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# Perspective Chapter: A Phenomenological Approach to Empathy

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## Abstract

In this chapter, we will seek to determine the role that empathy plays in the relationship between different human beings. In the phenomenological tradition, empathy was often considered the primordial form of relationship with others. According to classical phenomenology, bodily externalizations of inner psychic phenomena play an important role here. In this chapter, we will critically evaluate this approach to empathy. We will argue that empathy presupposes a prior recognition of the other in everyday life. From this perspective, empathy would constitute a second—although fundamental—moment of intersubjective life. The experience of a shared world entails an immediately shared understanding of that world and of those who live in it. Empathy would awaken only when anonymous relationships with other human beings become problematic. In the twentieth century, this concept has been appropriated by psychology on different levels: as a device to analyze how far the lack of empathy may be at the origin of certain pathologies and as a clinical tool that allows the psychologist to gain a deeper insight into the patient's problems. Unfortunately, dialog between the two disciplines around this issue was almost never carried out. This chapter tries to foster the possibilities of such a dialog.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, psychotherapy, intersubjectivity, empathy, compassion

## 1. Introduction

In the phenomenological tradition that stems from Edmund Husserl's work, empathy – the generally accepted translation of the German word *Einfühlung* – has been regarded as a privileged way of accessing other human beings' psychical life. Departing from Theodor Lipps' conceptions – namely, depriving Lipps' theory of empathy from any relation with esthetic feelings, where the study of the phenomenon of empathy had its roots – Husserl offers in his theory of empathy a way of explaining how we can reckon in other living beings the existence of a psychic life similar to our own: more specifically, a kind of psychic life that, like ours, can engage in constitutive achievements about the meaning of the world and of the objectivities that lie there. Moreover, when one reads Lipps, one easily gets the impression that his notion of empathy covers a large spectrum of different behaviors. For instance, Lipps calls empathy the relation between someone who talks and someone who hears, because, at

least if one listens attentively, one feels determined by the same thing that determines who is speaking to him ([1] p. 187). Nevertheless, the idea that empathy is somehow related to our ability to grasp foreign mental states by means of the apprehension of the bodily movements of others will never disappear in phenomenological thought.

The main difference between Lipps and the phenomenologists consists rather in the fact that Lipps systematically resorts to the notion of projection to explain why other bodies may be perceived as animated bodies, while phenomenologists stress the fact that the experience of a foreign psycho-physical unity is immediate. In a manuscript going back to 1909, Husserl already stressed that in the perception of a living body, something (i.e., its *psyché*) is also originally present and perceptible in the same primary sense as the body ([2], p. 22). The idea of a projection also led Lipps to state that empathy can be deceitful ([1], p. 199), since human beings can simulate states of mind, they do not have.

Consequently, the acceptance of empathy became one of the touchstones of a phenomenological-oriented theory of intersubjectivity, to the point that intersubjectivity and empathy seemed to mean the same phenomenon. However, both concepts do not necessarily overlap, and Husserl, in his first writings on empathy, sometimes also labeled “analogizing empathy”, seems to think that empathy is only the ground of intersubjectivity. Husserl’s explanations on this issue, however, have not remained undisputed, even inside the phenomenological movement. Outside the phenomenological movement, empathy – in the Husserlian sense – has also aroused mistrust since Husserl gave the theory its first public presentation in the 5th Cartesian Meditation. Since Husserl’s earlier research on empathy remained unpublished, it was not easy for anyone to grasp all the aspects of the theory. Notwithstanding, Husserl’s notion of empathy – along with Edith Stein’s and even Max Scheler’s notion of sympathy – has been generally welcomed in the fields of psychiatry and psychopathology. The same holds for the acceptance of empathy by the comprehensive social sciences, sometimes with references to the contributions of other phenomenologists, like Martin Heidegger or Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

In the field of psychology, above all, empathy has acquired considerable importance, and several (and sometimes antagonistic) psychological schools have addressed this topic. The so-called “developmental perspective”, for instance, considers that empathy and intersubjectivity play essential roles in the development of social skills and emotional intelligence, particularly in childhood. The ability to understand and share the feelings of others is foundational for normal social interactions. From a clinical standpoint, psychologists claim that lack of empathy or difficulties in engaging in intersubjective relations can be associated with various psychological disturbances, such as certain kinds of autism spectrum disorders or personality disorders. Consequently, therapeutic interventions often aim to enhance empathy and improve interpersonal understanding. More recently, the neuroscientific perspective, especially neuroscientific research, has identified brain regions associated with empathy, shedding light on the neural mechanisms underlying our ability to understand and resonate with the emotions of others.

In this chapter, we aim to give a critical survey of these several uses of a concept that, for some, still remains controversial. Phenomenology will help in the efforts of clarification of the issues, especially on the basis of its theory of embodiment. Indeed, the problem of the way a mind acts upon another mind can be much more easily explained if we acknowledge the embodiment of minds and, at the same time, the irreducibility of somatic living bodies (and their cognitive, emotive, and linguistic acts) to space-temporal physical things.

