3
PHENOMENOLOGY, EMPATHY, AND MINDREADING

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Recent years have witnessed an upsurge of interest in and work on empathy in many different disciplines, including philosophy, cognitive science, developmental psychology, social neuroscience, anthropology, nursing, and primatology. Despite all the work being done, there is still no firm agreement about what precisely empathy is or how it might relate to or differ from motor mimicry, emotional contagion, imaginative projection, perspective taking, and sympathy. One attempt to map out some of the central options has been provided by Battaly (2011). According to her reconstruction, the three main positions are as follows:

1. Some conceive of empathy as a sharing of mental states, where sharing is taken to mean that the empathizer and the target must have roughly the same type of mental state. On this account, empathy does not involve knowledge about the other; it does not require knowing that the other has the mental state in question. Various forms of contagion and mimicry consequently count as prime examples of empathy.

2. Others argue that empathy requires both sharing and knowing. It is consequently not enough that there is a match between the mental state of the empathizer and the target; the empathizer must also cognitively assign or ascribe the mental state to the target. Insofar as empathy on this account requires some cognitive grasp and some self-other differentiation, low-level simulation like mimicry and contagion are insufficient for empathy.

3. Finally, there are those who emphasize the cognitive dimension and argue that empathy doesn’t require sharing, but that it simply refers to any process by means of which one comes to know the other’s mental state, regardless of how theoretical or inferential the process might be.

If empathy is supposed to be the label for a distinctive accomplishment, if it is supposed to constitute a distinct kind of interpersonal understanding rather than simply collapse into either emotional contagion or standard mindreading, it seems advisable to stay clear of both 1 and 3. But should we adopt 2, or might there be other options available, or should we perhaps abandon the attempt to reach a clear-cut definition, since it will inevitably amount to nothing but
a terminological stipulation? Given how technical a term “empathy” is, and given how recently the term was coined and introduced into the scientific debate, it certainly doesn’t seem particularly promising to appeal to ordinary usage when trying to reach a satisfactory definition.

One obvious move that is surprisingly rarely made, however, is to revisit the initial philosophical and psychological debate on empathy that took place during the first decades of the twentieth century. Were one to do so, it would quickly become clear that the term was used somewhat differently than is the case today. Lipps, who co-opted the term Einfühlung (which Titchener then proceeded to translate as empathy) from the field where it was originally introduced, namely aesthetics, insisted that empathy constituted a modality of knowledge sui generis. He argued that there are three distinct domains of knowledge: 1) knowledge of external objects, 2) self-knowledge, and 3) knowledge of others, and he took these domains to have three distinct cognitive sources, namely perception, introspection, and empathy (Lipps 1909, p. 222). The initial discussion of empathy was consequently quite epistemologically oriented, and motivated by a preoccupation with the problem of other minds and by a rejection of the argument from analogy. In the wake of Lipps’s investigation, a number of phenomenologists, including Scheler, Stein, Husserl, Wältcher and Gurwitsch, engaged in further discussions regarding the nature and structure of empathy. Whereas they accepted the idea that empathy must be equated with a basic and quite fundamental form of other-understanding, they were more critical of Lipps’s own positive proposal and rejected various attempts to explain empathy in terms of mirroring, mimicry, or imitation. As pointed out by the phenomenologists, whereas the latter processes might explain how and why I come to have a certain experience myself, they do not explain how I come to understand the other. For someone to have a feeling herself and for someone to empathically understand that another has a feeling are two quite different things (Gurwitsch 1979, pp. 24–5). Ultimately, the phenomenologists did not merely dismiss the proposal that imitation is sufficient for empathic understanding. They also questioned whether it was necessary. On a more positive note, the phenomenologists took empathy to be a perceptually based experience of foreign consciousness that more complex and indirect forms of social cognition presuppose as well as rely on.

