

# EMPATHY, THE OTHER AND ENGAGED ACTS

## Abstract:

In this paper we consider the correlation and interdependence between empathy and engaged acts, i.e., acts undertaken in interacting with the other or others, through which the first-person singular shifts to the first-person plural. We argue that engaged acts are a constitutive element of empathy. To support our thesis, we address some issues with the common notion of empathy, specifically, those related to the first-person and third-person accounts. Further, we discuss their alternatives in phenomenology and interaction theories. In particular, we address two important aspects of empathy: that of the second person perspective, and the issue of the Self/Other differentiation. In the final part of the paper, we portray the phenomenological structure of engaged acts.

**Keywords:** Empathy, Engaged Acts, Engagement, Second-Person Perspective, Self/Other Differentiation

The term empathy is today commonly used for a wide range of phenomena, including identification with another's feelings, sharing of emotions, perspective shifting, social cognition etc. However, the mainstream usage of the term, which often aims at its moral significance, usually neglects main phenomenological issues and distinctions. (1) In the first part of the paper we will address two sets of problems concerning the common notion of empathy. One is related to the difference between "in-his-shoes" and empathic perspective shifting<sup>1</sup>, and the inability of social cognition to incorporate agency<sup>2</sup>. The other set addresses the distinction between empathy and similar phenomena, emphasizing the importance of the recognition of the other in empathy. (2) It is the second set of problems that leads us to the topic of the second passage. By following phenomenological approaches to the empathy, we will stress the importance of the so-called «thou» perspective for empathic experience<sup>3</sup>. Two crucial aspects of empathy are, we will argue, self/other differentiation and emotional engagement with the other. (3) Finally, in the third part we will come to the key point of this article, the question of engaged acts. Engaged acts are specific kinds of acts undertaken towards/with the other, through which first person singular switches to first person plural.

Apart from contribution of the paper to the understanding of empathy, the argument here regarding engaged acts could further enhance our understanding of human sociality. Thus, human sociality should not be perceived only through the lens of belonging to a specific group or institution, but rather presupposes projective, anticipatory and engaged activities towards/with others such as invitations, calls, gestures, introductions, provocations, appeals, etc.

## 1. Issues with the common notion of empathy

Peter Goldie insists in *Anti-Empathy* that we should respect the distinction between «in-his-shoes» and empathic perspective-shifting. "In-his-shoes" perspective-shifting presupposes that person A imagines being in the situation of B, i.e., deliberating what she herself would do in the situation that person B is in. On the contrary, empathic perspective-shifting is that in which person A imagines *being* B in that situation, e.g., deliberating and deciding what to do as if she were herself person B. A good example of

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<sup>1</sup> Goldie (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Slaby (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Zahavi (2014), (2015), (2019).

this would be the experience of reading a novel. There is a visible and non-trivial difference between the experience when I imagine that I am *in a situation* happening to the protagonist – in the shoes of the protagonist; and the experience of imagining that I am *being* the protagonist with all their characteristic features, dispositions, strengths and weaknesses, biographical and psychological baggage. Goldie locates the main reason for overlooking this distinction in the common tendency of theorists to deal with the simplest case – when there is no relevant difference in personalities. This is what Goldie calls «base-case», which have to satisfy following conditions:

[...] (i) there are no relevant differences in the psychological dispositions of A, the person attempting to empathize, and of B, the target of the attempt; in particular, both A and B are minimally rational; (ii) there are no relevant non-rational influences on B's psychological make-up or decision-making process; (iii) there is no significant confusion in B's psychological make-up; and (iv) B is not faced with a psychological conflict, such as having to make a choice between two or more alternatives where it is not clear to B which alternative is to be preferred<sup>4</sup>.

The problem with the base-case is that in meaningful real-life situations these conditions are rarely fulfilled, and most commonly all four are violated. This is because the base-case works within the presuppositions of the minimal notion of rational agency – the notion of agency which is impersonal (shared by A and B), i.e., which excludes personal differences. Two lessons could be drawn from Goldie's argument. The first one casts doubts on the status of «in-his-shoes» perspective-shifting, for if Goldie's distinction is correct, it does not quietly correspond to our intuition of empathic experience as a kind of emotional engagement with other's psychological states. The second reveals that actual emphatic perspective-shifting is much harder than we might have thought, even impossible, because the common understanding rests on presupposition of the base-case and emphatic perspective-shifting is much more complex, having to grasp another's agency<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, Goldie asserts that the issue at hand is usurpation of another's agency in emphatic perspective-shifting:

In empathic perspective-shifting, where A thinks B's thoughts, and then in imagination decides what is the right thing for B to think or to do, A *usurps* B's agency, replacing it with her own<sup>6</sup>.