## 2. The place of *Einfühlung* in the phenomenological tradition

The varied analyses to which Husserl subjects the phenomenon of empathy are situated within the scope of the problem that we could call the “constitution of the alter-ego”. The best-known analyses are probably those found in the 5th Cartesian Meditation. However, these analyses concern only one aspect of the problem of empathy. In fact, in this book, Husserl only refers to the alter-ego as another transcendental subject, with which the Ego could engage in a common procedure: namely, the constitution of a community of transcendental subjects – which Husserl will also label a monadic community – living in a common world. The concrete social relation between an Ego and an alter-ego was not within the scope of the *Cartesian Meditations*.

However, outside this constitutive sphere of the alter-ego, which represents one of the specifically transcendental tasks of phenomenology, Husserl proceeds to other uses of the concept of empathy. We think, in particular, about the numerous passages from Volumes XIII, XIV, and XV of the *Husserliana*, dedicated, as it is known, to the problem of intersubjectivity. What seems specific to the *Cartesian Meditations* is the fact that, always Husserl speaks of empathy, he puts it at the same level as the procedure he labels “pairing”, i.e., an analogizing procedure that will allow someone to say that he perceives a somatic body identical to his own ([3], p. 142). Around 1910 – in an earlier phase of his research on this issue – Husserl followed a different path, but he reached a similar conclusion. He tried to see if empathy could be explained in terms of “image consciousness” ([2], p. 187). For instance, when I feel angry, my anger would be a kind of object-image that makes it possible for me to reckon an identical emotion in someone else, the subject-image. This experience, Husserl argues, would be similar to what happens when I look at a painting: the painted colors and the drawn figures (i.e., the object-image) allow me to evoke what is represented in the painting. Husserl, however, rejects this explanation altogether.

In the *Cartesian Meditations*, empathy and pairing are associatively connected in the experience of an alien subjectivity. Husserl stresses that this procedure is not a reasoning but a variety of intuitive knowledge. In the 1st Logical Investigation – in an argument that resembles another already present in Lipps – he argued that, in normal speech situations, when someone hears another person talking to him, the person who hears immediately grasps the fact that another person has the intention of speaking and being heard ([4], p. 40). Of course, a complete transference of the properties of my Ego to the alien Ego will never happen. Indeed, if this ever were the case, our two Egos would be indistinguishable; moreover, both our kinesthetic fields would be one, and I would have the same bodily experiences that the Ego has ([3], p. 143). The exact frontiers of this analogizing procedure, however, were never determined convincingly by Husserl. Actually, I can experience an empathic relation with someone with whom the possibility of pairing is questionable; that is why men are most of the time sensitive to animal suffering. The same happens if my own body is the body of an adult male and the other body is the body of a woman or a child.

The way Husserl addresses empathy and characterizes the way it works had some critics among authors belonging to the phenomenological movement. This was the case, for example, of Max Scheler. Scheler argued that only the prior recognition of someone as another human being allows the establishment of empathetic relationships. This is in accordance with Scheler’s general idea that our perceptions of ourselves as psychical or animated beings are secondary and dependent on the experience of other subjects that belong to the same milieu as we do. Consequently,



an analogical procedure that takes as its point of departure my experience of myself as a psychic-somatic being will always be at grips with the problem of empathy. Empathy, for Scheler, is always factual and empirical. Consequently, how we come to know and understand “other minds” is, for Scheler, a problem that has to do, in the first place, with the philosophical-metaphysical foundation of social existence ([5], p. 209).

Other critics inside the phenomenological movement intended to go even further than Husserl. That was the case of Edith Stein, who compared the experience of the other self to the perception of one's own self ([6], p. 51), while Husserl preferred to compare it with phenomena like remembrance or expectation of a future event, under the common label of “presentification”. The problem for Husserl seems to lie in the impossibility of experiencing in a foreign body the same “I can” that I experience in mine ([2], p. 46). That is why a foreign body is transcendent and only as transcendent can it be experienced by me. Stein argues in a different way. She begins to ask how sensations of any kind are primordially given to us, concluding, then, that, besides feeling them, we can also locate them in a part of the body; however, while, in the first case, we are allowed to speak of “inner perception”, in the second case we can only speak of “outer perception”. The other's field of sensations is present to us just in the same way. Of course, as a trained phenomenologist, Stein knew very well that, for Husserl, perception has a primordiality that cannot be found in other kinds of intentional acts and must be denied to them. Husserl, when he compared empathy and remembrance, only wanted to highlight the fact that the primordiality of my sphere of ownness has necessarily a different character than the experience of the alter-Ego. However, Stein thinks that in the case of empathy, the importance does not lie in primordiality – which empathy does not have, compared with the experience one has of one's own Ego or of one's own body as a field of sensations and possible movements – but, instead, in the possibility of complete fulfillment.