1. What is empathy for?

Let me, in the following, try to further articulate and elaborate the phenomenological approach to empathy (by partially drawing on points that I have made in the past, cf. Zahavi 2010, 2011, 2014a, and 2014b). I will start elsewhere, however, namely by discussing a proposal by Joel Smith (2015). Smith’s proposal is quite representative of a certain way of discussing empathy. It exemplifies the second option listed by Battaly and it can serve as a useful contrast to the position I am aiming to articulate and defend.

In his article “What is empathy for?” Smith defends the view that empathy, rather than being a psychological process or phenomenon, is an epistemic state or achievement that can be attained in various ways. Indeed, many different psychological processes might feed into and be recruited by empathy, which then “allows us to know how others feel” (Smith 2015, p. 1). More specifically, Smith argues that empathy involves sharing in another’s affective state (Smith 2015, p. 4), and insists that two distinctive steps are needed in order for this sharing to occur. On the one hand, the empathizer must know that the target is in a certain affective state. But simply knowing that the target is in an affective state doesn’t yet tell A how it feels for B to be in the state in question. In order for that to be possible, A must also know first-personally how it feels to be in the affective state in question. Smith consequently offers the following definition of empathy:
A empathises with B if and only if (1) A is consciously aware that B is $\psi$, (2) A is consciously aware of what being $\psi$ feels like, (3) On the basis of (1) and (2), A is consciously aware of how B feels.

(Smith 2015, p. 5)

It is an important part of Smith’s proposal that the first condition can be met in a number of different ways. One might know that B is $\psi$ by being told so, by inferring it from other things that one believes about B, by simulating B and attributing to her the output, or simply by seeing that B is $\psi$. As for the second condition, Smith also allows for some variation. A might be acquainted with the feel of $\psi$, either by currently being in $\psi$, or by currently remembering a previous occasion where A was in $\psi$. In some cases, imagination might play the required role: one might be acquainted with the feel of $\psi$ in virtue of the fact that one is imaginatively representing oneself as being in the state. It might even be possible to empathize with B’s being $\psi$ even if A has never been in $\psi$, namely insofar as A simply is, or has been, in some state that affectively matches $\psi$, for instance, a state of a similar kind. Furthermore, similarity of content is not a requirement. So if B is worried about the likelihood of a nuclear catastrophe, and A in the past has been worried about the fact that her parents will once die, a sufficient affective match might be in place. “Thus, even if A is not, and has never been, in exactly the same psychological state as B, she may nevertheless be, or have been, in a state that affectively matches it at some level of determinacy” (Smith 2015, p. 7). The greater the level of determinacy, the greater the match, the more A can be said to empathize with B, the more A will know how B feels (Smith 2015, p. 7) (see Chapter 13, “Empathy and knowing what it’s like” in this volume).

To sum up, on Smith’s proposal (as well as on many others’, including, for instance, de Vignemont and Jacob (2012)), empathy involves sharing (and some amount of projection), it is restricted to affective states, and it has no foundational role to play in social cognition. As will become apparent in a moment, the phenomenological approach to empathy rejects all these claims.

2. Empathy and sharing

One significant problem with the widespread suggestion that empathy involves a sharing of affects (see also Decety and Lamm 2006, Preston 2007, Pfeifer and Dapretto 2009) is that people rarely define what they mean by sharing. Often all they mean is that empathy involves similar or isomorphic affective states in empathizer and target. But does that really amount to sharing? I think a moment’s reflection ought to make it clear that the answer must be no. The fact that two individuals each have their own token of the same type of affective state does not make them share an affective state. The individuals in question might be completely unaware of each other and might simply have similar affective states out of pure coincidence. However, as defenders of the view might insist, in empathy surely the situation is different. Here the empathizer is precisely aware of the target and that is enough to convert similarity into sharing proper. But this reply is not convincing. Empathy can obviously be one-sided. A can empathize with B without B being aware of this. Sharing proper, however, arguably requires reciprocity. If you regularly borrow my car without my knowledge, we are not sharing the car. To claim that I am (aware of) sharing one of your emotions, while denying that you are (aware of) sharing one of mine, is equally problematic. Consider, by comparison, recent work on shared or joint attention. There is widespread consensus that joint attention is not simply a question of two unrelated people simultaneously looking at the same thing,
nor is it simply a question of gaze following or gaze alternation. For joint attention to occur, the attentional focus of two persons (or more) shouldn’t merely run in parallel, it must be joint in the sense of being shared, i.e., its occurrence must be mutually manifest to the co-attenders (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986). This is precisely what makes joint attention quite unlike any kind of experience one might have on one’s own. The emphasis here is clearly on the importance of bi-directionality and reciprocity for sharing (for a more extensive argument, cf. Zahavi & Rochat 2015).