The background of Goldie's account is the agency-centered account of emotions. The common notion of empathy is usually associated with the idea that we have affective insight into other's states, as if these states were some kind of «inner objects» contained in the mind. Accordingly, to empathize with someone is to simulate their affective state as an «inner object» in your mind. The agency-centered accounts argue for a quite different view: when I love someone I do not look «inside myself» to see whether there is such a state as love contained in my mind, rather, love designates the way I am engaged with this person (or in other cases object, situation, the world or its aspects)<sup>7</sup>. Agency presupposes first-person commitments not reducible to the status of «inner objects»<sup>8</sup>. Thus, in empathizing with someone, we cannot simply replicate their psychological states isolated within our own minds; rather, we must somehow reach their first-person commitments and in the way this person is engaged in the world.

Goldie's argument was reinforced a few years later by Jan Slaby. In «Empathy's blind spot», Slaby puts the accent on agency as empathy's blind spot. The problem, as he sees it, is that an agent's first-person commitment always escapes attempts of deliberately

<sup>4</sup> Goldie (2011), p. 307.

<sup>5</sup> The direct target of Goldie's critique is Goldman's simulation theory. However, part of this argument could be applied even to Lipps' understanding of empathy (cfr. Zahavi, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Goldie (2011), p. 315.

<sup>7</sup> See also Goldie (2000), Ratcliff (2008), Slaby & Wüschsner (2014).

<sup>8</sup> See Slaby (2014), p. 254.

simulating another's mental state<sup>9</sup>, thus making empathic perspective-shifting impossible. Agency in a case of empathic perspective-shifting can only ever be the agency of the empathizer, not the agency of the person empathized with<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, trying it would be patronizing:

Trying this would be a move that comes close to patronizing the other because one inevitable [sic] will take what is in fact *one's own* agency (or would-be-agency) for the agency in which the other person's mental states are anchored<sup>11</sup>.

Slaby's intention is, however, not to dispense with empathy altogether. As he puts it, the aim is to point out that «there is no need to let a narrowly-focused "mental simulation" literature monopolize the difficult and important topic of interpersonal relatedness»<sup>12</sup>. An alternative could be found in interaction theories<sup>13</sup> and the management of so called «we-spaces»<sup>14</sup>. The basic idea is that in interaction, joint practices and engagements mental states are not simply «hidden» in the minds of individuals, but they rather appear in those spaces of interaction. The second key point is the recognition of the other and acknowledgement of their own needs, cares, feelings, etc.

Nothing is lost when one replaces this [perspective-shifting] by a stance of *acknowledging*, of *recognizing* the other, both in her (partial) agentive autonomy and in her exposedness as a vulnerable, needy being<sup>15</sup>.

A similar main point could be reached by following some distinctions from early phenomenologists such as Max Scheler, Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. All of them, in different ways, confront the standard notion of empathy, related to identification, simulation, or projection of the content of others' mind, instead arguing for other-directed intentionality as a primary and non-reducible form of intentionality. It is what Husserl, and sometimes Scheler (unfortunately both inconsistently) named "*Fremderfahrung*" or "*Fremdwahrnehmung*" (other-perception) in contrast to Lipps' term *Einfühlen*<sup>16</sup>. More recently, Dan Zahavi rehabilitates this standpoint in contemporary debates about empathy<sup>17</sup>. One way to explain the reason for this shift is differentiation of empathy and other similar phenomena. If empathy designated having the same state as some other, then it could be confused with emotional contagion. However, in emotional contagion a person does not have knowledge or awareness that the state one possesses also is the state that other have, and thus, it cannot count as empathy. The other common option is to equate empathy with situations in which we literally share emotions with others. Zahavi provides strong counter-example:

To empathically understand that your friend loves his wife is quite different from loving his wife yourself. It doesn't require you to share his love for his wife. Likewise, you might empathically grasp your colleague's joy when he hears the news of his promotion even though you are personally chagrined by this piece of news. The fact that you don't share his joy, the fact that you are feeling a very different emotion, doesn't make your experience any less a case of empathy; it doesn't make your awareness of his joy merely inferential or imaginative in character. Furthermore, unlike sharing proper, for which reciprocity is arguably a clear requirement, empathy doesn't have to be reciprocal<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, pp. 253-254.

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, p. 254.

<sup>12</sup> Ivi, p. 256.