Notwithstanding, the way Husserl deals with empathy in the 5th Cartesian Meditation represents, as we said above, a later stage in his thoughts about the issue. Moreover, as we also said, the tasks Husserl wanted to fulfill there – i.e., how can a community of monadic transcendental Egos constitute a world common to them all – did not allow him to address other important characteristics of the intersubjective relations that give empathy a specific role. In the second volume of the *Ideas* (that remained unpublished, as is well-known, during Husserl's lifetime), the references to empathy come second regarding other forms of communalized or socialized intersubjectivity ([7], p. 268). We will come back to this issue in Section 4 of this chapter. However, since Husserl, in the *Cartesian Meditations*, was not targeting this issue, he could make an appeal to a so-called second *epoché*, in which the noemata that carried any reference to another subjectivity (like cultural products, objects of everyday use, etc.) were bracketed. In this work, the other appears in a kind of experience that is not mediated by the presentation of cultural objects or any kind of objectivities that point to the existence of intentionality other than mine.

### **3. The expressive body**

We have already mentioned above that Husserl began his investigations into the experience of the other with a critic of Theodor Lipps' concept of empathy. It is important to note that, for Lipps, empathy was a kind of second stage in a two-stage experience: for him, first, one reckons that the movements or facial expressions of another body are like one's own; then one projects in them the same meaning one

finds in one's own movements and expressions, due to reasoning by analogy. Husserl argues that analogy here is not reasoning but instead a passive experience grounded in one's own bodily sensations. That is the reason why, as we saw in the previous section, he resorts to the word "pairing". Of course, this is problematic. I have an experience of my ownness, and only this experience enables me to say that I experience another self in such a way that the analogizing procedure cannot be annulled ([3], p. 143). In a way, the other is constituted by me in his otherness.

However, in Husserl, the explanations about the nature of pairing do not always coincide, although the fact that it is carried out in a regime of passivity is always highlighted. As we all remember, the kern of the critiques addressed to Lipps related to the possibility of conceiving analogy not as reasoning but rather as a lived experience. In a manuscript from March or April 1934 ([8], p. 660) -corresponding to the last phase of Husserl's theory of empathy, a phase that began when he was working on the *Cartesian Mediations* – we find the following explanation: in two different phases of the same activity – one already carried out, the other still waiting to be carried out – and to the extent that the first still remains "there", with the possibility of being easily evoked, a relationship of similarity can be established. It is not just the case of recognizing an equality between two things (or an identity of a thing with itself), but rather the recognition that with them (or with the same thing), one can go on doing what one was trying to do. Two different moments in the time flow are, so to speak, immediately coupled with each other, perhaps because the kinesthetic movements that accompany both experiences are the same.

What we will try to show in this section is that we have an immediate experience of the other and do not have to infer other minds through analogical processes. Having this kind of immediate experience, however, cannot mean that we have access to his or her mind like he or she has access to it. We already stressed before that if this were the case, our minds would be indistinguishable, and we would be the same person. The other always is, so to speak, "out there" in the world, just like us. This world is essentially communal or public, not private. Sartre showed that the difficulty in accepting this "publicity" emerges from the prejudice that we must overcome the distance that separates us from our fellow human beings, reducing them meanwhile to objects of knowledge. This is perhaps one of the reasons why solipsism has haunted some philosophies. However, as Sartre has stressed, resorting to Husserl's analysis in the *Cartesian Meditations*, we have an experience of the others even before knowing them because the others are essential to us in the process of world constitution ([9], p. 278). When Sartre says that I see the other in a table I am now perceiving, he means that the table is there for us both to see, that the other can see the parts of the table that I cannot perceive now, and that only our mutual and interchangeable perceptions guarantee the identity of the object perceived. Above all, Sartre wants to say that the consciousness of the existence of the other precedes an empathic relation. We will come back to this issue in the next section.

For Husserl, empathy allows us to understand that another being has a life identical to ours, that is, a life regulated by a psyche, and that his movements are not just mechanical in nature. As an outcome of empathy, I realize that whoever I see also sees me and that, if we exchange our positions in space, I will see as the other sees now – that is, I will have the same point of view as he has now – just as, reciprocally, his point of view will then be the same as my point of view now. With the acknowledgment of this importance of embodiment for empathy – and for any kind of analogical procedure – it may seem *prima facie* that Husserl, in the 1930s, came back regarding his earlier critiques of Lipps' theory of expression. Perhaps Scheler's critics also had

some effect on Husserl. In 1912, in *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, Scheler argued against the analogical procedure we have already mentioned, saying that we do not have to guess the existence of a foreign mind in a foreign body in cases in which this body behaved just like mine. The foreign mind is experienced in the expressive movements of the body since body and mind are not two separate substances. However, Scheler goes even further ([5], p. 214). He argues that the knowledge of an alien soul (by which he means the psychic life of another human being) comes second regarding our unconscious incorporation of the other's habits and dispositions in a social and communitarian context, since early childhood. We will show below that, near the end of his life, Husserl approached this notion of the unconscious.

