*Empathy and other-directed intentionality*

Although there in recent years has been something of an upsurge of interest in and work on empathy, there is still no clear consensus about what precisely it is. Is empathy a question of sharing another’s feelings, or caring about another, or being emotionally affected by another’s experiences though not necessarily experiencing the same experiences? Is it a question of imagining oneself in another’s situation, or of imagining being another in that other’s situation, or simply of making inferences about another’s mental states? People are disagreeing about the role of sharing, and caring, and imagination in empathy, just as they disagree about the relation between empathy and social cognition in general, and about whether empathy is a natural kind or rather a multidimensional construct.

Sometimes it can be illuminating and clarifying to consider the historical origin of contested notions. The notion of empathy does not have a long history. The German term “Einfühlung” had been coined in 1873 and used in the domain of aesthetics by the philosopher Robert Vischer. It was then taken over by Theodor Lipps, who introduced it into the field of social cognition and used it to designate our basic capacity for understanding others. It was Lipps’ notion that Edward Titchener, the American psychologist, had in mind when he in 1909 translated “Einfühlung” as “empathy”.

The concept of empathy has a distinct philosophical origin, but was soon adopted and co-opted by psychologists. In 1910, the 4th Congress for experimental psychology took place in Innsbruck. During that meeting, the phenomenologist Moritz Geiger presented a paper entitled “Über das Wesen und die Bedeutung der Einfühlung” where he very carefully surveyed and discussed how the concept of empathy had been employed by Lipps and by contemporary psychologists and philosophers like Siebeck, Volkelt, Witasek and Groos. During the ensuing discussion, however, he was criticized by member of the audience, a Fräulein Martin, who made the following remark:

When I arrived, I expected to hear something about experiments in the field of empathy. But what have I heard except plenty of old theories. No experimental results. But this is no philosophical association. I believe the time is ripe for those who want to present these kinds of theories, to show us whether or not they can be confirmed by experiments (Quoted in Geiger 1911, 66).

Such impatience with philosophy is of course not unique to Martin. Could it be that one reason why fundamental issues continue to remain unresolved and contested in the debate on empathy is due to the continuing predominance of philosophical ruminations and the lack of proper science? I am somewhat doubtful that matters would improve if philosophy was pushed to the side, but what needs to be considered is the historical origin and context of the term, and the extent to which traditional philosophical assumptions and positions continue to shape and influence the scientific debate for good and for ill.

In the following, my focus will be on the early exploration of empathy that we find in the phenomenological tradition, since I take it to contain important insights that remain of relevance for the contemporary debate. As we shall see, the phenomenologists offer a distinct and multi-layered analysis of the intentional structure of empathy, one that differs rather markedly from recent attempts to explain empathy in terms of mirroring, mimicry, imitation, emotional contagion, imaginative projection or inferential attribution.

I have been working on the topic of a phenomenology of empathy for more than a decade. The following contribution recapitulates some of the points I have made in the past, while adding some important new pieces to the picture.

*1. Lipps*

My point of departure, however, will not be the phenomenologists, but Theodor Lipps, whose account of empathy preceded and influenced the contributions of Scheler, Stein and Husserl, and from whom they all to varying degrees distanced themselves. One reason for briefly discussing Lipps’ view is consequently that it can serve as a clarifying point of contrast.

According to Lipps, there are three distinct domains of knowledge: 1) knowledge of external objects, 2) self-knowledge, and 3) knowledge of others and he takes these domains to have three distinct cognitive sources, namely perception, introspection and empathy (Lipps 1909, 222). Lipps is consequently quite adamant that empathy must count as a modality of knowledge *sui generis*. It is a novum that in no way can be explained by or reduced to some kind of analogical inference (Lipps 1907a, 697-698, 710). In fact, Lipps devotes a considerable amount of effort to criticise the argument from analogy, and many of his objections would later resurface in the writings of phenomenologists such as Scheler and Merleau-Ponty.

But what exactly does Lipps understand by empathy, which he takes to be a psychological (and sociological) core concept? How does he define it? One perhaps initially slightly surprising claim of his is that empathy is a question of self-objectification (Lipps 1909, 222). We shouldn’t forget, however, the aesthetic origin of the notion (Lipps 1907a, 713). If I experience trees or mountains as animated or besouled or if I hear the wind and experience it as having a melancholic sound, the source of the psychological content is in fact myself (Lipps 1907b, 355). What is really happening is that I am projecting a part of myself into these external objects (Lipps 1909, 225, 237), and this is for Lipps what empathy more generally is all about. To feel empathy is to experience a part of one’s own psychological life as belonging to or in an external object, it is to penetrate and suffuse that object with one’s own life (Lipps 1909, 224).

Let us consider the case of social cognition. When we perceive the facial expressions of others, we immediately co-apprehend the expressed emotions, say, the anger or sadness. This does not mean, however, that we actually perceive the anger or sadness. According to Lipps, anger and sadness cannot be perceived, since they are not to be found in the external world. We only know directly of these emotions through self-experience or to put it differently, the only emotions we have experiential access to are our own. So although we apprehend the angry or sad face as a unified phenomenon, analysis will show that the perceived gestalt and the co-apprehended emotion arise from two different sources. The visual gestalt comes to me from the external world, whereas the felt emotion is drawn from myself. The perceived face consequently comes to possess psychological meaning for me because I am projecting myself into it (Lipps 1907a, 714). How is this supposed to happen?

Lipps refers to something he calls the *instinct of empathy* and more specifically argues that it involves two components, a drive directed towards imitation and a drive directed towards expression (Lipps 1907a, 713). In the past, I have been sad. Back then I experienced an instinctual tendency to express the sadness. The expression was not experienced as something next to or on top of the sadness but as an integral part of the feeling. Now, when I see the expression elsewhere, I have an instinctual tendency to imitate or reproduce it, and this tendency will then evoke the same feeling that it in the past was intimately connected to (Lipps 1909, 229-230, 1907a, 719). When I experience the feeling anew, it will remain linked to the expression I am currently perceiving and will be projected into or onto it. In short, when I see an sad face, I will reproduce the expression of sadness, this will evoke a feeling of sadness in me, and this felt sadness that is co-given with the currently perceived facial expression will then be attributed to the other, thereby allowing for a form of interpersonal understanding (Lipps 1907a, 717-719).

Importantly, we do not merely project psychological meaning into the expressions we see. We also tend to believe that they really do contain mental life, and that this is not merely something that has been added by us. That this is so is, according to Lipps, a fact that cannot be explained any further. It simply has to be taken for granted as a given (Lipps 1907a, 710, 721).