What then about mere similarity? Is that a crucial requirement for empathy? As is also evident from Smith’s account, the decisive difficulty concerns the question of how specific the match between empathizer and target must be in order to count as sufficiently similar. After all, everything resembles everything else in some respect. To claim that I can empathize with someone who is distressed because of the death of her two-year-old Spanish Timbrado or with someone who is suffering because of an attack of biliary colic, only if I have been distressed over the loss of the same kind of bird or undergone a gallbladder attack with the same kind of intensity in the past is hardly convincing. By contrast, to claim that I can only empathize with a minded creature if I have a mind myself seems eminently plausible, but also rather trivial. If the account is to say something plausible, yet nontrivial, it must position itself somewhere in between these two extremes. The question is where. Must the empathizer feel (or have felt or in principle be able to feel) the exact same kind of emotion or sensation, say, mortification or nausea? Is it enough if the empathizer is first-personally acquainted with a member of the same family of emotions, or might it be sufficient that the empathizer has simply had (or is in principle able to have) an emotion with the same kind of valence? The less specific the demand is, the more plausible the account might be (see also Chapter 2, “Affective empathy”). But obviously, this increase of plausibility goes hand in hand with a decrease in explanatory power. In any case, the belief that having experienced a life event oneself will give one more insight into another person’s similar life experience is widespread, but might be unwarranted. Empirical research suggests that people with similar life experiences, such as childbirth and parental divorce, are not always more accurate at determining how another feels in the same situation compared to those without such experience. In some cases, having had the experience oneself might have a negative impact on one’s ability to recognize that the other feels differently about x than oneself did (cf. Hodges 2005).

One implication of Smith’s proposal is that empathy cannot provide us with knowledge of what it feels like to undergo new kinds of experiences, experiences we have not had ourselves. Indeed, contrary to Smith’s claim, empathy cannot really give us new experiential knowledge; it does not allow me to recognize anything in the other that is new, anything with which I am not already familiar. It shares this limitation with other projective accounts of empathy. But is this a plausible outcome, or does it have, as Scheler once observed, as little merit as the claim that we can never come to understand something new, but only that which we have already experienced before? In some cases, this is undoubtedly true. The only way to know what it is like to taste elderberry syrup or smoked salmon is to try it oneself. But can one generalize from what holds true in the case of gustatory sensations to all phenomenal experiences or would such a generalization fail to do justice to the intuition that empathy can in fact expand our life and lead us beyond the confines of our own actual experiences (cf. Scheler 2008, pp. 46, 49)? Is it really true that one cannot empathize with, say, parents who have lost their only child, unless one had oneself in the past gone through such an ordeal or at least engaged in an explicit act of imagination to that effect?
Phenomenology, empathy, and mindreading

As we saw, for Smith our understanding that the other is in a given state can be achieved in a number of ways. However different they might be (perceptual, inferential, testimonial, etc.), none of them can provide us with knowledge of how it feels like for the other to be in the state in question. How plausible is that claim? When seeing the other’s anger, exhaustion, frustration, admiration, or joy, am I then really merely registering or detecting that the other is in some mental state while having no clue about what it is like for him or her to be in that state? Compare and contrast also the two following situations:

1) You enter your friend’s home, discover that he has torn up all the letters from his ex-wife, and infer that he is anguished and distressed about his recent divorce.

2) You are together with your friend, when he suddenly breaks down and tells you about his divorce. You see his anguish and distress in his pained countenance.