The fact that Husserl always had some problems with bodily expressions may look like one of those strange technicalities that seem to characterize phenomenology. However, Husserl thought – very probably with reason – that expressive acts belong to a level that is higher than the level at which we reckon the psycho-physical existence of another person. We can take a sound or a movement to be expressive, Husserl argues, only if, first, we make the experience of a somatic body and its ongoing lived procedures. In a criticism of Lipps, going back to the time he was writing *Ideas II*, Husserl had already stated that in order to be able to understand a bodily movement as an expression, we must, in the first place, constitute a foreign body as a somatic body ([2], p. 71).

For Scheler, however ([5], p. 214), there is a primitive and original phenomenon of expression – ontologically “neutral”, so to speak, regarding the nature of what or who is being expressed – which only later will be differentiated in phenomena belonging to a lived body and phenomena belonging to the “inner world” of our fellow human beings. With the help of the concept of “neutral experience”, Scheler thinks he has overcome any possible trouble that comes with the concept of empathy. Nevertheless, one can ask in return if the concept of neutrality does not entail awkward and perhaps insoluble difficulties. At least, it entails the abandonment of the phenomenological ground. If one claims to be doing phenomenology, one must practice intentional analysis. In fact, if an experience has “neutrality” as its main characteristic, who is experiencing, and what is being experienced?

#### **4. The experience of the other “before” empathy**

That empathy is the beginning of the experience of an alter-ego has also been questioned by the French phenomenologist Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre, as we said in the previous section, addressed rather critically the problem of empathy. For him, the main problem regarding intersubjectivity is the way by which an Ego is “for himself” with another Ego; secondarily, how an Ego comes to say “we”, and not only “you and I”, or even just “I”. According to *Being and Nothingness*, we do not experience ourselves independently of the look of someone who is looking at us, nor live the experience of love, hate, or jealousy toward someone before being able to say “we”. Subjective feelings of love or hate always suppose you and I already connected above all. When someone says “we”, no one is an object for no one, while when I am just being looked at (by someone who crosses me in the street), I have already been turned into an object. To overcome this apparent paradox, Sartre resorts to his former analysis of intentional acts ([9], p. 464).

When consciousness intends something, it cannot, at the same time, intend its own intentional activity. If I am intentionally directed to my friend Paul who is lying in bed with a serious illness, I am not intending my feelings regarding Paul. However, later,



speaking to someone about Paul, I can say: “I spend all this evening beside Paul’s bed who is ill; I feel very sorry for him.” Was I feeling any sorrow when I was just beside Paul’s bed? In a way, yes, since if this was not true, I would be unable to speak later about my sorrow, but I was not thematically directed to my sorrow. According to Sartre, the same thing happens when I say “we”. I am always aware of “us”, since I live in a world where other human beings exist and either cooperate with me or are my rivals. However, I only acknowledge their existence thematically when I am not engaged in a common action but reflect on its conditions of possibility. Notwithstanding, it seems that the two experiences – the experience of the suffering of my friend and the “we-experience” – are not at the same level. The first is always an authentic one, and the second may sometimes be, and sometimes not. The following example will help us understand why,

To corroborate this idea Sartre ([9], p. 465) imagines a situation in which I am on the terrace of a café full of people. Usually this is the ideal situation for a reduction of the human subjects to an objective condition. Everyone (including myself) is looked at by everyone else as a stranger. But as soon as a car accident happens on the street in front of us, we all feel solidarity with the victim. And although this feeling of solidarity is something that each person, individually, experiences within himself, there is a collective solidarity – which does not need to be expressed through language – that reinforces those individual feelings. In this kind of situation, I feel myself automatically engaged in a “we-experience”. However, being with a multitude of people around me is always a contingent situation. I could find myself alone on the terrace, and probably my reaction to the car accident would be different.

Nevertheless, we can also find in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* some analysis of intersubjectivity closer to Husserl’s, but, once more, without mentioning the role of empathy. Suppose that I am perceiving a three-dimensional object. I immediately know that some parts of the object, namely those that are opposed to me, cannot be seen from my present point of view. In this situation, I imagine the possibility of another human being posited in front of me but on the other side of the object, seeing what I cannot see now. The same happens when I am in the presence of a cultural object, for instance, a book or a piece of music; it immediately comes to my mind the idea of another human being who is the author of the book or the music.

Notwithstanding, it is not in the phenomenological theory of perception that we can find a way of addressing intersubjectivity without putting empathy in the foreground of the analysis. Already in 1912 – on the eve of the publication of the first volume of *Ideas* – Husserl had written ([7], p. 268): “The development of a person is determined by the influence of others, by the influence of their thoughts, their feelings (as suggested to me), their commandments. This influence determines personal development, whether or not the person subsequently realizes it [...]” In manuscripts going back to 1910, i.e., to an early stage of his theory of empathy, we can find similar ideas. Emphasizing the role of communitarian experiences, Husserl writes: “Consequently, equality occurs: a diversity of similar, independent, feeling, and wanting selves in an identical sense.” ([2], p. 244).