One implication of Lipps’ model is that there are rather strict limitations to what I can come to understand empathically of the other. The imitated expression can only evoke an affective state in myself that resembles the affective state of the other, if I have had the affective state in question in the past (Lipps 1907a, 718-719). Consequently, I can only understand those of the other’s experiences which I have already enjoyed myself, or to put it differently, Lipps’ account of empathy doesn’t allow me to recognize anything in the other that is new, anything that I am not already familiar with, anything that I haven’t put there myself. It consequently shouldn’t come as a surprise that Lipps repeatedly speaks of other individuals as multiplications of one’s own ego, i.e., as products of empathic self-objectification (Lipps 1907b, 360), or as Lipps writes in his 1905 *Die ethischen Grundfragen*:

The other psychological individual is consequently made by myself out of myself. His inner being is taken from mine. The other individual or ego is the product of a projection, a reflection, a radiation of myself - or of what I experience in myself, through the sense perception of an outside physical phenomenon - into this very sensory phenomenon, a peculiar kind of reduplication of myself (Lipps 1905, 17).

Lipps’ position is by no means of mere historical interest. It has remained influential and has a number of modern heirs. Not surprisingly, it is in particular within the simulationist camp that the notion of empathy has resurfaced as a central category. In his book *Simulating Minds*, Goldman explicitly equates “empathy theory” with “simulation theory” (Goldman 2006, 11), and states that mindreading is an extended form of empathy (Goldman 2006, 4). According to simulation theory, a necessary condition for mindreading “is that the state ascribed to the target is ascribed as a result of the attributor’s instantiating, undergoing, or experiencing, that very state” (Goldman & Sripada 2005, 208), and the structural similarities between Lipps’ and Goldman’s accounts are also brought to the fore when Goldman writes that he considers a more appropriate name for the whole process to be simulation-plus-projection (Goldman 2006, 40). Goldman only refers in passing to Lipps, but in the past, other simulationists such as Iacoboni and Gallese have explicitly referred to and endorsed Lipps’ idea that empathy involves a form of inner imitation (Gallese 2003, 519, Iacoboni 2007, 314).

*2. The phenomenological criticism of Lipps[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Whereas Lipps’ criticism of the argument from analogy found approval among later phenomenologists, they were, as already indicated, by and large quite critical of his own positive account. In his 1931 Habilitation *Die mitmenschlichen Begegnungen in der Milieuwelt* Gurwitsch argues that Lipps’ theory of empathy despite its explicit criticism of the argument from analogy still belongs to the same class of theories (Gurwitsch 1979, 20). It still accepts the following basic but questionable assumption, that all we strictly speaking can be said to perceive is physical qualities and their changes, say, the distortion of facial muscles, and that this perceptual input is psychologically meaningless. It is, according to Lipps, only by animating what is perceptually given with what we know from our own case that we come to know that we are facing another minded creature. It is only by drawing on our own inner experience that we are able to move from the input to the actual ascription of mental states, say, joy or happiness, to others. But is this really plausible or ought we not, as Gurwitsch writes, to consider and ultimately endorse the view that the perceptually given, namely the expressive phenomena in question, already provides us with an access to the mental life of others (Gurwitsch 1979, 32, 56)? Gurwitsch further observes that Lipps’ appeal to instinct is unsatisfactory in that it sets aside the job of analysis (Gurwitsch 1979, 20). A similar criticism can be found in Husserl and Stein who in turn claim that Lipps’ reliance on instinct amounts to the “bankruptcy of scientific investigation” (Stein 2010, 41) and constitutes a “refuge of phenomenological ignorance” (Husserl 1973a, 24). The most pervasive criticism, however, is directed at Lipps’ claim that (inner) imitation constitutes the basis of empathy.

 First of all, such a theory doesn’t explain what it is supposed to explain. Let us assume that an observed expression arouses in me the impulse to imitate it, and that I as a result of the close link between expression and experience, subsequently come to experience the associated emotion myself. This might explain why a certain experience occurs in me, but it does not offer an explanation of how I come to understand the other. To be happy oneself and to believe that another is happy are two quite different things (cf. Gurwitsch 1979, 24-25). The former event does not per se entail either knowledge about the origin of the feeling, or knowledge about the similarity between one’s own feeling and that of the other. The other’s affective state might be the cause of my own, but it also needs to be its intentional object if we are to speak of any kind of social comprehension (Stein 2010, 22-24). Rather than explaining empathy, that is, empathy understood as an experience of the minded life of others, Lipps’ account is consequently better geared to handle something like *motor mimicry* or *emotional contagion*. There is therefore, as Stein puts it, a discrepancy between the phenomenon to be explained and the phenomenon actually explained (Stein 2010, 24).

 Of course, Lipps actually did argue that empathy involves two steps: imitation and projection. My perception of the other’s expression will evoke, in a rather mediated way, a feeling in myself, and this feeling is then attributed to the other through projection. However, rather than solving the problems, the appeal to projection merely aggravates them, since Lipps never manages to justify the epistemic legitimacy of the projection. Lipps himself pointed to the similarity between the projection found in empathy and the projection found in animism, and as Scheler observes, Lipps’ theory remains incapable of accounting for the difference between a correct and an incorrect projection (Scheler 2008, 241). As this latter criticism suggests, Scheler’s own investigation isn’t merely descriptive. It isn’t merely a question of describing how we de facto seem to experience others. Scheler is also interested in the normative question of whether our understanding of others can be justified experientially.

Ultimately, however, the phenomenologists do not merely dismiss the proposal that imitation should be sufficient for empathic understanding. They also question whether it is at necessary. On Lipps’ account, I can only ascribe pain or happiness to another, if I in that very moment undergo the same experiences myself. Indeed, if the imitation is to serve any explanatory purpose, my own felt pain or joy must precede rather than follow my conscious recognition of the pain or joy in the other. But aren’t we able to understand expressions that we are unable to imitate – say if we suffer from facial paralysis? And how plausible is it to claim that I have to be scared myself in order to understand that my child is scared, or that I need to become furious myself if I am to recognize the fury in the face of my assailant (Husserl 1973a, 188)? We might encounter a furious stranger and become furious ourselves, but our empathic understanding of the stranger’s emotion might also elicit the reverse response, namely a feeling of fear. In either case, however, our emotional reaction is exactly that – a reaction. It might well be that the emotions we perceive in others induce emotional resonances and action tendencies in our own bodies and that these responses then feed into and influence the way we apprehend the other, but there is a decisive difference between acknowledging this and defending the view that our understanding of the other’s emotion requires us to have that very emotion ourselves.

