

EMPATHY AND ETHICS*

Kathleen M. Haney
University of Houston-Downtown

Despite the prevalent opinion that the transcendental mode must remain ineluctably solipsistic, two areas of phenomenological research, empathy and ethics, hold some interest for social philosophy. I would like to reflect on some of the developments in phenomenological theory on these topics. I shall concentrate on their theoretical implications and their practical ramifications. Although empathy is necessary to develop the linguistic sense which distinguishes humans from other animals and continuously plays an essential role in human communication and relations, discussion of empathy in the philosophic literature is scanty. Yet, empathy functions to deliver the lived worlds of others, private worlds no longer.

Empathy, as derived sensitivity, has its place in philosophic concern as an essential ingredient in ethical thinking. Neither the Kantian prohibition against using others as means nor the possibility of knowing the other can be intelligible without an operative notion of empathy. The topic of this paper is a philosophic discussion of empathy. I have argued elsewhere that Husserl's account, in the fifth of his *Cartesian Meditations*, of the constitution of the other as other subject, an "other mind", is persuasive.¹ That very technical issue in Husserlian scholarship can be overlooked for the purposes of this paper. Likewise, the positivistic analogue, the problem of other minds, is not to our issue. Rather, let us begin with this statement from the second volume of Husserl's *Ideas*.

Given *eo ipso* with the act of apperceiving something as human is also the possibility of mutual relations, communication, between man and man. Then also the identity of nature for all men and animals. Given furthermore are the more simple and more complex social connections, friendships, marriages, unions; these are connections instituted between men²

Husserlian phenomenology begins with the fact of communication with other minds and asks how it is possible? The faculty of empathy allows me insight into the other's life which I cannot achieve in any direct evidence. I cannot feel the other's toothache or see the color red through his eyes. Nevertheless, I have empathetic experience of other persons. What acts of consciousness can bring this empathy about?

We communicate, more or less well, with others. We enter into

* Commentator: Ted Klein, Texas Christian University.

reciprocal relations with others in social and familial structures. These may be more or less formal, e.g. teacher/student, or extremely personal in a marriage or friendship. More complex cultural connections, "communities of higher orders," assume others as other humans with the human potential to enter into communication and association.

In the phenomenological fashion, then, let us first simply reflect on aspects of empathy which we *have* experienced, leaving aside the more thorny epistemological questions for another time. Empathic experience comes to us often in the ordinary course of our lives. For instance, thoughtfulness manifests a studied empathy when the good hostess anticipates our wants. Even this little example shows how experience brings further questions. The rest of my paper will be directed toward answering these questions by describing the process of empathy, its significance in elaborating the content of other minds, and the place of empathy in ethics.

Section 1. Empathy

Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein are two phenomenologists who have made significant contributions to the theory of empathy. Husserl held that empathy, properly speaking, involves the prior recognition of separateness since, without constituting human objects as human subjects, as other minds if you will, there is no experience of alterity as something to be overcome. Adult humans recognize each other as others, although potentially knowable. Empathy is the process which can disclose the other in his affective states, motivations, and his temporality. Empathy does not reveal the brute otherness of the other; rather, it overcomes the separation between subjects.

One of Husserl's major systematic problems originates in the difficulty of granting the transcendent meaning, "other", to aspects of the flux of a self-experiencing consciousness. The difficulty in positivistic philosophies of accounting for knowledge of "other minds" who inhabit independently real bodies is obviated by the transcendental phenomenological reduction which suspends existence claims. The body no longer guarantees the otherness of the other, but the phenomenal experience of the other, as *other than*, must be a meaning for a stream of consciousness (self-consciousness). In Husserlian phenomenology, the possibility of the experience of other egos must be accounted for as a result of the acts of the subject. How can the I *know* what is *other than* I?

Stein's general response is that empathy, a unique faculty of perceptual intuition, is the means for such experience. Stein, Edmund Husserl's first assistant, in her doctoral dissertation of 1917 described empathy as a *sui*

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generis conscious process through which we make sense of others in their self-experience.³ Empathy functions as another sense which, like the more usually counted first five senses, delivers intuitions of presence in a sensory manifold. Empathy has as its field the sensuous experiences of the other's expressions and gestures, as well as the other's words.