## 5. Empathy from different psychological points of view

Psychology does not have the same problems as philosophy when addressing the problem of empathy. Several psychological currents, as we will see, put empathy at the heart of their way of dealing with clinical issues. For this reason, they offer the philosopher a rich asset of empirical observations that can be used to address the classical empathy problems we mentioned in the previous sections. Of course,



one cannot expect that the psychologist will focus on these problems with the same intentions a philosopher has. For instance, it is not the business of psychologists to make the same kind of distinctions between lived body, psyche, and soul that we find in some philosophers, namely, those that belong to the phenomenological school. Notwithstanding, the collaboration between these two disciplines may be very profitable for both. It is also worth noting that this collaboration is not a recent trend in empathy studies. More than 100 years ago, Max Scheler ([5], p. 210) already noted – resorting to contemporary testimonies of Hugo Münsterberg and Arthur Kronfeld – that the epistemology and methodology of psychology and psychiatry philosophical research in this field could be fundamental.

For the psychologists of the Theory of Mind (TOM) school, for instance, empathy, on the one hand, involves the ability to attribute mental states, such as beliefs and emotions, to oneself and others, facilitating an understanding of and prediction about others' behavior; on the other hand, it is the capacity to share and comprehend others' feelings. In the context of TOM, empathy is closely linked with intersubjectivity, as it entails recognizing and understanding others' emotional states.

The development of TOM is seen as a foundational step for the development of empathy in the field of psychology [10]. Several key points underline the relationship between TOM and empathy, namely, (a) cognitive perspective-taking: TOM requires the ability to take others' perspectives, which is crucial for understanding their emotions. Empathy often involves cognitive perspective-taking, where individuals can envision themselves in someone else's situation; (b) recognition of emotions: TOM enables individuals to recognize and understand others' emotions. Empathy builds on this by allowing individuals to emotionally connect with others and share in their emotional experiences; (c) developmental connection: both TOM and empathy undergo significant development during childhood. Children gradually acquire the ability to understand and infer others' mental states, forming the basis for empathetic responses; (d) neural basis: Neuroscientific studies suggest overlap in the neural systems involved in TOM and empathy. Brain regions such as the mirror neuron system and prefrontal cortex play roles in understanding others' mental states and experiencing empathy; (e) social understanding: TOM contributes to social understanding, and empathy is crucial for successful social interactions. Understanding others' emotions is essential for forming and maintaining social relationships (see [11]).

Another empathy model is the Affective and Cognitive Empathy Model. It is important to notice that the Affective and Cognitive Empathy Model is a large conceptual framework drawing from a collective body of research, which is not directly linked to the name of specific authors [12]. However, while the model is not associated with anyone in particular, several researchers have significantly contributed to this field of research. Noteworthy figures include Jean Decety, a neuroscientist and psychologist known for his work on empathy, moral processing, and social cognition (see [13–15]), Tania Singer, a neuroscientist specializing in social cognition, empathy, and compassion; Marco Iacoboni, who conducted research on mirror neurons and their role in empathy; and Frans de Waal [12], a primatologist and ethologist, whose work delves into empathy and social behavior in animals, particularly primates, offering insights into the evolutionary aspects of empathy.

The Affective and Cognitive Model is, in the first place, a conceptual framework that delineates two primary facets of empathy: affective empathy, encompassing emotional resonance, and cognitive empathy, involving cognitive perspective-taking [14]. However, this is not specifically new in psychological studies. At the beginning of the last century, Theodor Lipps stressed the cognitive and moral role of empathic relations

([2], p. 198ff.). For the Affective and Cognitive Model, affective empathy, also known as emotional empathy, entails sharing and vicariously experiencing others' emotions, allowing individuals with high affective empathy to "feel with" others, mirroring emotional responses. On the other hand, cognitive empathy, also termed perspective-taking or mentalizing, involves understanding others' thoughts, beliefs, and perspectives at an intellectual level without necessarily sharing the emotional experience.

These two empathy components, affective and cognitive, are not mutually exclusive, and individuals can possess varying degrees of both. The Affective and Cognitive Empathy Model aids researchers and psychologists in comprehending the nuanced nature of empathy and its diverse manifestations. Widely utilized in exploring empathy across contexts such as interpersonal relationships, social interactions, and therapeutic settings, this model acknowledges empathy as a multifaceted construct. It incorporates emotional resonance (affective empathy) and intellectual understanding of perspectives (cognitive empathy) [16]. This nuanced understanding proves valuable in fields like psychology, counseling, and education, facilitating a more comprehensive analysis of empathetic processes and interventions.

The Perception-Action Model of Empathy, initially proposed by Preston and de Waal in 2002 and later expanded by Jean Decety and Philip L. Jackson in 2006, is a theoretical framework highlighting the interplay between perception and action in the empathetic response. This model posits that empathy entails both perceiving and comprehending others' emotional states, coupled with a corresponding emotional and motor response.