<sup>13</sup> Gallagher (2008).

<sup>14</sup> Krueger (2011).

<sup>15</sup> Slaby (2014), p. 256; cfr. Butler (2001).

<sup>16</sup> Scheler (2008), p. 220; Husserl (1960), p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> Zahavi (2001), (2014), (2015), (2019). It is worth noting that Slaby mentions Zahavi's account in one footnote, stating that he will not address this argument, which similarly to his argument objects to cognitive simulation theory, Slaby (2014), fn. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Zahavi (2015).

Looking at the previous example, it seems clear that the question of empathy is not whether we share the (feeling-)state with someone other from our first-personal perspective (whether we have that state as ours), but whether we can experience it as the state of mind of the other. Thus, phenomenologists speak of empathy in terms of experience of foreign consciousness. This standpoint presupposes two crucial aspects. One is the self/other differentiation, found to be one of the most primitive forms of intentionality, for to be able to experience state of consciousness as foreign, we have to recognize it as some other state than ours. The second aspect, intertwined with the first, is that the second-person perspective, or the so-called “thou” perspective; for to empathize with someone is to feel the relevant state as another’s state.

## 2. Self/other differentiation and «Thou» perspective

As we argued in the previous lines, empathy presupposes self/other differentiation and taking the stance of a second-person perspective. By following phenomenological distinctions, we have advocated that empathy cannot be understood either as having an identical state as the other (for this would confuse empathy with emotional contagion), nor literally as a sharing of affective states. Furthermore, we have addressed objections concerning simulation model raised by Peter Goldie and Jan Slaby. In what follows, we will address in more depth possibilities to designate self/other differentiation and “thou” perspective.

Self/other differentiation is an important factor of empathy, for at least two reasons. First, it is an ontological condition of empathy, for there to even be empathy, we must be able to differentiate another’s consciousness from our own, that is, see another’s consciousness as not our own. Second, it ensures that empathy does not usurp the agency of the person empathized with, that it does not replace their feelings with our own. One of the ways to formulate the differentiation is given by Thomas Szanto, as states in which individuals: «actually differ and have a clear *awareness* and understanding of precisely not being intermeshed, fused, let alone identical, in their affective lives. Rather, in various aspects [...] they exhibit intentional and experiential variations and differences vis-à-vis one another»<sup>19</sup>.

Phenomenologists use different ways to make clear that this differentiation is the fundamental *a priori*, or transcendental mode of experience. Heidegger formulates it through one of the fundamental concepts of being-with-other. The basic idea is that our very being in the world always already presupposes its social nature<sup>20</sup>. Heidegger’s well-known conception is marked as that which emphasizes the primacy of the “we”<sup>21</sup>. Quite differently, Sartre insists on the encounter with the other. To be seen or to be touched by someone is, argues Sartre, entirely different from touching or seeing. Particularly, a fundamental fact is that we could be an object for others, we are exposed to others<sup>22</sup>. Husserl sees the foundation of self/other differentiation in what he calls transcendental intersubjectivity. When we experience objects around us, a part of such experience is that I am experiencing it as accessible to others. Thus, the objective validity is made possible only by being mediated by the other. A special case of this is when I am myself an object for the other, or when my own self-awareness is mediated through the other, i.e., when I become aware that I could be an alter-ego for the other as he could be for me<sup>23</sup>. Merleau-Ponty argues that self-awareness of subjectivity, of “I”, has to already involve a dimension of otherness<sup>24</sup>.

A bit more moderate an account has been developed among contemporary enactivists’ approaches, referring to the concept of genuine intersubjectivity. Positioning themselves

<sup>19</sup> Szanto (2018), p. 89.

<sup>20</sup> Heidegger (1979), pp. 260-261.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. Zahavi (2019).

<sup>22</sup> Sartre (1978), pp. 221-431.

<sup>23</sup> Husserl (1973), pp. 243-244.

<sup>24</sup> Merleau-Ponty (2005), pp. 403-425, for more detailed argument see Zahavi (2001). For a comprehensive discussion of phenomenological accounts of empathy see Donise (2020).

in the middle of the road, they argue neither for *a priori* other-directed intentionality, nor neglect the constitutive role of the other. Rather, they put the focus on participatory sense-making and interaction as socially extended mind. The main idea is that our social lived experience is co-regulated in real-time interaction, in which the others' states are not "hidden" in the brain, but appear in interaction, and as affordances co-constitute the social situation. The self/other differentiation, thus, comes as nothing mysterious, but it is dynamically present in interaction<sup>25</sup>.

