conflation of elements into a form, but on a sensual effect unfolding in time.

## 18.2 Friedrich Schiller’s “Aesthetic State”

As mentioned above, when he articulates the dictum, Worringer is looking to Lipps’s essay on *Empathy and Aesthetic Enjoyment* for guidance. The essay’s introduction distinguishes several forms of enjoyment from one another:

There are three types or more precisely, three directions of enjoyment. In the first place, I enjoy a material or sensual object distinct from myself; for example, the flavour of a fruit. The second possibility is this: I enjoy [aspects of] my self; for example, my strength or my skill. For instance, I may feel proud of some deed in which I demonstrated such strength or skill. Between these two possibilities, however, combining them both in a curious way, is the third: I enjoy [aspects of] my self in a sensual object distinct from myself. This type is aesthetic enjoyment. It is objectified self-enjoyment.

(Lipps 1906a, 100)<sup>11</sup>

It is these last two sentences of Lipps’s which Worringer takes up as the core message of his publication. When Worringer, with Lipps, speaks of “objectified self-enjoyment”, what it means is that empathy with art is not possible without a special prerequisite. As Worringer states, enjoyment, and hence also empathy, requires an objectification before any connection to art can be made at all.<sup>12</sup> This objectification is, according to Worringer, not simply given. As far as art is concerned, “objectified self-enjoyment” refers to an aesthetic figure of thought which does not emphasize the form, but rather the mode of being – or feeling – respectively. Rancière argues with regard to such a “definition of art as a form of life and a form of life’s spontaneous self-development” that at the “beginning of this understanding of modernity [...] the fundamental reference to Schiller’s concept of the aesthetic education of the human being” is relevant (Rancière 2008, 44–45; Kleesattel 2016, 68–72).<sup>13</sup> With the dawn of this aesthetic orientation, Rancière (2008, 45) goes on, “the idea was first articulated that domination and servitude are primarily ontological distributions (activity of thinking versus passivity of sensual material)”.<sup>14</sup> Rooted in this activity, accordingly, is a self-definition of the subject which has been virulent since the French Revolution, which makes it possible to attain what Worringer conceives of as “objectified self-enjoyment”. Meant is a sensual mode of aliveness that is attainable in the reception of art. Rancière (2008, 45) elaborates: “And a neutral state was defined, a state of double suspension in which the activity of thinking and the receptivity of sensuality become a single reality, a new dimension of being – that of autonomous appearance and free play”.<sup>15</sup> Precisely this sphere of neutrality is attained in Friedrich Schiller’s grace-as-beauty, which one only comes to possess within a self-instructed dignity (Rancière 2016, 104). This is the basis of the “double suspension” invoked by Rancière (2008, 45), which in its appearance and its freedom of play promises neutrality.

In the context of empathy in art around 1910, it is worthwhile to look more precisely at what Rancière calls “double suspension”. Worringer, as discussed, understands the dictum of “objectified self-enjoyment” as the essence of empathy. How enjoyment relates to art is shown in the sentences which, in Lipps, precede the dictum taken up by Worringer, professing that empathy results from enjoyment. It is crucial here to register the link between empathy and enjoyment. Emil Utitz (1923, 19) comments generally on the foundations of Lippsian aesthetic empathy: “This theory is already germinating in romanticism” and adds: “now, however, it is given scientific cultivation”.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the relationship with aesthetics around 1800, mentioned by Utitz and pointed out by Rancière in citing Schiller, is absolutely central to the understanding of empathy in Lipps and Worringer. In this regard, in 1906, Max Dessoir – whom Richard Hamann (1911, V) reckons “the most well-versed in all specifically modern

questions”, – refers to a staged model, constitutive for Schiller’s aesthetics, which ultimately corresponds to the three forms of enjoyment in the introduction of Lipps’s essay *Empathy and Aesthetic Enjoyment* (Dessoir 1906, 34; Meyer 2013, 129). In that work, as mentioned, Lipps differentiates three sorts of enjoyment: 1. the enjoyment of a “material or sensual object”, 2. the enjoyment of a quality of the subject and 3. the enjoyment of an external object apperceived by the subject by means of a sensation (Lipps 1906a, 100). It is this theory derived by Lipps which contains analogies with “Schiller’s requirements for beauty” and the corresponding three points (Dessoir 1906, 34). Faustino Fabbianelli previously pointed out Lipps’s 1895 study on Kant’s and Schiller’s aesthetics as a fundamental prerequisite for aesthetic empathy.<sup>17</sup>