The key elements of the Perception-Action Model of Empathy consist of the Perception Component, encompassing the perception of others' emotions and its neural mechanisms, and the Action Component, involving motor and emotional responses and their neural underpinnings. Additional crucial components include Simulation and Shared Representations. In the context of Perceiving Others' Emotions, the model begins with the recognition of emotional clues, such as facial expressions or body language, requiring accurate interpretation. Neural mechanisms, including the mirror neuron system and areas associated with social cognition, play a role in this process. The mirror neuron system, in particular, is deemed crucial for mirroring or resonating with others' emotions. Lipp's too related empathy with mimetic processes. Concerning Motor and Emotional Responses, the model suggests that perceiving others' emotions prompts a corresponding emotional and motor response in the observer, involving a similar emotional experience and potential mimicry of observed emotional expressions. The neural circuits implicated in perceiving emotions are also involved in generating emotional and motor responses, emphasizing the interconnectedness of perception and action systems in the brain.

Simulation and Shared Representations align with the simulation theory of empathy, proposing that individuals internally simulate or mimic the emotional and motor states of others. This internal simulation contributes to understanding others' emotions and elicits an emotional and motor response in the observer. Shared representations between the observer and the observed person form the foundation of empathetic responses, enabling individuals to resonate with and comprehend others' emotional experiences. However, the model acknowledges the complexity of empathy, recognizing that it is influenced by various factors and refrains from oversimplifying the richness of human empathetic experiences. It emphasizes the dynamic interplay among perception, action, and cognitive processes.

The Perception-Action Model of Empathy has significantly influenced research on empathy, particularly in neuroscience and social psychology. It offers a framework

for comprehending how the brain processes emotional information and generates empathetic responses, underscoring the integrated nature of perception and action in the empathetic experience.

The Empathy-Compassion Model is a psychological framework delving into the interplay between empathy and compassion. While empathy involves understanding and sharing others' feelings, compassion extends beyond by encompassing a desire to alleviate their suffering and a motivation to provide help. This model emphasizes the transition from empathetic feelings to compassionate actions, with empathy serving as the initial stage. It involves perceiving and connecting with others' emotional experiences. In this model, Personal Distress may lead to Empathic Concern – a more compassionate response that goes beyond personal distress and involves a genuine desire to help and alleviate others' suffering. Perspective-taking, the ability to adopt others' perspectives, is crucial for empathy, facilitating understanding of others' needs and experiences.

Altruism, within this model, denotes selfless acts of kindness and assistance toward others. Compassion motivates altruistic behaviors directed at relieving others' suffering, involving a deep awareness of their pain and a strong desire to alleviate it. Compassion transcends empathy by incorporating a motivational aspect, driving individuals to take proactive and caring actions. It motivates behaviors that offer comfort and support. Empathy-induced altruism refers to acts of kindness motivated by feelings of empathy and compassion. The model posits that genuine, selfless acts are more likely when empathetic responses turn into compassionate motivations, fostering a desire to make a positive difference.

The Empathy-Compassion Model underscores the importance of progressing from empathetic feelings to compassionate actions, recognizing that while empathy enables connection with others' emotional experiences, compassion plays a vital role in motivating altruistic behaviors aimed at reducing suffering and promoting well-being.

Research by Tania Singer [17] also explores the relationship between empathy and compassion. Paul Gilbert [18] extensively researches compassion-focused therapy and its psychological aspects, contributing to the understanding of compassion development. Kristin Neff [19] focuses on self-compassion, contributing to the broader understanding of compassion as an emotional response. Nancy Eisenberg [20] investigates empathy and prosocial behavior, especially in children, shedding light on empathy development and its connection to compassionate actions. Jean Decety [21] made valuable contributions to the understanding of the links between empathy and prosocial behavior, including compassionate responses. It is important to notice that the field of empathy and compassion is multidisciplinary, involving contributions from researchers in psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and other disciplines.

## **6. Some psychological therapies based on empathy**

The Person-Centered Therapy, also known as Client-Centered Therapy, was developed by psychologist Carl Rogers [22] and is recognized as a therapeutic approach deeply rooted in empathy. One key reason for this classification is the emphasis on providing unconditional positive regard to clients, whereby therapists accept and support clients without judgment, creating an empathetic and noncritical environment. The significance of empathic understanding in therapy is highlighted by Carl Rogers [23], and therapists practicing this approach strive to comprehend the client's subjective experiences, feelings, and perspectives.



In Client-Centered Therapy, therapists actively listen and use reflective techniques, with reflective listening being a central element. Through this process, therapists convey empathy by accurately reflecting clients' thoughts and seeking clarification. This enhances the therapeutic relationship and ensures that clients feel heard and understood. Moreover, the therapy is non-directive, with therapists refraining from providing solutions, advice, or interpretations. Instead, they create a supportive space for clients to explore their thoughts and feelings, aligning with an empathetic understanding that clients are experts on their experiences. The therapist's attitude in Client-Centered Therapy is client-centered, focusing on the client's needs, experiences, and goals. The therapist conveys warmth, genuineness, and empathy, fostering a safe space for clients to express themselves without fear of judgment. The therapeutic relationship, marked by an empathetic connection between therapist and client, is deemed essential for personal growth and positive change. Carl Rogers' belief in the client's inherent capacity for self-directed growth aligns with the therapist's empathetic understanding, supporting the exploration of feelings, thoughts, and potential solutions.