It is now time to proceed to the more positive accounts offered by Scheler, Stein and Husserl, but before taking that step, a couple of cautionary remarks:

Given the size of their work, it is impossible in a single article to do justice to the complexity of any one of these thinkers, let alone all three of them. So the following overview will most definitely not constitute an exhaustive presentation and analysis. But although I will have to leave many details unaddressed – and this will also include a discussion of some of the important differences between their respective positions –, my aim is to highlight some common ideas that are both distinct and significant. As Ingarden would later observe, Scheler’s, Stein’s and Husserl’s contribution to the debate made it “increasingly clear that the classical theory of empathy, which considered it a kind of projection of one’s own psychical states into foreign bodies, had to be replaced by a theory that took empathy to be a special kind of perception of the psychical states as they are manifest in the bodily expression” (Ingarden 1994, 170-171).

What might be slightly more surprising is that not all phenomenologists were equally happy about the term “empathy”. Husserl did use it, but his preferred term, especially in his later writings, was simply “other-experience” (*Fremderfahrung*). As for Scheler, he unfortunately didn’t stick to a single term when referring to our experiential understanding of others. Rather, he used terms such as *Nachfühlen* (reproduction of feeling), *Nachleben* (reproduction of experience),or *Fremdwahrnehmung* (perception of other minds)(Scheler 2008, 9, 238). For want of a better term, I have decided to use “empathy” as the best way of capturing what Scheler was referring to when he spoke of a basic experience of others. Now, it so happens that Scheler himself only uses the German term *Einfühlung* rather sparingly and when he does frequently rather dismissively as part of his criticism of Lipps. However, as I see it, Scheler’s reservation is mainly due to his categorical rejection of the former’s *projective theory of empathy* (2008, xlviii), and it is telling that other contemporary phenomenologists referred to Scheler’s own theory as a theory of empathy (cf. Husserl 1950, 173). If we finally consider Stein, she explicitly defines empathy as a form of intentionality directed at foreign experiences and specifically asks us to disregard any other traditional connotation the term might have (Stein 2010, 14). It is for this very reason that Stein can write that Scheler’s polemic against empathy is not directed against what she calls empathy (Stein 2010, 42). I will adopt Stein’s usage, and when I in the following refer to the accounts of empathy found in Scheler, Husserl and Stein, I will be referring to their respective accounts of how we experience others.

As this last remark should make clear, the ultimate goal of the present contribution is *not* to determine once and for all what empathy is. It is fairly obvious that one reason why it continues to be so difficult to reach a commonly accepted definition is because people have been using the notion of empathy to designate quite different phenomena. Although one could make the case that one ought to stick to the traditional use of the term – it was as already mentioned introduced by Lipps as a general term for our understanding of others – instead of identifying it with, say, prosocial behaviour or a very special kind of imaginative perspective taking, it is not evident that such a strategy would be particular productive or illuminating. Thus, my primary goal in the following is simply to make the case that we by looking at the phenomenological analyses of empathy can find important insights that contemporary debates on social cognition and interpersonal understanding ought to incorporate.

1. *Scheler*

On Scheler’s view, empathy is not simply a question of intellectually judging that somebody else is undergoing a certain experience. It is not the mere thought that this is the case; rather, Scheler defends the view that we are empathically able to *experience* other minds (Scheler 2008, 10). It is no coincidence that Scheler repeatedly speaks of the *perception of others* (*Fremdwahrnehmung*) and even entitles his own theory *a perceptual theory of other minds* (Scheler 2008, 220).

For Scheler, empathy is what allows me to understand other experiencing subjects. It neither entails that the other’s experience is literally transmitted to me, nor does it entail that I undergo the experience I observe in the other. Rather, to empathically experience, say, the emotion of another necessarily differs from the way you would experience the emotion if it were your own. Scheler consequently rejects the proposal that emotional contagion or mimicry should be the paradigm of automatic empathy (cf. Hodges and Wegner 1997, Darwall 1988, 264-266), and also criticizes the suggestion that empathy should be based on a direct association between cues coming from others and one’s own similar past experiences, as if one’s ability to empathize with, say, parents who have lost their only child or a drowning man fighting for his life, would not only be conditional on one having oneself gone through such an ordeal, but would even entail an actual reproduction of that past experience. What is overlooked by such a proposal is, according to Scheler, the extent to which we are able to grasp another person’s state of mind directly in the available expressive phenomena. Moreover, not only is such a reproduction unnecessary, but if it was a requirement, it would be a source of error rather than a way to insight, since it would lead to personal distress and egoistic drift (Scheler 2008, 46-47).

Scheler also dismisses the suggestion that the empathizer must at the very least have been first-personally acquainted with some of the basic elements of the empathized experience. As he points out, not only does such a proposal mistakenly think that an experience is composed of atomistic mental particles, but it also leaves it entirely unclear how one should subsequently reconstruct the experience to be understood on the basis of such elements. What could guide this combination if not a prior understanding of the end result (2008, 47)? Scheler’s criticism highlights one of the challenges facing any account arguing that empathy requires a significant similarity between the empathizer and the target. The obvious question to ask is how specific the match must be in order to count as significantly similar. To claim that I can empathize with someone who is distressed because of the death of her 2-year old Airedale Terrier 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 dog 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 quite trivial. If an imitation based account of empathy 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 if 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. But obviously, this increase of plausibility goes hand in hand with a decrease in explanatory power. For Scheler the matter is in any case clear. It is simply not true that we can only empathically understand experiences in others that we have ourselves undergone in the past. For him, such a claim has as little merit as the claim that we can never come to understand something new, but only that which we have already experienced before. As Cassirer was later to write, one of Scheler’s important contributions was to have shown that the understanding of expressive phenomena is a primitive and that it alone constitutes the bridge that can lead us into the realm of the “thou” (1957, 87). Thus, one problem with the projective theory of empathy is precisely that it imprisons us within our own mind. It fails to do justice to the genuine and true self-transcendence that we find in empathy; to the fact that empathic understanding can expand our life and lead us beyond the limitations of our own actual experience (Scheler 2008, 47, 49).

Despite Scheler’s emphasis on the visibility and perceptually accessibility of other minds, it is, however, important to realize that Scheler isn’t committing the mistake of claiming that all aspects of the experiential life of an individual is equally accessible to others. Whereas we in some cases can intuit the other’s experiences, there are on Scheler’s account also some important limitations.