In taking recourse to Schiller here, Lipps’s concern is to give empathy an aesthetic grounding and thereby make it compatible with art. Schiller’s concept is based on an anthropological constant. In the *Augustenburger Briefe* (*Letters to Prince Frederick Christian von Augustenburg*) he makes the following distinction: “We can thus notice three different epochs or stages, if you will, through which the human being has to pass before he is that for which nature and reason determined him” (Schiller 1983, 62).<sup>18</sup> Also subsumed in this process of human development are the three “theses” mentioned by Dessoir. Schiller (1983, 62) says:

At the first stage, he is nothing but a suffering force. He feels here merely what nature beyond himself will let him feel, and determines himself merely according to what he feels. He feels pleasure because material from outside is given to him, and unpleasure merely because it is not given or is taken from him.<sup>19</sup>

At the second stage, a distancing of the subject from the object occurs:

Whereas need seizes its object directly, contemplation places its object at a distance. Desire destroys its object, contemplation leaves it untouched. The forces of nature, which previously assailed, oppressed and frightened the slave of his sensuality, recede in the course of free contemplation, and space arises between the human being and phenomena.

(Schiller 1983, 62–93)<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the object moves into the distance and allows reflection. Ideally, the following then happens: “Another step further and I act because I acted before, i.e. I want, because I recognized. I elevate concepts to ideas and ideas to practical maxims. Here, at the third stage, I leave sensuality entirely behind me and have ascended to the freedom of pure spirits”

(Schiller 1983, 64).<sup>21</sup> What becomes possible at this final stage, according to Schiller, is general independence from all external objects (Rohrmoser 1983, 314–333). Lipps adapts this staged model to Schiller’s aesthetics. Thus, the relationship he posits begins with the subject, then switches to the object, before finally unifying both spheres in the feeling of the subject.

Schiller’s staged model is not inconsequential for the reception of the artwork. It begins at the same point where Rancière (2008, 44–45) generally situates the previously mentioned “definition of art as a form of life and a form of life’s spontaneous self-development” in Schiller’s aesthetics. For this definition of art, the concept of the three stages worked up in Schiller’s *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung* (*Letters on Aesthetic Education*) is constitutive. Following Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Schiller (2000, 62) transfers the concept to the “ideal figures of a Venus, a Juno, an Apollo, not in Rome but in Greece”. Schiller thus proceeds from the vision of ideal beauty in Greek sculpture. Specifically, his programme on beauty refers to the colossal female head of the Juno Ludovisi, of which a plaster cast was installed in Goethe’s residence on Frauenplan square in Weimar in 1823. This head has a notable presence in the modern period after 1900. For example, postcards are in circulation showing a painting by Otto Rasch of the Juno room (Wahl 2009, 795).

But even in the 1780s, the head was taking centre stage in the art reflection of Weimar classicism. When Goethe remarks in the *Bericht* (*Report*) of April 1788 on his sojourn in Rome, during his Italian journey, that a plaster cast of the Juno Ludovisi is held in the studio of Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, and “none of our contemporaries who steps before her for the first time may claim to be equal to this sight”, he is anticipating Schiller’s conception of a staged model of aesthetics.<sup>22</sup> In fact, it is this female bust that Schiller (2000, 63) holds up in the *Fifteenth Letter* as a paradigm of ideal beauty and the utmost value: “It is neither grace, nor is it dignity that speaks to us from the glorious countenance of a Juno Ludovisi; it is neither of the two because it is both at once”.<sup>23</sup> The gracefulness she emanates and the pre-eminence it confers are unattainable. “As the womanly god craves our worship, the god-like woman ignites our love; but when we utterly succumb to the heavenly loveliness, heavenly self-sufficiency makes us recoil” (Schiller 2000, 63).<sup>24</sup> Schiller, as Ines Kleesattel (2016, 73) shows, sets the artwork analogous to the ideal: “The whole figure rests and resides in itself, a completely closed creation, and as if it were beyond space, without yielding, without resisting; there is no force that struggled with forces, no breach where temporality could break in” (Schiller 2000, 63–64).<sup>25</sup>

Henceforth, determining what is ideally beautiful and, at the same time, valuable in the manner laid out by Schiller becomes an essential prerequisite for the reception of art. The head of the Juno Ludovisi transforms