This account of empathy may be rendered less esoteric by recalling Merleau-Ponty's remark (echoing William James) that "The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is anger itself."⁴ If the gesture signifies anger because it manifests anger, I can understand the Other's lived body to render his meanings into my own lived life where I react to the other or not. In her commentary on Stein's work, Carmen Balzer reminds us that "it is on the level of senses that we have the elements to establish a link with the foreign individual."⁵

Empathy may be a *sui generis* intuition, but empathic grasp of the other's physically presented meanings is an everyday experience. This experience of empathy remains as the guiding clue after the reduction and, since empathic awareness of the other includes the experience of the other as a bodily being, the body as experienced remains too, as it was experienced, only deprived of the claims to substantial (objective) existence which the degenerate metaphysical tradition presupposed.

The above description of empathy opens up its moral dimension. Perhaps "To understand all is to forgive all" overstates the case, but it does suggest one of the paramount motivations behind holding empathy to be a moral obligation. One cannot serve the community of others if she lacks other perspectives on the world. More properly said, one cannot even help the other (or judge his intention) without empathizing with his meanings.

Note: two streams of consciousness, two subjects, are active here. The subject seeking to know the other has insights into the meanings embodied in the other's gestures. The other's feelings are still his alone even when the subject interested in empathizing sees into the meanings which the other person displays. The hostess may notice the empty glass or the distant salt shaker without deep emotional understanding of how her guest is experiencing the distress. Or, deep communication between persons may be possible if they are both interested in sharing their private meanings.

Acts of empathy do not necessarily imply reciprocity, however. In empathy, one turns oneself (more or less, a smaller or wider turn) toward the other in expressive communication. On the receptive pole of the dyad, on the other hand, one turns oneself into an intentional ray into the other. The motivation for empathy may be subliminal as, for instance, when one *finds*

oneself engaged in seeing into the other and mirroring his meaning, passing the salt because the desire of the other has become obvious. The process must be dialectical or this process is the dialectic of "body language," in "crowd psychosis," or in Plato's *Republic*.

Empathy, although it does not seek empathetic response in return for its acts, can, when it is reciprocal, achieve mutual receptivity. Mutual empathy can be both active and passive when it is completed by a corresponding empathetic partner. The pairing of a couple empathically united (infant/mothering one, husband/wife, Clint Eastwood and the "bad guy") involves a mutual overlap of meanings. These meanings take their unity from shared values and shared horizons. The mothering one prizes the infant and he basks in her good opinion, never doubting her priorities. The adult couple can show themselves to each other within a wide range of affect, becoming partners in mutual experiences. The pairing between them is a pairing of incarnate historical egos, but these egos, although embodied and historical, are transcendental insofar as they are loosely attached to their mundane egos as players of objective roles. The egos of close communication are possible egos since they are being constituted in the midst of the commerce between the members of the pair.

As each is understood, he constitutes both himself and the other as his partner. The communication between them pushes the horizons of the world apart so that it reenacts the Greek creation myth of Gaia and Uranus, Earth and Sky pushed apart by their children to make the space of the world. The members of the pair find themselves overtaken by a shared world in which they can dwell in the space of things against the mutual horizon extending now to the others of the other and their spaces and meanings.

As many of its critics have shown, the doctrine which accounts for empathy on the basis of simple analogy discounts the individuality of the other person since it claims to know her on the model of the self. The analogized other is but an importation of the self into a different setting. I may know myself, but to presume an other like me is to beg the question of knowing the other, since the other person imagined in this fashion is not really other but merely subject to the same motivations and interpretations that I am.