Bodily sensations constitute one of these limitations (Scheler 2008, 255). I can have the same *kind* of headache or kidney pain as someone else, but I cannot literarily perceive his or her specific pain or, say, gustatory sensations. This is a crucial clarification, since it immunizes Scheler from an obvious objection. If I observe a man enjoying his dinner or a woman in labour pains, what I am able to empathically and experientially comprehend, on Scheler’s model, is not the specific taste of, say, smoked salmon or the specificity of the pain sensation, but rather the general state of enjoyment or suffering. Thus, Scheler even concedes that the only way to understand the specific sensations that another person (or animal) is living through is through reproduction. In short, whereas I might see that a child or a bat is exhausted, if I want to know what it is like for someone to taste Papaya juice, I have to taste the juice myself (Scheler 2008, 48).

On the other hand, although Scheler obviously concedes that we can learn something about the other from his *automatic* and *involuntary* expressions, he also insists that there is a limit to how far this will get us, especially since there are dimensions of the mind that aren’t tied to bodily expressions. If we wish to grasp what Scheler calls the spiritual being of the other, that is the essence of his personhood, we need to rely on communication. More specifically, Scheler claims that the distinct cognitive activities of the other person, his or her thoughts, will remain concealed and hidden, until the other decides to reveal and communicate them (Scheler 2008, 102, 225). This is why language proves so essential for higher forms of social understanding. Yet, even then, there will remain something ineffable in the other. There is, according to Scheler, an absolute intimate sphere of foreign personhood that even the act of free communicative intention cannot disclose (Scheler 2008, 66, 219).

1. *Husserl and Stein[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Let us move on to Husserl and Stein. In *Phänomenologische Psychologie* Husserl writes as follows: “The intentionality in one‘s own ego that leads into the foreign ego is the so-called empathy” (Husserl 1962, 321). This is also the view of Stein, who repeatedly argues that empathy rather than being a distinct and specific emotion (like embarrassment, shame or pride) is the name for a *sui generis* form of intentionality directed at other experiencing subjects (Stein 2010, 4, 68). Thus, for Stein, empathy is quite generally the term of choice for the experience [Erfahrung] of foreign consciousness (Stein 2010, 10). It is the basic cognitive source for our comprehension of foreign subjects and their experiences, and it is what more complex kinds of social cognition rely on and presuppose (Stein 2010, V, 4).

One of the recurrent questions that kept preoccupying both Husserl and Stein was how to understand the intentional structure of empathy. On Husserl’s standard model, we have to distinguish between *signitive*, *pictorial*, and *perceptual* ways of intending an object: I can talk about Mount Fuji, although I have never seen it; I can see a detailed drawing *of* Mount Fuji; or I can perceive Mount Fuji myself. Similarly, I can talk about how fantastic it must be to fly in a hot air balloon, I can see a television program about it; or I can experience it myself. For Husserl these different ways of intending are not unrelated. On the contrary, there is a strict hierarchical relation between them, in the sense that the modes can be ranked according to their ability to give us the object as directly, originally and optimally as possible. The object can be experienced more or less directly, that is, it can be more or less *present*. The tricky question is where to place empathy within this classification. The answer given by both Husserl and Stein is that empathy is both like and unlike perception. Empathy is unlike perception in that it does not give us its object, the empathized experience, originally. There will always, and by necessity, remain a difference in givenness between that which I am aware of when I empathize with the other, and that which the other is experiencing. Indeed, what distinguishes empathy is precisely that the empathized experience is given as belonging to the other. However, although empathy differs from perception by not giving us the object originally, it does resemble perception insofar as its object, say, the empathized pain or distress, is given directly, unmediated and non-inferentially as present here and now (Stein 2010, 5). To exemplify, consider a situation where a friend tells me that he has lost his mother, and I become aware of his distress. What kind of awareness is this? I do not see the distress the same way I see the colour of his shirt, rather I see the distress “in” his pained countenance (Stein 2010, 5). On her account, this more complex act that allows for a co-apprehension of that which is expressed in the expression still deserves to be called a form of perception. Why? Because although I certainly do lack a first-person experience of the distress - it is not given as *my* distress - it is nevertheless the case that I experience rather than imagine or infer my friend’s distress. Stein consequently contrasts empathy with a more cognitive comprehension of the other’s experience that intends the foreign experience without grasping it directly. This could for instance happen, if somebody wrote me and informed me that he was sad. Based on this information I could then grasp his state of mind, but his sadness would not be given to me perceptually (Stein 2010, 92). In this latter case, we would be dealing with an indirect comprehension of the other that is derivative and refers back to empathy understood as a more basic experiential grasp of the other’s experience (Stein 2010, 20, 26). It is precisely the possibility of such an experiential givenness that on Stein’s view is ignored by those favouring the argument from analogy. Now, Stein is by no means denying that we occasionally employ this kind of inferential reasoning, but on her view, it never provides us with an *experience* of other minds, but only with a more or less probable knowledge of others’ mental states (Stein 2010, 29).

Not surprisingly, we find rather similar considerations in Husserl. In *Ideen II* and elsewhere Husserl distinguishes two different attitudes that we can take towards the other, a *naturalistic* and a *personalistic*. In the naturalistic attitude, the other is given in a two-fold step as a composite entity. First, the other’s body is given to us as a material unity and functionally dependent upon and located in this material object, the other’s experiential life is then posited as a founded stratum. Husserl then contrasts this attitude, which is prevalent in the sciences, with the personalistic attitude, which is the attitude of our daily life, and which is the one he takes to be the more fundamental. In this attitude, the other is from the beginning given in a unified manner as a person, rather than as a composite of two externally intertwined or causally related entities (Husserl 1952, 228). When encountering the other in the personalistic attitude, when I see the other dance, laugh or discuss something, I don’t see a conjunction of two realities, but one expressive unity. I don’t see a mere body, nor do I through the body intend an annexed mind. I see a human being. More specifically, Husserl speaks of how the mindedness of the other, his thinking, feeling, desiring, is intuitively present in the gestures, the intonation and in the facial expressions. Indeed, the expressivity of the other is imbued with psychological meaning from the start (Husserl 1952, 235), and according to Husserl, it is precisely empathy that allows us to understand and grasp this psychological meaning (Husserl 1952, 244).