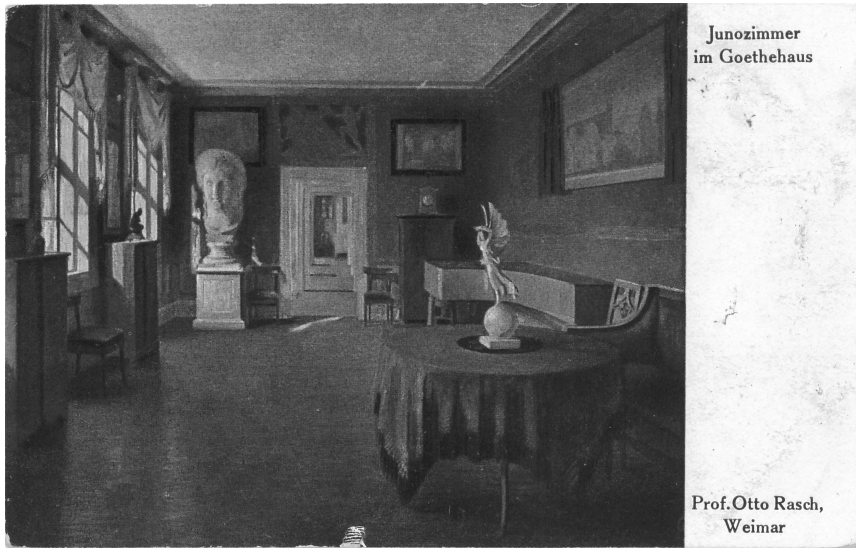


Figure 18.5 Otto Rasch, *Juno's room in Goethe's house on Frauenplan in Weimar*, around 1910, Oil on canvas, Postcard [ran: 1919]

into a model demonstrating what, according to Schiller's aesthetics, occurs upon viewing an artwork. At issue here, according to Rancière (2016, 108), is the principle of polar forces mentioned at the outset: "The dual Schillerian movement of attraction and repulsion – of 'grace' and 'dignity' – becomes the gravitational law of the work itself".<sup>26</sup> Embedded between the beautiful and the valuable, the artwork recedes to a distance. One cannot take possession of it directly. In this situation, there is as much power in beauty as there is in dignity. Once this distance has been created, sensations arise on viewing the artwork which are defined in aesthetics as feelings of pleasure or displeasure (Kant 2009, 51 [B 9]; Allesch 1972; Imorde 2008, 127–141).

### 18.3 Sensual Receptivity versus Aesthetic Form

Schiller's aesthetics provides Lipps with a model, based on which he successfully establishes the connection between his aesthetic empathy and art. Starting out from this model, Worringer develops an aesthetic concept for the art of the modern period, whose criterion is not form but emotional expression (Meyer 2013, 127–137; Silaghi 2013, 65–74). Worringer's book *Abstraction and Empathy* is thus a programmatic counterpart to Hildebrand's tract on *The Problem of Form* (Holdheim 1979, 339–358).

Both publications are canonical to the art discourse of their time. Jutta Müller-Tamm, discussing the influence of Worringer’s book, cites the example of Ernst Bloch’s review of Carl Einstein’s book *Negerplastik* (*Negro Sculpture*). She asserts that Einstein’s affinity with Worringer is manifested in his interpretation of African sculpture in terms of its sensual expression (Müller-Tamm 2005, 286–291). The same is true of Einstein’s volume *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*The Art of the 20th Century*) published by the Propyläen-Verlag in 1926 (Einstein 1988, 278–279). The accent on feeling in Worringer’s work is also emphasized by Eckart von Sydow (1920, 18) in *Die deutsche expressionistische Kultur und Malerei* (*German expressionist culture and painting*): “Whoever feels the new era to be a destiny congruous with itself must contend with Worringer, whose conception of the primitive sense of life is so very different from that of earlier (e.g. Rousseauian) generations”.<sup>27</sup>

One of the contentions points to which discussions continually return in the 1910s and 1920s is indeed whether feeling or form should take precedence in the derivation of art. Given this polarity, it is not surprising that the Lippsian theory of empathy and Worringer’s book were dismissed by some. In 1922, for instance, Liebermann passes comment in the magazine *Kunst und Künstler* (*Art and Artists*) without naming names:

After all, we now read books by professors (or those aspiring to the title, to say nothing of sensationalist scribblers) claiming that art until now has degraded the visual sense to “mechanical reception”, while only the expressionist has put the imaginary image in place of the perceptual image.