How plausible is it to claim that both situations are alike in only providing you with knowledge that your friend is anguished and distressed? How plausible is it to claim that the face-to-face encounter in and of itself provides you with no information of how (or what) it is like for your friend to be in the affective state in question? How plausible is it to claim that that encounter provides you with no appreciation of the qualitative and hedonic character of the other’s phenomenal state, and that your only access to that dimension is by somehow living through the state first-personally (be it online or offline)? Even if you have no children of your own, might spending time together with a couple who is bereaving the loss of their son not give you an understanding of what that is like; an understanding that is far more powerful than anything you might accomplish by means of certain feats of imagination?

3. Empathy and social cognition

One of the controversies in the empathy debate concerns the role that empathy plays in social cognition. Whereas some have argued that mindreading is an extended form of empathy (Goldman 2006, p. 4), and that empathy “is relevant when accounting for all aspects of behaviour enabling us to establish a meaningful link between others and ourselves” (Gallese 2001, p. 43), others have ascribed a far more modest role to empathy. On Smith’s proposal, empathy is obviously not what establishes awareness of the other person’s mental life in the first place. Rather, empathy requires a prior understanding of the other’s mind in order to get off the ground, and is then supposed to allow for an enhanced understanding of the other’s affective state. Over the years, empathy has been defined in various ways, just as many different types of empathy have been distinguished, including mirror empathy, motor empathy, affective empathy, perceptually mediated empathy, reenactive empathy, and cognitive empathy, to mention just a few of the options available. If Smith wants to use the term the way he does, he is, of course, free to do so, but it is striking how different his use is from the way the term was originally introduced and defined by early empathy theorists. Indeed, it might not be an exaggeration to say that we are dealing with a radical change in the meaning and use of the term.

One remaining commonality, however, is the idea that empathy somehow allows for a unique experiential understanding of others. But what is meant by “experiential understanding” differs dramatically. Consider, for example, Coplan, who has recently argued that empathy is a complex imaginative process through which the observer simulates another’s situated psychological
states, while maintaining clear self-other differentiation (Coplan 2011, p. 40). What, then, is the deliverance of empathy? Here is what Coplan writes:

this process is the only one that can provide experiential understanding of another person, or understanding of another from the “inside.” It is in virtue of its ability to provide this type of first-person access to another, however imperfect, that empathy is a unique and invaluable process – and one worth our attention.  

(Coplan 2011, p. 58)

But why should an act of imagination, even one that specifically accomplishes an other-oriented perspective taking (Coplan 2011, p. 54), provide for an experiential understanding of another person? Would we not normally insist on the difference between imagining a traffic accident and experiencing a traffic accident? In reply, it could be argued that although that difference does make good sense in our own case, it is far less obvious that it makes sense when it comes to our understanding of other people. Any convincing account of our understanding of others must respect the fact that we do not have the same kind of access to the minds of others that we have to our own, it must respect the asymmetry between self-ascription and other-ascription of mental states, it must respect that I do not have first-personal access to the minds of others. Since we cannot experience other people’s mental states, the closest we can get to an experiential understanding of the other is by engaging in a particular kind of imaginative other-oriented perspective taking. But it is precisely this line of reasoning that the phenomenological account of empathy calls into question.