To sum up, Client-Centered Therapy is acknowledged as a psychological therapy centered on empathy due to foundational principles such as unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, reflective listening, and a client-centered approach. This therapeutic process revolves around creating an empathetic and supportive space, encouraging clients to explore their experiences and work toward self-discovery and personal growth.

The Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a methodical and purpose-driven therapeutic approach that centers on recognizing and challenging negative thought patterns and behaviors. Although CBT does not inherently prioritize empathy like person-centered therapies, it remains pivotal in the therapeutic process through various components [24]. The Therapeutic Alliance underscores the importance of establishing a strong connection between therapist and client in CBT. While the focus is on cognitive and behavioral interventions, the quality of the therapeutic relationship significantly influences the effectiveness of treatment. Therapists who convey empathy and understanding create a supportive atmosphere that fosters collaboration and trust [25].

Empathetic understanding is crucial in CBT as therapists need to comprehend the client's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to guide them effectively. This empathetic understanding aids therapists in grasping the client's perspective, which is essential for tailoring interventions to individual needs [24]. Cognitive restructuring, another core element of CBT, involves helping clients identify and challenge distorted or negative thought patterns. Empathy is vital here, as therapists must understand the emotional impact of specific thoughts on the client's well-being. An empathetic exploration of the emotional content underlying thoughts contributes to effective cognitive restructuring [26].

Empathy also plays a key role in Behavioral Interventions, where therapists collaborate with clients to set goals, develop plans, and implement behavioral changes. It helps therapists understand the challenges clients face and provide support and encouragement throughout the change process. In Motivational Enhancement, empathy is crucial in understanding the client's motivations, values, and goals, tailoring interventions to align with individual preferences, and enhancing motivation for change [25].

Cultural Sensitivity in CBT requires empathy to understand the client's cultural background, values, and beliefs. This understanding is essential for adapting



therapeutic strategies to be culturally sensitive, contributing to the effectiveness of CBT across diverse populations. Empathetic Exploration of Core Beliefs is vital in CBT, especially when delving into sensitive and deeply held beliefs that underlie negative thought patterns. Therapists need to convey understanding and support during this process [26].

While CBT is renowned for its cognitive and behavioral techniques, the integration of empathy is a critical factor in building a positive therapeutic relationship and tailoring interventions to the unique needs of each client. Empathy helps therapists understand the client's experiences, fosters collaboration and contributes to a supportive and effective therapeutic process.

Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT) is a time-limited and structured therapeutic approach that centers on interpersonal relationships and their impact on psychological well-being. While IPT may not explicitly emphasize empathy in the same way as some other therapeutic modalities, it remains a crucial aspect of the therapeutic process [27, 28]. In IPT, establishing a strong therapeutic alliance is pivotal, and empathy forms the foundation for building a trusting and collaborative relationship between the therapist and the client. The effectiveness of IPT is enhanced by a supportive and empathetic therapeutic alliance.

The primary focus of IPT is on the client's current interpersonal difficulties and their contribution to emotional distress. Empathy is indispensable when delving into the client's experiences within relationships, understanding the impact of interpersonal dynamics, and validating the emotions associated with these interactions [29].

Empathy plays a key role in validating the client's emotions related to interpersonal challenges. The therapist acknowledges and accepts the client's feelings, creating an empathetic and nonjudgmental space where the client feels understood and accepted [30]. Therapists practicing IPT often employ communication skills such as active listening and empathetic responding. These skills aid therapists in understanding the client's communication style, validating their experiences, and facilitating effective interpersonal interactions [31].

IPT involves identifying and understanding recurring interpersonal patterns contributing to the client's difficulties. An empathetic exploration of these patterns helps the therapist and client gain insight into the underlying dynamics, enabling targeted interventions. The therapeutic process in IPT is centered around resolving interpersonal difficulties and improving the client's interpersonal functioning. Empathy is integral as therapists collaboratively work with clients to address relational challenges, enhance communication skills, and foster healthier connections with others. Cultural sensitivity is crucial in IPT, considering the cultural context of the client's interpersonal relationships. Anybody with an empathetic stance may assist therapists in navigating cultural nuances and supporting clients within their specific cultural context.

While IPT may not explicitly highlight empathy in its theoretical framework, the application of empathy is inherent in the therapeutic relationship and the exploration of interpersonal dynamics. Therapists practicing IPT utilize empathetic skills to create a supportive environment, understand the client's interpersonal experiences, and collaboratively work toward resolving difficulties within relationships.