(Liebermann 1986, 274–275; Busch 2013, 107)<sup>28</sup>

Accordingly, deduction from form rather than from feeling is constitutive for painting in Liebermann’s view.

Nevertheless, Worringer continues to expand on his aesthetic approach with regard to sensual receptivity, making the case that for empathy with an artwork, specific prerequisites apply. One is that consideration should be given to whether, on appraising an object, one accepts or rejects it: “Lipps calls the former case positive [empathy], the latter, negative empathy” (Worringer 1918, 6).<sup>29</sup> This is the point at which aesthetic empathy connects with the Schillerian view of art: “Apperceptive activity becomes aesthetic enjoyment in the event of positive empathy, in the event of harmony between my natural self-activating tendencies and the activity imposed on me by the sensual objects” (Worringer 1918, 7).<sup>30</sup> In this moment, the recipient attains the state which Schiller (2000, 64) conceives of as emotional distance from the artwork. It is in keeping with this that Worringer, who



follows Lipps, talks about an imposition. Only this allows positive empathy with a painting: “And with regard to the artwork, too, there can only be talk of this positive empathy. That is the basis of the theory of empathy insofar as it has a practical application to the artwork” (Worringer 1918, 7).<sup>31</sup> Worringer thus derives art from the affirmation of an emotion.

Marc’s appreciation of Worringer’s *Abstraction and Empathy* rests on the above groundwork. Herwarth Walden (1917, 19), whose Sturm galleries in Berlin exhibited Marc’s paintings, is also attuned to the aesthetic concept: “The feeling is given shape directly, not indirectly through the figurative. Colour and form as means of conveying feeling are just as direct as sound. The most important artists of this movement are named: Kandinsky, Marc Chagall, Franz Marc, Campendonk, Paul Klee”.<sup>32</sup> Walden thus agrees with Worringer that it is not form but sensual receptivity that is decisive for the genesis of the image. Kandinsky (1973, 21) likewise understands the inwardness of the subject as the artwork’s primary point of origin:

The similarity of inner endeavours in the whole moral-spiritual atmosphere, the striving towards goals that were pursued in the main but later forgotten; that is, the similarity of the inner disposition of an entire period can logically lead to the use of forms that successfully served the same endeavours in a bygone period.<sup>33</sup>

The traditional conception of imitating nature is now related to the analogy with the subject’s feeling (Smid 1983, 606–616). At the same time, Kandinsky regards the “inner disposition” as the sound of emotion. Considering this groundwork, it comes as little surprise when Marc rounds on Max Beckmann. Beckmann initially concedes: “Certainly, on catching sight of a beautiful wallpaper even I may have pleasant, if I wish and happen to be in the mood, even mysterious feelings” (Beckmann 1912, 500).<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, for him the position that painting can be derived from emotional receptivity is indefensible: “But there is a very serious difference between these feelings and those one has in front of a picture” (Beckmann 1912, 500).<sup>35</sup> In contrast, Marc (1912a, 530) rejects any emphasis on form, and asserts with regard to the receptivity of works of art that “our constructive ideas are just about the *opposite of ‘stylisation’*”. The question at issue has nothing to do with a style or a form. Marc argues that the authentic artist has always started from constructive visual ideas, the responsibility for which he attributes to inspiration derived from the inner life:

This is the “great upheaval” – in matters of art, certainly great enough to merit this title; for it means no more and no less than boldly *overturning all that is familiar*. One no longer clings to the natural image,

but rather, *obliterates* it in order to show the powerful laws that hold sway behind the beautiful appearance.

(Marc 1912a, 530–531)<sup>36</sup>

The overturning brought into play by Marc is aimed at the orientation towards that which appeals to sensual receptivity. Accordingly, he serves his adversary, who favours the natural form as the starting point of painting, with a rebuff: “No, Mr Beckmann, quality cannot be recognized from the sheen of the nail or the fine glaze of the oil paint; *quality* denotes the work’s *inner* greatness, which sets it apart from works of imitators and small minds” (Marc 1912b, 556).<sup>37</sup> For Marc, the verdict on the quality of an artwork, with which all analyses of aesthetics begin, springs from the subject’s sensuality.