In some places, Husserl writes that empathy is a distinct and direct kind of empirical experience, one that allows the empathizing ego to experience the consciousness of the other (Husserl 1973a, 187). Husserl also claims that empathy is what allows the other to be present to me, perceptually present (Husserl 1973c, 514), and that the other is given to me originally in empathy, for what I see is not a sign, not a mere analogue, but rather *the other* (Husserl 1973b, 385, 1993, 182, 1950, 153, 1973c, 506). Likewise, Husserl speaks of how the other is given in his being-for-me (*für-mich-sein*) in empathy, and how that counts as a form of perception (Husserl 1973c, 641, 1973b, 352). At the same time, however, Husserl also insists that even the most perfect perception of the psychical life of another lacks the originality of self-perception. Empathy cannot give us the empathized experience itself in its original presence (Husserl 1973a, 347, 440, 1974, 389, 1952, 199-200, 1950, 139). On occasions, Husserl even claims that foreign psychical life is in principle inaccessible to direct perception (Husserl 1966, 240). The other’s experience can only be appresented through a special form of apperception, or to use a different terminology, it is co-intended and characterized by a certain co-presence (Husserl 1973a, 27, 2002, 107).

As might be clear by now, there is a certain tension or uncertainty in Husserl’s account. I think, however, that it is possible to reconcile Husserl’s different claims by means of some slight reformulations. Husserl’s occasional insistence on the indirect nature of empathy is obviously motivated by his worry that any claim concerning a direct experiential understanding of others would amount to the claim that we have the same kind of first-personal access to other people’s consciousness as we have to our own, i.e., that the only way in which the mental states of another could be given directly to us would be for us to be in those states. Had that been the case, the experiences of others would have become our own and no longer remained that of others (Husserl 1973c, 12). But this worry is, I think, ultimately misguided. It assumes that there is a single gold standard of what directness amounts to, and that a direct access to one’s own mental life constitutes the standard against which everything else has to be measured. In other contexts, however, Husserl is careful to point out that it is unacceptable to transfer the demands we put on evidence in one domain to other domains where these demands are in principle incapable of being realized (Husserl 1976, 321). And there are even places where Husserl emphasizes that it would be a mistake to measure empathy against the standards of either self-perception or external object perception. Empathy has its own kind of originality, its own kind of fulfilment and corroboration and its own criteria of success and failure (Husserl 1954, 189, 2003, 65, 122, 1973b, 352, 385, 1973a, 225).

Employing that insight, one could respect the difference between first-person and third-person access to psychological states without making the mistake of restricting and equating experiential access with first-person access. To put it differently, why not argue that it is possible to experience minds in more than one way? Arguably, there is no more direct way of knowing that *another* is in pain than seeing him writhe in pain. Husserl is not as clear and consistent on this issue as one could have wished for, but as the following quote from *Erste Philosophie II* might illustrate, I do not think such a proposal would be disagreeable to his way of thinking:

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, 176).

Furthermore, as Husserl repeatedly stresses, 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, it is a difference that 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 (Husserl 1950, 139). In addition, although I do not have access to the first-personal character of the other’s experience, although I do not experience it as it is experienced by the other, the fact that there is more to the other’s experience than what I am grasping is salient to me, as Husserl repeatedly emphasizes (Husserl 1950, 144, 1973c, 631). To demand more, to claim that I would only have a real experience of the other if I experienced her feelings or thoughts in the same way as she herself does, is nonsensical, and fails to respect what is distinct and unique about the givenness of the other.

*5. The objects and levels of empathy*

So far, the discussion might have suggested that empathy for both Husserl and Stein is a unitary concept and that its object is the other subject. Both assumptions must be modified.

In the course of her investigation, Stein distinguishes different levels of accomplishment (*Vollzugsstufen*) (Stein 2010, 19). At first, I might be confronted with the doubt or elation in the other’s face, and I might have a vague and relatively empty comprehension of the other’s experience. But if I then try to better understand it, if I try to explicate its character, I will no longer face the other’s experiential state as an object. Rather, its intentionality will pull me along, and I will turn towards its intentional object. It is only after I have successfully accomplished this clarification, that I again will face the other’s experience as an object, but this time with an increased comprehension. To exemplify, consider a situation where you come across a crying child. Empathy will allow you to discern the child’s distress, even before you know *why* the child is upset. But if your empathy goes deeper, it will seek to understand what it is that has upset the child. Finally, after having grasped the object of the emotion, you will again turn towards the child, but this time with a better (and more fulfilled) understanding of her distress. Even when I follow the intentional pull of the child’s distress and turn towards, say, the absent mother, the distress is given to me in a quite peculiar manner. It is not felt as my own distress, nor as a remembered distress, let alone simply as an imagined distress. No, it is throughout given to me as the other’s distress, as a distress lived through by the other (Stein 2010, 10). This is precisely what is peculiar and distinct about empathy, and this is why Stein continues to label empathy a *sui generis* kind of experience (Stein 2010, 10).

If we move on to Husserl, we also find him distinguishing different levels of empathy. The most fundamental form of empathy is the one that allows us to apprehend the perceptually given body as a lived body, i.e., most fundamentally as a sensing body (Husserl 1973a, 70, 66, 435-6). This form of sensual empathy (to use a term by Stein (2010, 66)), which Husserl also calls animal apperception (*animalische Apperzeption*) or experience of animality, happens passively or associatively (Husserl 1973a, 455, 475-6). Husserl then contrasts this most basic and fundamental kind of empathy with a more active form that targets the understanding of that which is expressed in bodily expressions, namely beliefs, decisions, attitudes (Husserl 1973a, 435). In a manuscript from 1931-32, he operates with even more levels. The first level of empathy is the appresentation of the foreign lived body as sensing and perceiving. The second level is the appresentation of the other as physically acting, say, moving, pushing, or carrying something. The third level goes beyond this and attends to the purposefulness of the action and grasps, say, the running of the other as flight, etc. (Husserl 1973c, 435). On a few occasions, Husserl goes even further and also speaks of the kind of empathy involved in appropriating foreign traditions (Husserl 1973c, 436, 2006, 372-373).

 In other words, although Husserl would claim that a first level of empathy is constituted by coupling, by a passive and involuntary associative bonding of self and other on the basis of their bodily similarity (cf. Zahavi 2012), he would maintain that this is only the first primitive level and would never agree with the claim that it amounts to the full range of interpersonal understanding. The latter only reaches its culmination in acts of communication. Thus, we shouldn’t overlook that expressions can also be voluntary and serve communicative purposes. When I seek to influence the other, and when the other is aware that he is being addressed and when he reciprocates, we are dealing with communicative acts through which a higher interpersonal unity, a we, is established, and through which the world acquires the character of a truly social world (Husserl 1973c, 472, 1973a, 498, 1952, 192-194).