One useful way to pinpoint the difference in question is by briefly looking at the distinction between emotional contagion and empathy. One popular move in the more recent empathy literature has been to insist that one of the important distinctions between emotional contagion and empathy is that whereas the former is “self-centered,” the latter is “other-centered” (cf. de Vignemont 2009). The other-centered character of empathy is then often cashed out with reference to the target of ascription. In emotional contagion as well as in empathy, the subject is living through the experience first-personally, the only difference being that in the former case, the experience is self-ascribed, whereas in the latter case, it is other-ascribed. The phenomenological approach views matters differently, and insists that we also have to factor in the other-centered givenness of the empathically grasped experience. Although the very experience of empathizing is given first-personally to the empathizer, the object or target of the act of empathy is not given first-personally to the empathizer, but is precisely given as an experience that is lived through first-personally by the other. It is, as Stein would say, located in the other and not in myself (Stein 1989, pp. 10–11). This is, of course, why phenomenologists have standardly rejected proposals according to which empathy should entail that the other’s experience is literally transmitted to me, or at least require me to undergo the same kind of experience that I observe in the other (say, being sad that you are sad). Both proposals miss what is distinctive about empathy, and conflate empathy with emotional contagion and sympathy. To empathically experience, say, the emotion of another necessarily differs from the way you would experience the emotion if it were your own. In empathy, you are confronted with the presence of an experience that you are not living through yourself. If I empathize with your sadness, I have a sense of what it is like for you to be sad without being sad myself; I lack first-personal access to the sadness in question.

This might sound more mysterious than it really is. When insisting that empathy is what allows me to experience other experiencing subjects, and that we as a consequence do not
Phenomenology, empathy, and mindreading

exclusively have to rely on and employ internal simulations or imaginative projections, the idea is not to deny that second- (and third-) person access to psychological states differ from first-person access. The idea is rather to insist that it is a mistake to restrict and equate experiential access with first-person access. It is, to put it differently, possible to experience mental states in more than one way. Noticing a bottle of painkillers next to his bedside together with an empty glass of water and concluding that he is in pain is an example of knowing indirectly or by way of inference (Bennett & Hacker 2003, pp. 89, 93). By contrast, there is no more direct way of knowing that another is in pain than seeing him writhe in pain. Moreover, the fact that my experiential access to the minds of others differs from my experiential access to my own mind is not an imperfection or shortcoming. On the contrary, this difference is constitutional. It is precisely because of this difference, precisely because of this asymmetry, that we can claim that the minds we experience are other minds (cf. Husserl 1950, p. 139).

Just as what is past can be originally given as past only through memory, and what is to come in the future can as such only be originally given through expectation, the foreign can only be originally given as foreign through empathy. Original givenness in this sense is the same as experience.

(Husserl 1959, p. 176)

We might phrase this by saying that empathy provides a special kind of knowledge by acquaintance. It is not the standard first-person acquaintance, but rather a distinct other-acquaintance. Rather than blurring the distinction between self and other, rather than leading to some sense of merged personal identities (Cialdini et al. 1997), the asymmetry between self-experience and other-experience is quite crucial for empathy, at least according to the phenomenologists. When Coplan writes that the concept of empathy has not figured prominently in those discussions of intersubjectivity within Continental philosophy that have stressed the difference between self and others (Coplan 2011, p. 59), she is consequently mistaken.

When saying that empathy can provide a special kind of experiential understanding, this is not meant to suggest that empathy provides an especially profound or deep kind of understanding. In order to obtain that, theoretical inferences and imaginative simulations might very well be needed. No, the specificity of the access is due to the fact that it is basic and intuitive, i.e., the empathized experience is given directly as existing here and now. In short, there is a difference between empathically experiencing that another person is angry, and assuming or believing or inferring that another is angry. Just as we ought to consider the difference between thinking about a lion, imagining a lion, and seeing a lion, we also ought to acknowledge the difference between thinking about Anton’s compassion or sadness, imagining in detail what it must be like for him to be compassionate or sad, and being empathically acquainted with his compassion or sadness in the direct face-to-face encounter. In the latter case, our acquaintance with Anton’s experiential life has a directness and immediacy to it that is not possessed by whatever beliefs I might have about him in his absence.

This proposal is not committed to the view that everything is open to view or that others are totally transparent. The claim is not that every aspect of the mental life of others is directly accessible, but merely that we can be experientially acquainted with some aspects of the mental life of others. It has been argued that such a claim is hugely controversial in that it commits one to some form of behaviorism (Jacob 2011, p. 531). I have discussed the relation between experience and expressivity and rejected this criticism elsewhere (Zahavi 2014b), so let me here merely point out that the notion of social perception has gained popularity and been defended by philosophers coming from a variety of different traditions in recent years (cf. Rudd...