Empathy is, however, often confused with analogy since my own similar experiences are necessary to provide me with a context in which to begin to imagine what the other might be experiencing. I suspect that some of the problems which men and women find in understanding each other have to do with their different privileged experiences. Many of the relations

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which obtain between them are reciprocally complementary, but not identical. In *Experience and Judgment*, Husserl writes that “empathy is nothing other than a special group of positional presentifications in relation to memories and expectations”⁶ These “positional presentifications” which unite me with the other must be founded in my own prior experiences, although they cannot finally be restricted to my immediate experience since empathy, while grounded in my own experience, is still not imprisoned by the limitations of the actual life of the empathizing partner. Although empathy relies on self-experience for its ground, empathy permits the other to come to presence albeit more or less limitedly.

The face of the other, which, according to Emmanuel Levinas, confronts us with immediate ethical responsibility, does so since it presents itself in a fullness which empathic intuition can thematize, although never exhaust. To the extent that her face presents the other and her ethical claims, empathy becomes a precondition for ethical responsibility and, itself, an ethical responsibility. Through empathy, the other can be present to me in his life which I “read” of his physical expressions (including words and gestures) and situate within his context. Empathic intuitions are present to me in self-evidence, modified by the words that the other speaks. Such refinements are themselves understood in other interpretative acts.

As Stein emphasizes, verbal communication is different from gestural expression since the word advances its meaning symbolically and ambiguously. We each experience our meanings uniquely; we must translate them into objective speech in order to have any legitimate hope of being understood. The problem of language announces itself here. The flexibility, the possibilities of linguistic meaning, demand that words be interpreted in relations. Originary language, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us, bestows new meanings as the speaker interprets extra-(pre)linguistic experience by naming it. Insofar as the speaker seeks to communicate a more or less unique perspective, a sudden insight, a nuanced emotional state or subtle ethical difficulty, she must articulate in natural language. To do so, she translates experience into the language which appresents her meanings and herself. Only by reversing the process, translating the common language into her or his own, can the audience make sense of the speaker. Attributing the sense intended by the originator is a function of the process of empathy; such empathy is essential to the give-and-take that fundamentally characterizes human communication.

According to our ordinary usage, linguistic communication and body language play a role in the development of mutual understanding, but

empathy is the precondition for associating any language with the meanings that the other attaches to them. In order to decipher representations and symbols, all communication demands at least minimal empathetic understanding. The other, as text, provides me with an opportunity to exercise my empathetic capacity, to appresent his or her affective life.

What can empathic intuition of the other reveal? Empathic process occurs along a continuum. Like the other senses, its perceptions include a range from vague or fuzzy to clear. Mundane considerations of others—as objects in the world awaiting possible fulfillment as persons in intuitive, empathetic awareness—intend the other only as a possible other. Empathy allows me to see the other, however inadequately. At one end of the spectrum, I can be empathetically aware that another person is thoroughly engrossed in an activity which has no attraction for me or is in the midst of a situation which has never surrounded me. In this case, empathic intuition of the shape which fills up the other's space is amorphous, but can be present to me, nevertheless. In Husserlian terminology, the other is present to me as emptily intended.

This empathetically intuited other person is not an object only granted the meaning "that it is." I can have a glimpse, at least, of her involved as she is with something which I do not feel or have not felt. Empathy can imagine analogies between my own experience of involvement and what seems to be the other person's. I can dismiss the other's thoughtless behavior to me, assuring myself that she has other things on her mind.

On the other hand, in empathy, persons may be very close to each other. If we are close, we share the one space with another person for a brief time, anyway. Many episodes of these brief times are the stuff of friendships and attachments as well as of the social construction of the world. The world which is, in the mutual agreement of most subjects, taken as the actual, cultural world is part of the possible world which includes it. Indeed, in empathy with others of different races, genders, traditions, languages, etc., I can enlarge my vision of the possible world which includes all variations of interpretations. If, through empathy, I have understood myself and the other person as each one among many others, I see that each perspective has its place.

How is the text, the other person, read? If empathy is a kind of a sense like taste since it, too, delineates a sensuous manifold, what field does empathy disclose? Empathy brings about a kind of sensuous consciousness of the sensual field which the other person perceives, as preliminary to understanding her perspective. Like any of the other senses, empathic

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functioning can acquire the ability to make finer distinctions, to see more clearly, to pick out light flavors which it did not notice or recognize previously.