#### 18.4 Summary

On the same principle as the empathy that is demonstrably relevant to painting in Marc’s circle of *Blauer Reiter* artists, the will is brought into harmony with feeling. The starting point is Schiller’s concept of attraction by formal beauty, with repulsion as the transition to reality. Following this logic, Rancière (2016, 16) shows that the polarity of *poiēsis* and *aisthēsis* as “regimes for identification of the arts” is no longer regulated by out-moded imitation of nature. Henceforth, in keeping with Schiller’s aesthetics, it is reflection and sensation which give rise to the artwork. Within this dialectical relationship, Worringer develops a position that can plausibly apply to the painting of classical modernism. By drawing on Lipps’s aesthetic empathy, he succeeds in formulating a conceptual model that is valid for the painting of that period from the stance of *aisthēsis*.

Hence, his book *Abstraction and Empathy* stands in opposition to Hildebrand’s *The Problem of Form*; the two enter into a dialectical relationship. Any publication keen to engage in the art discourse of the 1910s and 1920s could find no way around the dialectic – between the mode of making-and-doing as an activity of artistic thought and the mode of sensual receptivity – articulated in each. Herein lies the relevance of Worringer’s (building on Lipps’s) aesthetic empathy: it affords the possibility of bringing Schillerian aesthetics up to date to accommodate the tendencies towards artistic abstraction at the *fin de siècle*. With this in mind, the paintings of an artist like Kandinsky show a richly contrasting play of abstract forms and colours with emotive appeal.

As Hugo Zehder (1920, 25) wrote of Kandinsky’s paintings in 1920:

While the will to form in expressionism only really brings the things of the environment to life by “spiritualising” them, by itself conditioning



Figure 18.6 Wassily Kandinsky, *Komposition 2*, 1910, reproduction: Zehder 1920

their essentiality, for Kandinsky colour leads a special life, independent of man, exerting “unconditional” influence on his spirituality.<sup>38</sup>

So Zehder, too, sets himself the task of capturing how the effect of Kandinsky’s painting plays out in time.

The further the work of art distances itself from the tradition of *mimesis*, the more it requires comprehensive reflection with regard to its imagery (Ranci re 2016, 20). Just like the scenes in the *Blauer Reiter* artists’ paintings, painstakingly articulated conceptions of art are subject to fast-moving dynamics. “No sooner have Malevich or Kandinsky declaimed the principle of artistic modernity”, Ranci re (2009, 121) attests, “than there appears the army of Dadaists and Futurists, who overturn the purity of the pictorial surface into its opposite: a jumble of words and forms, forms of art and things of the world”.<sup>39</sup>

## Notes

- 1 “Die Meister dieser Theoretisierung wie Alois Riegl – mit seiner Theorie der organischen Ornamentik – und Wilhelm Worringer – mit seiner Theorie der abstrakten Linie – sind durch eine Reihe von Mi verst ndnissen zu den theoretischen B rgen des Abstraktwerdens der Malerei geworden: als einer Kunst, die einzig darauf abzielt, den Willen – die Idee – des K nstlers durch Symbole auszudr cken, die als Zeichen f r eine innere Notwendigkeit fungieren.”
- 2 “Heute liegen, soweit ich es zu  bersehen vermag, nur zwei Versuche vor, die Grundlagen einer solchen Dogmatik zu schaffen. Einmal das geistreiche Buch von *Wilhelm Worringer*, *Abstraktion und Einf hlung*, das heute die allgemeinste Beachtung verdient und in welchem von einem streng historischen Geiste ein