Incidentally, Husserl and Stein are not the only ones to distinguish levels of empathy. In the contemporary debate, various people have defended the idea that empathy rather than being a unitary phenomenon is in fact a multidimensional construct. Defenders of the latter view include de Vignemont who distinguishes *mirror empathy* and *reconstructive empathy* (2010)*,* and Stueber who distinguishes *basic empathy*, which he defines as a mechanism of inner imitation that underlies our theoretically unmediated quasi-perceptual ability to recognize other creatures directly as minded creatures, from *reenactive empathy*, which he defines as involving the use of our cognitive and deliberative capacities to reenact or imitate the thought processes of others (Stueber 2006, 20-21). In both of these authors, however, empathy is conceived within the conceptual framework of simulation theory. I will return to this shortly.

If we move on to the question regarding the proper object of empathy, Husserl actually denies that I normally thematize the other as an object when empathizing. Rather, when empathically understanding the other, I so to speak go along with his or her experiences, and attend to their object (Husserl 2003, 617, 1973c, 427, 513). It is consequently important to emphasize that the other, rather than being given to me simply as a nucleus of experiences, is given as a centre of orientation, as a perspective on the world. To put it differently, the other is not given in isolation or purity for me, rather the other is given as intentional, as directed at the same world as I, and the other’s world, and the objects that are there for him, is given along with the other (Husserl 1973b, 140, 287, 1973a, 411, 1952, 168, 1950, 154, Cf. Stein 2010, 68-69). This is of course, one reason why our perception of others is so unlike our ordinary perception of objects. As soon as the other appears on the scene, my relation to the world will change, since the other will always be given to me in a situation or meaningful context that points back to the other as a new centre of reference. The meaning the world has for the other affects the meaning it has for me. Or to phrase it using a concept coming from developmental psychology, for both Husserl and Stein empathy and social referencing are closely linked.

At the same time, however, both Husserl and Stein recognize that I can be part of what the other intends. So again, when I experience others, I do not merely experience them as psychophysical objects in the world, rather I experience them as subjects who experience worldly objects, myself included (Husserl 1973c, 4-5, 1952, 169, 1950, 158). In fact, through my experience of others, I precisely can come to attain a new experience of myself, I can come to adopt an alienating attitude towards myself and thereby come to see myself as others see me. To that extent, empathy can count as an important source of self-knowledge (Stein 2010, 130).

How should one compare and assess the relation between Scheler’s view and that of Husserl and Stein? Both of the latter strongly object to the former’s claim that we can experience not only our own experiences, but also those of another, through a kind of inner experience or intuition (cf. Scheler 2008, 249, Stein 2010, 30-32). Their worry is obviously that Scheler by making such a claim downplays what they take to be an essential difference between self-experience and other-experience, thereby leading to fusion and confusion. I think, however, that this specific controversy is more apparent than real. First, Scheler specifically defines inner intuition as an act that grasps the psychical, regardless of whether it is my own or that of the other (Scheler 2008, 249). In and of itself, this definition does not per se involve or entail a disregard of the difference between one’s own experiences and those of the other. And in fact, Stein concedes that such a definition is compatible with her own account of empathy. Secondly, although Scheler does indeed highlight the visibility and perceivability of some of the other’s psychological states, he also, as already mentioned, repeatedly emphasizes that there are dimensions of the other that are “absolutely inaccessible to any kind of experiential sharing” (Scheler 2008, 66).

But what about the following passage from *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie,* where Scheler speaks of

an immediate flow of experiences, *undifferentiated as between mine and thine*, which actually contains both our own and others’ experiences intermingled and without distinction from one another. Within this flow there is a gradual formation of ever more stable vortices, which slowly attract further elements of the stream into their orbits and thereby become successively and very gradually identified with distinct individuals (2008, 246).

This quote suggests that the differentiation between self and other is derivative and founded, and that it might be based on some kind of undifferentiated stratum of experience. If this is a correct reading, it would present a problem for my interpretation. Consider, however, the direct continuation of the quote:

But the essential links in the process are simply the facts: (1) that every experience belongs *in general to a self*, so that wherever an experience is given a self is also given, in a general sense; (2) that this self is necessarily an *individual self,* present throughout every experience (in so far as such experiences are adequately given), and not therefore primarily constituted by the interconnection between them. (3) That *there is an ‘I’ and a ‘Thou’ in a general sense*. But which individual self it may be, that owns a given experience, whether it is our own or another’s, is something that is not necessarily apparent in the experience as immediately presented (2008, 246).

This passage hardly supports the claim that Scheler should defend the view that there is a fundamental stratum of pre-individuated undifferentiated experiencing. This, of course, still leaves it a somewhat open question how precisely then to interpret Scheler’s reference to an undifferentiated flow of experience. One possibility, which I cannot pursue any further here, but which at least should be mentioned, is to employ the distinction between *authorship* and *ownership* and argue that although an experience for essential reasons always remained owned, it might have no clear author.

It is certainly not as if Scheler, Stein and Husserl are agreeing on everything, but there is still, I think, a sufficient amount of overlap between their respective theories to warrant talking about a distinct phenomenological account of and approach to empathy. The following quote by Scheler is one that Husserl and Stein could both accept without any qualms:

That we cannot be aware of an experience without being aware of a self is something which is directly based upon the intuitable intrinsic connection between individual and experience. […] It is a corollary of this that the other person has – like ourselves – a sphere of absolute personal privacy, which can never be given to us. But that ‘experiences’ occur there is given for us *in* expressive phenomena – again, not by inference, but directly, as a sort of primary perception. It is *in* the blush that we perceive shame, *in* the laughter joy. To say that our only initial datum is the body is completely erroneous. This is true only for the doctor or the scientist, i.e., for man in so far as he abstracts *artificially* from the expressive phenomena, which have an altogether primary givenness (Scheler 2008, 9-10).

6. *Theory of Mind*

As I pointed out in the beginning, there is currently no consensus about what empathy is. Rather, what one finds in the contemporary debate is a multitude of competing definitions. One rather useful way of mapping some of the central options has been provided by Heather Battaly in a recent article (2011). In 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 doesn’t 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. Thus, it is 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 would be excluded.
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.

As far as I can judge, Battaly’s tripartition really does capture the currently dominant positions, but I would suggest that the phenomenologists offer us a fourth option: For the phenomenologists, empathy is not simply the having of the mental state (like in contagion), nor is it a question of literally sharing the mental state with somebody else (which they take to be something over and above the empathic recognition of the other’s mental state), nor is it a question of just abstractly ascribing a certain mental state to another. Rather, and to repeat, for the phenomenologists empathy is quite generally the term of choice for the experience of foreign consciousness. It is a distinctive form of other-directed intentionality, distinct from both self-awareness and ordinary object-intentionality, which allows foreign experiences to disclose themselves as foreign rather than as own. Contrary to some current proposals, none of the phenomenologists would accept the claim that one can only empathize with affective states, rather they would take empathy to refer to our general ability to access the life of the mind of others in their expressions, expressive behaviour and meaningful actions. 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 of 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 isn’t 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.