The other is a text for and through the efforts of a subject. The limit of empathy is the complete fusion which blurs all boundaries. This must be always only a limit, however, since each of the persons is spatially and temporally other or they would be the same. Nevertheless, what convergence of perspectives is possible results from empathic awareness. Empathetically, I live respecting others' uniqueness and the universal claim which each makes upon the other. Thus, I know my self as one-among-others.

If it is true that only one is I, and that others are others, this objectifying equalization by which I become an Other for these Others, an other among these Others, must be accounted for. It is an equalization in the sense that reciprocity abolishes the privilege and brings it about that there are only Others. I am an Other among Others. Thus, a community of real men is possible.⁷

Rational sympathy must be founded on empathy since it is impossible for me to feel genuine compassion unless I am aware of whatever acts upon you and the way you experience such forces. The lived cultural world, the arena of all expressions, is clearly not exclusively a moral arena although it can become morally charged for individuals who understand themselves as beings engaged in moral transactions. The world loses its neutral "objectivity" to become more than a world which permits moral actions, but since the world is primarily a shared world, demands moral action on its moral stage.

The history of the criteria for citizenship in the United States suggests that much of moral development is simply, in the first instance, imbuing others with the meaning other "I." The further development required for right moral action is, according to Robert Sokolowski, taking the other's good as my own and, thereby, transforming my empathic actions through which I know the other into good moral acts. In his work, *Moral Action*,⁸ he provides some accessible examples of such transformations. Although cutting the lawn may be morally neutral, a man may cut the lawn in order to spite his wife who is naggingly concerned about his exertion in the heat. Then, when she goes shopping and he cuts the lawn, his action is moral, not good, but moral. Or, a person may invite another person to lunch if they enjoy each other's company. This action can become a moral transaction if the host wishes to express his gratitude towards his friend by providing him with a nice meal.

In both these cases, the intention and the deed which embody it are

displayed in a single action which is necessarily shot through with reciprocal empathy if it is to be truly a moral action. Unless the wife knows that her husband is exploiting her excessive concern for him, his act of spite will fail in its moral intention; it will not hurt her, and he will have only tried to act spitefully towards her. If the friend does not read the gratitude in the lunch, the host feels the debt as still unpaid.

We recall that for Edith Stein the faculty of empathy is *sui generis*; empathy is a means for knowledge of the other which makes use of all sensory faculties, but empathy is distinctive from any of the other “senses” insofar as its peculiar function is to bring to presence the emotional state which accompanies the other’s meanings. The empathy which intuitively grasps such lived meanings provides the context for moral adjudications and reasoning together. Ethics requires empathic understandings and theories derived on the basis of such experience lest the other’s actions be misunderstood or our judgments inappropriate. Empathic experience, and the rational sympathy derived from it, represent ethical value and moral responsibility since we are each one among others in the world we share with others.

Empathy reveals that the substitutability of one for other can be merely formal when there is no substitution possible on the level of lived experienced. If the other lives in my consciousness as an incarnate ego which is other than myself, not as emptily intended, but meant as the bodily being who thinks I’m funny or whose goodness I cherish. Knowing one other empathically allows me the experience to generalize: those of us born of women are subject to the frailties of the flesh, death, joy, the life of the human being in all its wild permutations and basic similarity. The essential grasp of human nature, for which empathy provides experience, suggests further ramifications for ethical theory. Empathy is a means to knowledge of the human nature; knowledge of the human nature enlivens and encourages empathy. On such a basis, ethics is possible.

Notes

¹ Kathleen M. Haney, *Intersubjectivity Revisited*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994).

² Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Andre Schuwer, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989) p. 170.

³ Edith Stein, *The Problem of Empathy*, trans. by Waltraut Stein. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff), 1964.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Trans. Colin

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Wilson, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1976) p. 230.

⁵Carmen Balzer "The Empathy Problem in Edith Stein," *Analecta Husserliana* XXXV. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991).

⁶Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, trans. by James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 165.

⁷Paul Ricoeur, *Husserl*, Trans. Edward G. Ballard, Lester Embree, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. .

⁸Sokolowski, Robert. *Moral Action*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.