- Gedankengang niedergeschrieben wurde, der den ängstlichen Gegner der modernen Bewegung einige Beunruhigung verursachen dürfte. Das andere, ‘Über das Geistige in der Kunst’, ist von dem *Maler W. Kandinsky* geschrieben; es enthält Ideen zu einer *Harmonielehre der Malerei*, in der die uns heute faßbaren Gesetze über die Wirkungen von Formen und Farben formuliert werden und zugleich in seinen Bildern die lebendigste Gestalt gewonnen haben”.
- 3 “Es gibt niemanden, den man ihm näherücken könnte, – Gewiß: auch sonst leben und lebten Tiermaler in Hülle und Fülle, kleine und große, – Kröner und Liebermanns”.
  - 4 “Der Verfasser behandelt in einem theoretischen Teil das Problem der Einfühlung und sein Verhältnis zur modernen Aesthetik, namentlich zu Theodor Lipps”. Artur Weese, Gutachten zu Wilhelm Worringer, “Abstraktion und Einfühlung”, 14.08.1906, Personalakte Worringer, Staatsarchiv des Kantons Bern, BB IIIb 624, abgedruckt in: Gramaccini and Rößler 2012, 19.
  - 5 “Der folgende Charakterisierungsversuch gibt die Grundideen der Lippsschen Theorie teilweise wörtlich in den Formulierungen wieder, die ihnen Lipps selbst in einer resümierenden Zusammenfassung seiner Lehre, die er im Januar 1906 in der Zeitschrift ‘Zukunft’ veröffentlichte, gegeben hat”.
  - 6 On this issue, von Sydow has the following to say: “It is astonishing from the very outset that Worringer so very seldom, almost negligently, cites sources to support his claims. From this, one might draw two conclusions, firstly: that his command of the matter is complete down to the last detail and he no longer has any need for legitimating citations. But one could also draw the other conclusion, that perhaps he had no knowledge of the literature at all – thus, that he perhaps merely thought up his theories” (von Sydow 1920, 20).
  - 7 “Die einfachste Formel [...] heisst: Aesthetischer Genuss ist objektiver Selbstgenuss”.
  - 8 “Denn dadurch gelangen wir zum Verständnis jener für uns wichtigen Formel, die uns als Folie für die folgenden Ausführungen dienen soll und die wir deshalb an dieser Stelle wiederholen: Aesthetischer Genuss ist objektiver Selbstgenuss”.
  - 9 “Dass auch das Einfühlungsbedürfnis als Ausgangspunkt des ästhetischen Erlebens im Grunde einen Selbstentäußerungstrieb darstellt, will uns im ersten Augenblick um so weniger einleuchten, als wir noch jene Formel im Ohr haben: ‘Aesthetischer Genuss ist objektiver Selbstgenuss’.”
  - 10 “Die psychische Voraussetzung war also nicht die spielerische banale Freude an der Uebereinstimmung der künstlerischen Darstellung mit dem Objekt derselben, sondern das Bedürfnis, Beglückung zu erfahren durch die geheimnisvolle Macht organischer Form, in der man seinen eigenen Organismus gesteigert geniessen konnte. Kunst war eben objektiver Selbstgenuss.”
  - 11 “Es giebt drei Arten, genauer gesagt, drei Richtungen des Genusses. Ich genieße das eine Mal einen von mir unterschiedenen dinglichen oder sinnlichen Gegenstand, zum Beispiel: den Geschmack einer Frucht. Die zweite Möglichkeit ist die: Ich genieße mich selbst, zum Beispiel: meine Kraft oder meine Geschicklichkeit. Ich fühle mich etwa stolz im Hinblick auf eine That, in der ich solche Kraft oder Geschicklichkeit an den Tag gelegt habe. Zwischen diesen beiden Möglichkeiten aber steht, beide in eigenartiger Weise verbindend, die dritte: Ich genieße mich selbst in einen von mir unterschiedenen sinnlichen Gegenstand. Dieser Art ist der ästhetische Genuß. Er ist objektiver Selbstgenuß.”
  - 12 The basis for objectification is set out in Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*). Seen from that perspective it stands in contrast to the