On the present proposal, there is no reason to delimit our empathic understanding to affective states. On the contrary, it is possible to empathize with the cognitive, affective, and conative experiences of the other, i.e., with his or her beliefs, perceptions, feelings, passions, volitions, desires, and intentions. After all, empathy concerns our general ability to access the life of the mind of others in their expressions, expressive behavior, and meaningful actions. Although Wittgenstein does not employ the term “empathy” in the following quote, what he is describing is precisely what the phenomenologists had in mind when they were discussing empathy:

“I see that the child wants to touch the dog, but doesn’t dare.” How can I see that? Is this description of what is seen on the same level as a description of moving shapes and colours? Is an interpretation in question? Well, remember that you may also mimic a human being who would like to touch something, but doesn’t dare.

(Wittgenstein 1980, Section 1066)

We can see the other’s elation or doubt, surprise or attentiveness in his or her face, we can hear the other’s trepidation, impatience, or bewilderment in her voice, feel the other’s enthusiasm in his handshake, grasp his mood in his posture, and see her determination and persistence in her actions. Thus, we certainly also express or manifest our mental states by acting on them. My fear or concern is not merely revealed to others in my facial expressions, but also in my running away from what terrifies me or in my attempts to console somebody who is grieving. When I experience the facial expressions or meaningful actions of another person, I am experiencing aspects of his or her psychological life, and not merely imagining it, simulating it, or theorizing about it. As Husserl writes, the mind of the other, his thinking, feeling, desiring, is intuitively present in the gestures, the intonation, and in the facial expressions. The expressivity of the other is imbued with psychological meaning from the start, and it is empathy that allows us to understand and grasp this psychological meaning (Husserl 1952, pp. 235, 244).

One implication (and limitation) of this account is that highlighting and emphasizing the intuitive character of empathy also restricts it to face-to-face based forms of interpersonal encounter. Importantly, this does not mean that empathy is necessarily restricted to dyadic relationships. It might very well be possible to empathize with a group, say, a mourning family. However, on many other accounts, and this is also reflected in colloquial speech, it makes good sense to say that we can also empathize with individuals or groups of people not present, and even with fictional characters. For the phenomenologists such uses of the term must at the very least be considered derivative. Moreover, any claim to the effect that, say, people in Copenhagen felt empathy with the Syrian refugees in Hungary might be problematic in that it blurs the distinction not only between empathy understood as a perception-based direct acquaintance with the minds of others and some kind of imaginative projection or theoretical inference, but also between empathy and sympathy. Thus, one should obviously also not overlook that the present proposal does not support or accord with the idea that empathy is per se morally significant and basically equivalent with compassion (see Chapter 21, “Empathy and moral responsibility”).

In arguing for the difference between emotional contagion and empathy, Coplan has insisted that emotional contagion in contrast to empathy is a bottom-up or outside-in process. It is involuntary, it does not require any deliberate effort or higher-level processing such as imagination. It gets triggered by direct sensory engagement with another person expressing an emotion, and consequently requires a direct perception of the other (Coplan 2011, p. 46). On the phenomenological account, these features are very much features characterizing basic empathy,
and this is what makes empathy different from other, more mediated forms of mindreading. So what would then on this account be the relation between empathy and mindreading? There are two different possibilities. The first would be to simply define empathy as faced-based mindreading. It is no coincidence that some of the recent work on phenomenology of empathy has been presented in the framework of the direct social perception debate (cf. Zahavi 2011). The other option would be to say that empathy is more basic and fundamental than mindreading proper. The coherence of this proposal obviously depends on what one understands by mindreading. On one popular proposal, mindreading involves the employment of a theory of mind and refers to our ability to attribute mental states to others, where these states are conceived of as unobservable, theoretical posits, invoked to explain and predict behavior in roughly the same way as physicists appeal to electrons and quarks in order to predict and explain observable phenomena. According to this usage, mindreading qua mental state attribution is a skill that has to be acquired just as we need to learn how to read texts (since there is no intrinsic or natural connection between the psychologically meaningful mental states and what is perceptually available). Given such a usage, empathy could be seen as immediate and direct form of social understanding (involving sensitivity to the animacy, agency, and emotional expressivity of others) any attempt to explain or predict the other’s mental states and behaviors relies on and presuppose.