Empathy is the experience of the embodied mind of the other, an experience which rather than eliminating the difference between self-experience and other-experience takes the asymmetry to be a necessary and persisting existential fact. One can consequently not empathize with unowned experiences. The givenness of the empathized experiences differs from the givenness of the experiences I am living through first-personally. The empathized experiences are given as belonging to another; they are given as lived through first-personally by that other. To that extent, the phenomenological analysis of empathy is in perfect accord with that tradition’s focus on and respect for the first-personal character of consciousness. Furthermore, according to the phenomenological proposal, empathy takes different forms, it has different stages or levels, and can provide a special kind of understanding, one that, to use a Husserlian terminology, provides intuitive fulfilment, confirmation or satisfaction to more indirect or signitive ways of intending or judging about other people’s mental lives. It is what more complex kinds of social cognition rely on and presuppose. Importantly, when saying that empathy can provide a special kind of 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, thereby making empathic understanding very different from, say, reasoning that the other is upset, because the letter she received has been torn up, or inferring that the other is drunk because he is surrounded by a dozen empty beer bottles, or concluding that the other must be furious because I would be furious if I had been subjected to the same treatment as he.

One implication (and limitation) of the phenomenological proposal is that it by highlighting and emphasizing the intuitive character of empathy also restricts it to face-to-face based forms of interpersonal encounter. On many other accounts, and this is also reflected in colloquial speech, it makes perfect sense to say that we can feel empathy, not only towards individuals not present, or whole groups of people, but even towards fictive literary figures. For the phenomenologists such uses of the term must at the very least be considered derivative. Moreover, it might be objected that any claims to the effect that people in Copenhagen felt empathy with those affected by the March 11 tsunami and earthquake in Japan, is problematic in that it blurs the distinction not only between empathy and sympathy, but also between empathy understood as a perception-based experiential access to the minds of others and a more cognitively demanding form of imaginative perspective taking.

One way to further highlight the distinctive character of the phenomenological proposal is by contrasting it with the simulationist proposal, according to which empathy involves a simulation-plus-projection routine, that is, where empathy is taken to be a projective process that centrally involves either the imaginative adaptation of another person’s point of view or at least some form of inner imitation (cf. Goldman 2006, 40, Stueber 2006, 15, 28). As we have already seen, the phenomenologists explicitly and repeatedly reject the view that imitation is the paradigm of empathy. If presented with Goldman’s view, they would have argued that such an account conflates empathy with other kinds of interpersonal understanding and ultimately, due to a misbegotten Cartesian heritage, disregards the fact that we can and do *experience* other minds.

Although the two main paradigms in the contemporary theory of mind debate, the theory-theory of mind and the simulation theory of mind, are not necessarily committed to the invisibility claim, i.e., to the claim that the mental states of others are unobservable, it is undeniable that prominent defenders of both approaches have often assumed that other minds are in fact characterized by a fundamental invisibility. They remain concealed and hidden, and it is precisely because we lack a direct experiential access to the mental states of others – which are frequently described as “inherently unobservable constructs” (Mitchell 2008) – that we need to rely on and employ either theoretical inferences or internal simulations. Without a commitment to a view like this, the constant appeal to internal imitations and projections and abductive inferences would make little sense. Indeed, as Epley and Waytz repeatedly state in their survey chapter on *Mind Perception* in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*: Others’ mental states are unobservable and inherently invisible and it is precisely because people lack direct information about others’ mental states that they must base their inferences on whatever information about others that they do have access to. They must make a leap from the observable behaviour to the unobservable mental states, a leap employing either simulation or theoretical inference (Epley & Waytz 2009 499, 505, 518). Thus theory-theory and simulation theory have frequently shared a fundamental background assumption, namely that the minds of others are hidden, which is why they have considered one of the main challenges facing a theory of social cognition to be the question of how and why we start ascribing such hidden mental entities or processes to certain publicly observable bodies. Here are a few representative quotes:

One of the most important powers of the human mind is to conceive of and think about itself and other minds. Because the mental states of others (and indeed of ourselves) are completely hidden from the senses, they can only ever be inferred (Leslie 1987, 139).

Empathy involves a leap of imagination into someone else’s headspace. While you can try to figure out other persons’ thoughts and feelings by reading their faces, their voices, and their postures, ultimately their internal worlds are not transparent, and to climb inside their heads requires imagining what it must be like to be them (Baron-Cohen 2005, 170).

Often the invisibility thesis is asserted without any argument right at the beginning of the analysis and apparently serves to motivate the ensuing approach. Saxe and colleagues, for instance, start their article by writing,

Unlike behaviorists, normal adults attribute to one another (and to themselves) unobservable internal mental states, such as goals, thoughts, and feelings, and use these to explain and predict behavior. This human capacity for reasoning about the mental causes of action is called a theory of mind (Saxe, Carey and Kanwisher, 2004, 87).

As I read these statements, the claim is not merely that propositional attitudes are invisible, but that this holds true for our psychological life as such, i.e., for all our mental states including our desires, feelings and intentions. They are all hidden from view. But is this assumption really sound? Is it really true that mental states (be it all of them or only those belonging to others) are invisible constructs and that our engagement with others as minded creatures is initially (or even exclusively) a question of attributing such hidden states to them? Is it really the case that all I can see is the other’s perspiration, his flushed face, wrinkled forehead, his jerky motion of the arms, the hunched lips, the clenched fists and the trembling, but not his fear, embarrassment, desire and frustration? Is it really the case that when faced with a weeping person, I first perceive drops of liquid rolling from her eyes, distortions of her facial muscles and broken sounds, and only then in a subsequent move come to realize that the person is grieving? Since I have discussed the invisibility claim in some detail in other papers (cf. Zahavi 2001, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011), let me here merely state that it is a claim that phenomenologists would typically reject. On the phenomenological proposal, when I empathically grasp the trepidation in the other’s voice or the intentions in her actions, I am *experiencing* foreign subjectivity, and not merely imagining it, simulating it or theorizing about it. That we can actually experience (rather than merely infer or imagine) the minds of others is, however, not to say that everything is open to view. Experiential directness does not entail infallibility or exhaustiveness. Another person’s mind is not exposed in such a way that we immediately, effortlessly and infallibly have complete access to her innermost thoughts and feelings. As Husserl points out, the perception of others is always partial and is always open for correction (Husserl 1973a, 225). In fact, there will always be an indeterminate horizon of not expressed interiority (Husserl 2005, 70), and a complete knowledge of the other will forever remain impossible. Furthermore, sometimes our direct acquaintance with others might be limited to the bare recognition of their existence. We immediately perceive the presence of mind, but often fail to discern anything further with regard to it (Duddington 1918-1919, 168).