- judgement of taste. This is aesthetic, not logical, and is thus part of subjectivity. Asked about the objectification of a sensation, this emerges from perception and takes its place at the first stage of the order of representation elaborated by Kant. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, nach der ersten und zweiten Originalausgabe herausgegeben von Jens Timmermann, Hamburg 1998, p. 426, A 320 | B 376. If sensation is understood as objectified emotional life, “it means what is real in an empirical representation” (Kant 2009, 48 [204 | B 4]).
- 13 The passage reads in full: “Rancière legt hinsichtlich einer solchen ‘Bestimmung der Kunst als Lebensform und Form einer spontanen Selbsttherausbildung des Lebens’ dar, dass zu ‘Beginn dieses Verständnisses von Moderne [...] die grundlegende Referenz auf Schillers Konzept der ästhetischen Erziehung des Menschen‘ ausschlaggebend ist”.
  - 14 The passage reads in full: “Mit dieser Ausrichtung der Ästhetik wurde erstmalig die Vorstellung artikuliert, dass Herrschaft und Knechtschaft in erster Linie ontologische Verteilungen sind (Aktivität des Denkens vs. Passivität der sinnlichen Materie).”
  - 15 “Und es wurde ein neutraler Zustand definiert, ein Zustand der doppelten Aufhebung, in dem die Aktivität des Denkens und die sinnliche Empfänglichkeit zu einer einzigen Wirklichkeit und einem neuen Bereich des Seins werden – den des selbständigen Scheins und freien Spiels.”
  - 16 The passage reads in full: “Schon in der Romantik keimt diese Lehre auf” und fügt hinzu: “nun aber gewinnt sie wissenschaftlichen Ausbau”.
  - 17 Faustino Fabbianelli draws attention to the relationship between Lipps’s work and Schiller’s: “and here, in particular, to the aesthetic conception of a Kant or a Schiller. In his discussion of Eugen Kühnemann’s book, *Kants und Schillers Begründung der Ästhetik (Kant’s and Schiller’s Justification of Aesthetics)* (München 1895), Lipps had emphasized the inner convergence of beauty, freedom and morality: In the movement of the line, one is said to experience one’s free action; and the line is said to be beautiful, because the freedom in it “is delightful.” “The freely acting personality, meaning inwardly free, is the highest, its value the value of all values. One piece of this value resides in the line, as in every thing of beauty. The line, like every thing of beauty, is the symbol of something moral” (Fabbianelli 2018, 712).
  - 18 “Wir können also drei verschiedene Epochen oder Grade, wenn man will, bemerken, die der Mensch zu durchwandern hat, ehe er das ist, wozu Natur und Vernunft ihn bestimmten.”
  - 19 “Auf der ersten Stufe ist er nichts als eine leidende Kraft. Er empfindet hier bloß, was die Natur außer ihm ihn empfinden lassen will, und bestimmt sich bloß, je nachdem er empfindet. Er empfindet Lust, weil ihm von außen Stoff gegeben wird, und Unlust bloß weil ihm nicht gegeben, oder weil ihm genommen wird.”
  - 20 “Wenn das Bedürfnis seinen Gegenstand unmittelbar ergreift, so rückt die Betrachtung den ihrigen in die Ferne. Die Begierde zerstört ihren Gegenstand, die Betrachtung berührt ihn nicht. Die Naturkräfte, welche vorher drückend und beängstigend auf den Sklaven der Sinnlichkeit eindringen, weichen bei der freien Kontemplation zurück, und es wird Raum zwischen dem Menschen und den Erscheinungen.”
  - 21 “Noch eine Stufe weiter, und ich handle, weil ich handelte, d. i. ich will, weil ich erkannte. Ich erhebe Begriffe zu Ideen und Ideen zu praktischen Maximen. Hier auf der dritten Stufe lasse ich die Sinnlichkeit ganz hinter mir zurück, und habe mich zu der Freiheit reiner Geister erhoben.”
  - 22 In 1788, Goethe writes an entry in the *Italienische Reise (Italian Journey)* describing the studio of Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, where he took

lodgings during his second stay in Rome. “This new apartment now afforded the opportunity to set out a number of plaster casts, which had gradually amassed around us, in a pleasing order and good light, and only now did this most worthy possession come to be enjoyed. If, as is the case in Rome, one is constantly in the presence of works of sculpture by the artists of antiquity, one feels oneself, as in the presence of nature, faced with something eternal, inscrutable. [...] The first place among us is claimed by Juno Ludovisi, all the more highly esteemed and revered given that one glimpsed the original only seldom, only by chance, and had to count oneself fortunate to have it permanently on view, for none of our contemporaries who steps before her for the first time may claim to be equal to this sight” (Goethe 1921, 177–178).