What plays a crucial role in access to the mental states of others, for both the early phenomenologists and the enactivists today, is the complementary concept of second-person perspective and engagement. The second-person perspective usually has two aspects. One is the capacity to feel a state of mind on behalf of another – not as ourselves. To refer to the given example, you can feel the joy of your friend's promotion on his behalf, even you are personally not joyous<sup>26</sup>. Although such a construction presupposes a self/other differentiation, it does not avoid objections to simulation theory and a primacy of the first-person perspective. In other words, taking this aspect alone, the difference between first- and second-person perspective is too weak<sup>27</sup>. Recently, Schilbach and colleagues have developed an approach to second-person perspective that emphasizes the importance of social interaction. The main idea is that social cognition is radically different once we engage in I-Thou relations with others:

[...] our central claims are that *social cognition is fundamentally different when we are engaged with someone as compared to adopting an attitude of detachment, and when we are in interaction with someone as compared to merely observing her*<sup>28</sup>.

Schilbach and colleagues strongly oppose the spectatorial stance (mere observing) to the emotionally engaged perspective. By taking an engaged perspective, not only do I encounter another in an interaction, but also, I re-modify my own self-awareness, as someone who is being exposed to "you" or addressed by "you". In other words, I am at the same time implicitly aware of myself in the accusative, as attended to or addressed by the other<sup>29</sup>. This is the second important aspect of the second-person perspective. Following this, we can say that "full-fledged" empathy requires several protocols, recognition of the other, but also that I myself have been recognized by the other, and furthermore, that I am aware of being recognized by the other<sup>30</sup>. It is only once this complex interplay in engaged interaction have taken place, that we are actually encountering the second-person perspective, and that we are able to really have other-perception.

### 3. Engaged Acts

The question of engagement has for a long time been neglected in the literature about social ontology and empathy. Once the collectives and empathic relations have been observed from the third-person perspective, it seems that engagement could be reduced to a mere actualization of already established formal conditions. Arguments such as those by interaction theorists and Schilbach and colleagues emphasize the constitutive role of engagement. They argue that there is a fundamental difference once we take an engaged perspective. Moreover, these arguments are well supported by empirical studies. Schilbach

<sup>25</sup> Froese (2018), Krueger (2011).

<sup>26</sup> One of good examples of this phenomenological difference could be found in Helm's argument about care for others: «When I get a paper rejected because of an undeservedly negative referee report, my anger consists in the feeling of the import of my scholarship as such impressing itself on me in the present circumstances in such a way that I am pained by the offense that rejection presents [...]. Such anger differs from the anger I would feel on behalf of a colleague I care about in similar circumstances [...]. Thus in being angry on her behalf, the pain I feel consists in part in the feeling not only of the import she (the focus) has to me but also of the import her scholarship (the subfocus) has to her, so that the rejection feels bad because of its bearing on the well-being of both her scholarship and her; in this respect my anger on her behalf differs phenomenologically from my anger at my own paper's rejection» (Helm, 2009, p. 89).

<sup>27</sup> Zahavi (2019).

<sup>28</sup> Schilbach et al. (2013), p. 356.

<sup>29</sup> Cfr. Zahavi (2019).

<sup>30</sup> For a more complex differentiation of degrees of reciprocity see Zahavi (2019).

et al. drew on neuroscience findings and conducted their own studies, in addition to which there has been work on agent-based simulation modeling that demonstrates how agents engaged in interaction can create new properties and processes at the collective level<sup>31</sup>. This does not necessarily mean that engagement is logically or ontologically prior to a primary empathic relation, e.g., self/other differentiation and other-directed intentionality. However, engagement is a necessary condition for I-Thou relation, i.e., without engagement, mental states of others will remain “hidden”<sup>32</sup>.

Under the term «engaged acts» we understand a type of social act, related to others, in order to engage them in interaction or any other form of joint/institutional action or relation. Prototypes of such acts could be calls, invitations or appeals. However, engaged acts can have various forms, including gestures or other actions of individuals that could stipulate the response. We are fully aware that in real-life situations engaged acts do not happen in a vacuum, without an already established framework of a given social situation (e.g., reactive attitudes). An engaged act is fulfilled only once the other responds, i.e., when the other is engaged by that act; and we usually cannot make a clear distinction between “initiator” and the person who is engaged by them. Furthermore, a more common situation is one in which we encounter a series of engaged acts that accompany and link up with one another<sup>33</sup>. Nevertheless, analytical distinctions and formal/abstract reductions are necessary for a further consideration of the nature of engaged acts. Thus, for analytical purposes, we presuppose the difference between the initiator (the person who undertakes engaged acts) and responder, for they typically have different motivation and focus their attention on different details<sup>34</sup>. Moreover, we will examine an abstract situation in which there is no prior communality between the parties, because this reductive situation helps catching the formal features of engaged acts.