In the developmental literature, it is fairly uncontroversial that infants manifest an essentially innate sensitivity to social stimuli, that there is already an early form of intersubjectivity at play from around two months of age, where the infant has a sense of reciprocity with others, and that the “echoing of affects, feelings and emotions that takes place in reciprocal interaction between young infants and their caretakers” is a “necessary element to the development of more advanced social cognition, including theory of mind” (Rochat & Striano 1999, p. 8). Not surprisingly, however, a debate has sprung up regarding whether it might be possible to explain some of the findings in a more parsimonious way, i.e., in a way that doesn’t ascribe any mindreading capacities to the infant. Perhaps the infant is merely very good at behavior-reading, i.e., sensitive to observable behavior and capable of reasoning about such behavior (for instance in a way that allows it to predict and anticipate certain outcomes) (Apperly 2011, p. 151). However, this dispute about whether infants are really mindreading or merely behavior-reading seems premised on the assumption that the former necessarily involves referring to purely interior and private states, i.e., states that are not visible in meaningful actions and expressive behavior. Given such a concept of mentality, there are good reasons to believe that children will only be able to master the capacity at a relatively late stage. But the obvious and crucial question is why one would want to opt for such a narrow, mentalistic understanding of the mind in the first place. Phenomenologists have in general taken an embodied approach to questions of intersubjectivity and interpersonal understanding. We begin from the recognition that the body of the other presents itself quite differently than any other physical entity, and accordingly that our perception of the other’s bodily presence is unlike our perception of ordinary physical objects. I would consequently suggest that a more fortuitous route to explore is one that takes us beyond the dichotomy of behavior-reading and mindreading (cf. Sinigaglia 2008), and ultimately dispenses with the whole reading imagery. Moving beyond that dichotomy changes the nature of the challenge. The decisive question is no longer how to bridge the gap between visible but mindless behavior and invisible but disembodied mentality, but to understand the link between early forms of perceptually grounded empathy and more sophisticated forms of interpersonal understanding. To understand this link might itself pose many challenges, but to adopt a terminology from philosophy of mind, the challenges would belong to the easy problems, rather than the hard problem, of social cognition. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the problem of knowing how
I can come to understand the other is infinitely less difficult to solve, if the other is understood primarily as an intentional comportment in the world, as a way of intending and grasping the world that surrounds us, than if she is understood as a radically alien psyche (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 117).

I hope it has by now become clear why the proposal I have outlined, a proposal that dates back to the earliest discussion of and debates on empathy, differs from the three main positions outlined by Battaly. On the phenomenological reading, empathy doesn’t involve sharing, but nor is it merely just any kind of mindreading. Empathy is rather a form of “expressive understanding” that requires bodily proximity, and which allows for a distinct experiential grasp of and access to the other’s psychological life.

Given the early and formative discussion of empathy, one might wonder whether one should not simply argue that the contemporary understanding and use of the notion is mistaken: it departs too radically from the original meaning of the term, which is the meaning to which we ought to return. This is, however, not a strategy I propose or endorse. To that extent, my main concern is not to argue that the classical phenomenological analysis of empathy is the right one. My point is rather that the phenomenological discussion of empathy – regardless of whether or not it de facto targets what we today would label empathy – contains various important insights regarding the foundations of social cognition that contemporary research on the topic ought to incorporate. For one, this analysis can offer a corrective to the widespread ‘ invisibility assumption’ in the theory of mind literature, i.e., the assumption that other minds are concealed and hidden (cf. Johnson 2000, p. 22; Saxe, Carey, & Kanwisher 2004, p. 87).

References


Phenomenology, empathy, and mindreading