- 23 “Es ist weder Anmuth noch ist es Würde, was aus dem herrlichen Antlitz einer Juno Ludovisi zu uns spricht; es ist keines von beyden, weil es beydes zugleich ist.”
- 24 “Indem der weibliche Gott unsre Anbetung heischt, entzündet das gottgleiche Weib unsre Liebe; aber indem wir uns der himmlischen Holdseligkeit aufgelöst hingeben, schreckt die himmlische Selbstgenügsamkeit uns zurück.”
- 25 “In sich selbst ruhet und wohnt die ganze Gestalt, eine völlig geschlossene Schöpfung, und als wenn sie jenseits des Raumes wäre, ohne Nachgeben, ohne Widerstand; da ist keine Kraft, die mit Kräften kämpfte, keine Blöße, wo die Zeitlichkeit einbrechen könnte.”
- 26 “Die doppelte Schiller’sche Bewegung der Anziehung und der Abstoßung – der ‘Anmut’ und der ‘Würde’ – wird zum Gravitationsgesetz des Werks selbst.”
- 27 “Wer die neue Zeit als sich gemäßes Schicksal fühlt, muß sich mit Worringer auseinandersetzen, dessen Auffassung des primitiven Lebensgefühls eine so ganz andere ist, als die früherer (etwa Rousseau’scher) Generationen.”
- 28 “Lesen wir doch in Büchern von Professoren (oder solchen, die es werden wollen, ganz zu schweigen von den sensationslüsternen Skribifaxen), daß die bisherige Kunst das Sehen zu einer ‘mechanischen Aufnahme’ herabgewürdigt hätte, während erst der Expressionist an die Stelle des Wahrnehmungsbildes das Vorstellungsbild gestellt hätte.”
- 29 “Jenen Sachverhalt nennt Lipps die positive, diesen die negative Einfühlung.”
- 30 “Zum ästhetischen Genuss wird die apperzeptive Tätigkeit im Falle der positiven Einfühlung, im Falle des Einklangs meiner natürlichen Tendenzen der Selbstbetätigung mit der mir von dem sinnlichen Objekte zugemuteten Tätigkeit.”
- 31 “Und von dieser positiven Einfühlung kann auch dem Kunstwerk gegenüber nur die Rede sein. Hier ist die Basis der Einfühlungstheorie, soweit sie auf das Kunstwerk ihre praktische Anwendung findet.”
- 32 “Das Gefühl wird unmittelbar zur Gestaltung gebracht, nicht mittelbar durch das Gegenständliche. Farbe und Form sind als Mittel der Gefühlsgestaltung ebenso unmittelbar wie der Ton. Die entscheidenden Künstler dieser Bewegung heißen: Kandinsky, Marc Chagall, Franz Marc, Campendonk, Paul Klee”.
- 33 “Die Ähnlichkeit der inneren Bestrebungen in der ganzen moralisch-geistigen Atmosphäre, das Streben zu Zielen, die im Hauptgrunde schon verfolgt, aber später vergessen wurden, also die Ähnlichkeit der inneren Stimmung einer ganzen Periode kann logisch zur Anwendung der Formen führen, die erfolgreich in einer vergangenen Periode denselben Bestrebungen dienten.”
- 34 “Gewiß, auch ich kann beim Anblick einer schönen Tapete angenehme, wenn ich will und gerade in der Stimmung bin, auch mysteriöse Gefühle haben.”
- 35 “Aber es ist ein sehr erster Unterschied zwischen diesen Gefühlen und denen, die man vor einem Bilde hat.”
- 36 “Dies ist die ‘große Umwälzung’ – in Dingen der Kunst, allerdings groß genug, um diesen Titel zu verdienen; denn es bedeutet nicht mehr und nicht weniger

- als die kühne *Umkehr alles Gewohnten*. Man hängt *nicht mehr am Naturbilde*, sondern *vernichtet* es, um die mächtigen Gesetze, die hinter dem schönen Scheine walten, zu zeigen.”
- 37 “Nein, Herr Beckmann, Qualität erkennt man nicht am Glanz des Nagels oder am schönen Schmelz der Ölfarbe; mit *Qualität* bezeichnet man die *innere* Größe des Werkes, durch die es sich von Werken der Nachahmer und kleinen Geister unterscheidet.”
- 38 “Während für den Formwillen des Expressionismus die Dinge der Umwelt erst dadurch wirklich Leben erhalten, daß er sie ‘vergeistigt’, ihre Wesenheit durch sich bedingt, führt für Kandinsky die Farbe ein Sonderleben, unabhängig vom Menschen, auf dessen Geistigkeit, unbedingten’ Einfluß ausübend”.
- 39 “Kaum haben Malewitsch oder Kandinsky das Prinzip der künstlerischen Moderne verkündet, da erscheint auch schon die Armee der Dadaisten und Futuristen, die die Reinheit der pikturalen Fläche in ihr Gegenteil umkehren: in ein Durcheinander aus Worten und Formen, aus den Formen der Kunst und den Dingen der Welt.” I would like to thank Deborah Shannon, Berlin, for the careful translation.

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