Gestalt Therapy, developed by Fritz Perls, is an experiential and phenomenological psychotherapeutic approach that centers on the present moment, emphasizing awareness, personal responsibility, and the integration of mind and body [32]. In Gestalt Therapy, empathy holds a unique role, understood, and applied in a specific way. Empathy is particularly relevant in the context of Phenomenological

Exploration, where it involves a thorough exploration of the client's subjective experience in the present moment [33]. Within Gestalt Therapy, empathy is utilized to deeply understand the client's current thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviors from the client's own perspective. The focus is on the client's unique phenomenological experience. Empathy in Gestalt Therapy entails the therapist being fully present and engaged with the client in the "here and now", establishing contact and attuning to the client's immediate experience rather than relying solely on intellectual understanding.

Gestalt therapists not only attend to verbal communication but also pay close attention to non-verbal indications, such as body language, facial expressions, and gestures. Empathy includes tracking these non-verbal cues to gain a holistic understanding of the client's experience and emotions. In Gestalt Therapy, empathy is expressed using "I and Thou" language, where therapists speak from their own subjective experience ("I") and invite clients to express their experiences ("Thou"). This dialogical process contributes to building a shared understanding and connection [34].

A specific technique in Gestalt Therapy to enhance empathy involves therapists mirroring the client's behaviors, gestures, or expressions. This mirroring is not an interpretation but a way to help the client become more aware of their own non-verbal expressions and behaviors. Empathy is often conveyed through experiential techniques that encourage clients to fully engage with their emotions and experiences, such as role-playing and empty-chair dialogs [34].

Gestalt therapists practice empathy by respecting the client's pace of exploration and self-discovery. Instead of imposing interpretations or solutions, therapists follow the client's lead, encouraging self-awareness and self-support. Empathy is crucial in supporting clients through the concept of "closure of gestalts", where unresolved feelings or unfinished business is addressed and completed, helping clients integrate and make sense of their emotional experiences [32]. To sum up, empathy in Gestalt Therapy extends beyond intellectual understanding, involving a deep, experiential engagement with the client's present-moment experience. Therapists use empathy to support clients in becoming more aware, taking responsibility for their experiences, and fostering a greater sense of wholeness and integration. The emphasis is on the relational and experiential dimensions of empathy within the context of the here and now.

## 7. Conclusion

In several papers and books written by psychologists, we find some interesting essays that define the concept of empathy and distinguish it from associated ones. Empathy is not sympathy, is not a phenomenon of emotional contagion, is not compassion, and, above all, is not (or at least not totally) intentional. Those distinctions can be of the utmost importance for the philosopher. Some authors also acknowledge the importance of the philosophical approach to the issue, and Max Scheler is sometimes mentioned ([10], p. 146). It is not rare to see sporadic references to the work of Theodor Lipps but seldom to his reception by phenomenologists like Husserl, Scheler, or Stein. However, although nowadays, a fruitful dialog between psychologists and philosophers has become infrequent – the case of psychoanalysis offers perhaps an exception – this was not always the case in the past. For instance, the founders of the Gestalt therapeutic model knew their indebtedness to some philosophical currents, namely, existentialist-oriented philosophers, and frequently engaged in a dialog with philosophy. Max Wertheimer – one of the founders of this current – was a student of

the Austrian philosopher Christian Von Ehrenfels, who had introduced the Gestalt concept to philosophy and psychology. Later, Kurt Lewin continued the work of the main representatives of this approach by applying its principles to areas outside of perceptual psychology.

In order to comprehend the Gestalt approach, it is important to acknowledge its basic phenomenological principles. They refer to the study of the structures of consciousness as they are experienced from the first person's perspective. Also, for classical phenomenology and, above all, for its founder, Edmund Husserl, empathy cannot be understood from a third-person perspective. A core element of the experience is that it moves toward an object, and this intention toward objects constitutes the experience along with facilitating factors that accompany it. As Peter Orfanos puts it: "[p]henomenology presumes that reality is shaped in relation to the observer and the observed, which means that it can be interpreted" ([35], p. 111). The phenomenological way of looking at consciousness and its intentional acts is followed by the Gestalt psychologists; of course, as psychologists, they do not need to deal with the intricate problems of transcendental intersubjectivity that occupied Husserl in the 5th Cartesian Meditation. However, the Gestalt approach separates the perception, the emotions, and the action of the individual from their interpretations – it puts the latter into brackets, to use a famous Husserlian expression – because it claims that interpretations lack the reliability of direct experience.

Sometimes, of course, phenomenology seems to make strange claims. As we said above, Husserl argued that empathic relations and remembrance have some similarities. That is the reason why he labeled both "presentifications". Let us now think a little more about this and try to see if this hint cannot be used by the psychologist. What happens when I remember a past event? I must take some distance toward myself, at least toward what I am now, in the present. Of course, the past event I am remembering belongs to my stream of consciousness, however, it belongs to a phase of this stream that does not coincide with the phase in which I am now. Won't engagement in an empathetic relation mean an identical effort by someone to take a distance from his own self?

As we saw above, a certain number of psychological currents see the possibility of aiding a patient in overcoming his difficulties in a process consisting in the enhancement of his communication skills, with the therapist as well as with fellow human beings. This process can be successful only if communication means, in the first place, taking a distance from oneself – which implies, at the same time, mastering one's own stream of consciousness – in order to give place to others.

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