It might at this point be helpful to consider a threefold distinction. On the one hand, we should distinguish our ability to ascribe mindedness to another, i.e., our coming to understand that another has a mind in the first place, from our ability to determine another’s specific state of mind. On the other hand, we should distinguish our ability to determine or detect the current mental state of another from our ability to reason about a person’s past and future mental states and behaviours. Let me label these different achievements, the grasping of the *that*, the *what* and the *why*. Consider to start with, that we in daily life often wonder whether others like us or not, find us trustworthy or not, or attractive or not. We wonder whether others are being truthful or deceptive, and whether others are motivated by greed or generosity. We very rarely wonder whether others are minded in the first place. In fact this is something that is not only taken for granted; it is also something the certitude of which is of a quite different magnitude than whatever certainty we might have regarding the ascription of specific mental states to others. As Gurwitsch wrote at one point, in ordinary life, we are never faced with the choice of whether or not we wish to take the people we are meeting in the street or conversing with as real people or mere automatons. And as he then asks, where does this deep-rooted certainty, which far exceeds our confidence in well-confirmed scientific hypotheses, come from (Gurwitsch 1979, 10-11)?

Furthermore, consider the distinction between the *what* and the *why* question. It is one thing to determine what a person is experiencing or doing, say, being sad or angry or reaching for a cup. But even if empathy might allow us to directly grasp (part of) what a person is experiencing or doing, this will not as such provide us with an understanding of *why* somebody is sad or angry or performing the action in question. According to the phenomenological proposal, empathy provides us with an experiential access to other minds. But although we should recognize its importance, we also need to recognize its limitations. There is a limit to how far empathy (plus sensitivity to the immediate context) can get us. Our everyday understanding of others draws on other resources as well. If we wish to unearth *why* somebody is feeling the way he does or *why* he is acting the way he does, we might need to consider the larger social, cultural, and historical context, and this understanding is not provided by empathy.

What these distinctions should make clear is that the phenomenologists in addition to being interested in some of the same questions as simulationists and theory-theorists, namely how we determine the other’s more specific state of mind and come to understand its relation to the person’s past and future mental states and behaviours, are also interested in a somewhat different question, namely the question of how we come to understand that another has a mind in the first place. A standard claim has precisely been that the recognition of others as minded creatures is not only more fundamental, but also more certain than our ascription of specific beliefs and emotions to others. As Schutz pointed out, the experience of the presence of others is prior to any understanding of others that draws on imaginative projection, autobiographical memory or theoretical knowledge (Schutz 1967, 162). We only start to employ the latter strategies, when we are already convinced that we are facing minded creatures, but are simply unsure about precisely how we are to interpret the expressive phenomena in question, or to put it differently, we would not start to inquire into the meaning of another’s actions, we would not attempt to predict or explain them, were we not already convinced that the other was a minded, experiencing, subject. Moreover, even if there is much about the other that is not readily accessible, there is a decisive difference between our everyday uncertainty about what precisely others might be thinking about, and the nightmare vision of the solipsist. Although we might be uncertain about the specific beliefs and intentions of others, this uncertainty does *not* make us question their very mindedness.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Interestingly, and perhaps also slightly confusingly, empathy is taken to play a role when it comes to answering both types of question. What is brought out by Husserl’s and Stein’s analyses in particular is that empathy works along a continuum. At one end of the scale, empathy is understood as a basic sensitivity to the mindedness of others. It can, however, also provide us with a more specific experiential grasp of the psychological life of the other.

7. *Conclusion*

As I pointed out earlier, the primary goal of this probe into the early phenomenological exploration of empathy was not to provide a clear cut definition of the notion, but rather to highlight some of the insights that can be garnered from that exploration; insights that remain of relevance for the contemporary discussion of social cognition. These would include the emphasis on the multifaceted character of interpersonal understanding, a recognition of our basic sensitivity to the mindedness of others and, of course, a highlighting of our experiential grasp of the foreignness of the other’s consciousness.

As should have become clear, the phenomenologists I have been discussing do acknowledge that interpersonal understanding comes in many shapes and forms and that a single model cannot do justice to the whole variety. We should consequently be wary of any theory that claimed that our understanding of others is solely a question of, say, direct empathic understanding, imaginative projection, analogical reasoning, or inference to best explanation. We need multiple complementary accounts in order to cover the variety of abilities, skills and strategies that we draw on and employ in order to understand and make sense of others. To put it differently, the phenomenologists are not claiming that all forms of social cognition involve or can be explained by empathy. They are not denying that we, in some cases, rely on imagination, memory or theoretical knowledge when attempting to understand others. In fact, they readily concede that if we really want to understand the full psychological life of others, if we really want to understand what others are up to, why they are doing what they are doing, and what that means to them, then we have to go beyond a narrow focus on face-to-face interaction and embodied engagement. In short, none of them are disputing that we have to go beyond what is directly available if we wish to attain deeper levels of interpersonal understanding. But making that concession doesn’t make them question or downplay the importance of the face-to-face encounter, since they all consider it basic. The foundation of interpersonal understanding is not to be found in detached belief-ascriptions but in a far more primitive sensitivity to animacy, agency and emotional expressivity.

In the contemporary debate on empathy, one can encounter distinctions between mirror empathy, motor empathy, affective empathy, perceptually mediated empathy, reenactive empathy and cognitive empathy, to mention just a few of the options available. Given the polysemic character of the notion of empathy (and also the fact that not all phenomenologists were equally happy using the term) one might, of course, wonder whether it would not be best to simply drop the term and instead present the phenomenological findings as contributions to the more general field of social cognition. Although one could certainly do so, here is one reason for resisting such a move. I think Lipps, Husserl and many others got it right when they urged us to respect the irreducible difference between our knowledge of external objects, our self-knowledge and our knowledge of others. Continuing to use and employ the notion of empathy might help us keep that point in mind.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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1. The following overview of the phenomenological reception of Lipps owes much to Zahavi 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. My discussion of Husserl’s account of empathy is largely adapted from Zahavi 2012, which contains a far more detailed presentation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The arguments in the last few paragraphs are adapted from Zahavi 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am indebted to two anonymous reviewers for a number of helpful comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)