In a formal sense, engaged acts, seemingly paradoxically, refer to some form of collectivity, but rather in its absence. We cannot make a sense of engaged acts unless they are aimed at establishing joint (inter)action. However, we also cannot think engaged acts if this collectivity is entirely fulfilled, for they are aimed at its fulfilling. This is the crucial difference between engagement and joint commitment<sup>35</sup>. One of the solutions to this problem could be to understand motivational features that underlays engaged acts as an anticipatory experience. In engaged acts, a “we” I am focused on is not present as fulfilled, but rather this “we” is anticipated as a potentiality, as an, at least partially, empty/unfulfilled intention (whose object is not apparent)<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, motivation for engaged acts could be intelligibly explained by the following two conditions: (1) that there is an anticipation of “we” which has some import for the initiator; but which is (2) followed by a clear awareness that the addressed person is actually another (or someone currently not partaking in the joint activity) and that the “we” is not fulfilled<sup>37</sup>. Thus, as we see, the self/other differentiation is fundamentally entangled in the structure of engaged acts. Nevertheless, the anticipatory experience of “we” allows us to treat this person as someone who is, at least potentially, part of *our* situation, relation, that is, potentially one of us.

On the side of the responder, engaged acts produce a specific kind of pressure or burden to respond<sup>38</sup>. However, unlike joint commitment, it does not produce an obligation to

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<sup>31</sup> Candadai et al. (2019), Froese, Iizuka & Ikegami (2014).

<sup>32</sup> For arguments which emphasize constitutive role of engagement in achieving the plural perspective see Zahavi (2015), as well as Loidolt (2018).

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. Bojanić (2020).

<sup>34</sup> See Schilbach et al. (2013), p. 397.

<sup>35</sup> See Bojanić (2020); cfr. Gilbert (1992).

<sup>36</sup> An obvious example of anticipatory experience of social situation, albeit negative, can be experience of social anxiety.

<sup>37</sup> Note that the second condition strongly contrasts this experience to the notion of imagined communities or Searle’s argument about hallucinated collective intentionality, Searle (1990), p. 407. Unless one is aware of unfulfillment of the “we”, engaged acts would be senseless.

<sup>38</sup> See Bojanić (2020). This pressure could be compared, but not formally equated, to the pressure one can experience as an addressee of reactive attitudes. Particularly relevant would be the case when forward-looking reactive attitudes can be understood as an invitation to new members or an invitation to reestablish or modify communal norms (see Helm, 2017, p. 108).

respond (neglecting to respond or be engaged is not wrongdoing in the same normative sense as neglecting of action I am/we are committed to)<sup>39</sup>. In this way, engaged acts acknowledge the other as a person they are, while still adopting the stance of *letting them be* the other person.

#### 4. Conclusion

We began this paper by addressing issues with the notion of empathy that relies on a first-person or third-person perspective. Then we introduced alternative views by phenomenological approaches and contemporary interactionist theories, which emphasize the importance of self/other differentiation and second-person perspective. Accordingly, we focused our attention on the crucial role of engaged interaction for empathy, as a necessary constituent of the I-thou relation. In the previous paragraph, we portrayed an argument about engaged acts. Engaged acts are a type of social act, related to others, in order to engage them in interaction or any other form of joint action or relation. This protocol should be clearly differentiated from similar protocols such as joint commitment. According to our analysis, engaged acts are phenomenologically structured as an anticipative experience of “we”, followed by a clear awareness that the addressed person is actually another (non-member) or an awareness that the “we” is not fulfilled. Thus, engaged acts presuppose self/other differentiation, but still allow treating the other as a potential member to whom we relate. On the side of the responder, engaged acts produce a specific pressure, which, nevertheless, should not be confused with an obligation, still allowing acknowledgment of the other as a person they are.

Apart from the contribution to understanding of empathy, these considerations could help provide a more complex insight into human sociality in general. We have been taught to reflect on human beings either as isolated individuals or as members of social and cultural groups. By focusing on engagement, we could reveal more dynamic relations, which involve not only a presence of collectivity, but also its anticipation and potentiality.

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<sup>39</sup> Bojanić (2020); cfr. Gilbert (1992).

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