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A RUMOR OF EMPATHY

Rewriting Empathy in the
Context of Philosophy

Lou Agosta





A Rumor of Empathy

Also by Lou Agosta

EMPATHY IN THE CONTEXT OF PHILOSOPHY

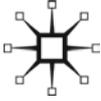
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▶ **A Rumor of Empathy:
Rewriting Empathy
in the Context of
Philosophy**

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To my teachers JJM, ETG, and BB, whose incomparable empathy and inspiration were no rumor and who inspired a love of learning in their students

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Preface

This work on the deep history of empathy in the context of philosophy started many years ago. I was a graduate student in philosophy, and one of my mentors was being psychoanalyzed. At the same time, Heinz Kohut was innovating in the world of psychoanalysis, proposing that psychoanalysis was actually the science of empathy, albeit one misleadingly formulated as a positive, natural science such as physics. Kohut's *The Analysis of the Self* (1971) was disrupting complacencies in classic Freudian analysis and the philosophy of science. Mirror neurons would not even be hypothesized for another two and a half decades. Did such a phenomenon as empathy even exist? Hence, the present title "A Rumor of Empathy." It points to the possibility that empathy may be an illusion—mere agreement, niceness, courtesy, sympathy, prosocial sentiment, or compassion. Nothing wrong with these as such—indeed the world needs more of them—just they are not empathy. Nearly simultaneously with Kohut's innovations, the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur were on the philosophical horizon but strategically being ignored by ordinary language philosophers and logical empiricists in the hope they would just go away. They did not. Neither did empathy. Into this tangle, the call goes out from Kohut's self psychology colleagues such as Drs. Michael F. Basch, Ernest Wolf, and Arnold Goldberg: "We have an opening for a token philosopher to do research into the history of this distinction 'empathy' of which Kohut is making so much. What is the philosophical and intellectual provenance of this concept?" My dissertation advisors, Stephen

Toulmin and Paul Ricoeur, knew these individuals firsthand and said, “Lou, how about it?” My response? I sense a dissertation topic—every graduate student’s fervent need and hope—and I reply: “I am in with both feet!” I even receive a modest amount of funding from the think tank, The Center for Psychosocial Studies, Bernard Weissbourd’s project, for which I again express appreciation. I send Dr. Basch chapter 1 of my dissertation. Basch writes back to me with a six-page type written response. A relationship is born. Empathy is made present—albeit in scholarly form. The work commences. “Dear Mike—Sorry it took so long. I believe this is what we had in mind.”

Meanwhile, long ago in a far away neighborhood, a dissertation in philosophy on *Empathy and Interpretation* (University of Chicago 1977) was completed and put on the shelf in Regenstein Library where, as far as I know, it is still gathering dust. This is not that document. Years later I realize that my dissertation study should be done right. My study needs to be redesigned, reworked, and rewritten from the ground up. Hence, the phrase “rewriting empathy.” However, the phrase also indicates that empathy—the distinction, not the word—often occurs, and, is used even where the term is missing. “Rewriting” takes on the sense of “describing” and “re-describing” as used by Elizabeth Anscombe (1959) and Ian Hacking (1995). Rewriting occurs when Hume’s four different meanings of “sympathy” overlap in tension-laden relationships with today’s “empathic understanding.” A “rewriting” also points to a reinterpretation as when two lines in Kant on the “communicability of feelings” and “enlarged thinking” point to a Kantian reconstruction of relatedness that is today captured by “empathy receptivity.” Rewriting occurs when Theodor Lipps’ extraordinary eruption of “aesthetic empathy” as the humanization—one might also say “anthropomorphization”—of inanimate nature with human feelings is juxtaposed with “apperceptive empathy” in such a way that “empathy” replaces “aesthetic taste.” Rewriting occurs when Freud—who for our purposes is as much a philosopher as psychoanalyst—mentions the word only 22 times in 24 volumes but whose clinical method demonstrates an incomparable empathic interpretation. Rewriting also occurs in the phenomenologists—Max Scheler, Edith Stein, and Edmund Husserl—where empathy steadily migrates from the periphery to the foundation of intersubjectivity and community. So even though this is not a psychoanalytic or a clinical treatise, but a philosophical one in intellectual history, it makes use of methods of reconstructive inquiry that describe and redescribe, work-

ing from manifest to latent content, from appearance to infrastructure, and from surface to depth.

Finding a starting point is not a trivial matter. The present approach contributes to clarifying what has been dimly recognized but not well articulated about the relationships between empathy and aesthetics, interpersonal relations, and altruistic (“prosocial”) impulses. These trajectories interact, converge and diverge, and this is a part of the philosophical significance of empathy. Arguably the first historical witness in modern times in whom all three converge is David Hume. Hume’s aesthetic cultivation of a “delicacy of taste”—whether as theatre, painting, or ornamentation—enhances an individual’s empathic receptivity. The development of moral sensibility—especially as benevolence and as a sympathetic general observer—enhances an individual’s empathic responsiveness. The human qualities that make one an engaging friend and contributor to the community are enhanced by empathic understanding. Hume’s many meanings of “sympathy” enhance the empathic interpretation of human relations. Hence, the choice of Hume as a starting point.

A final thought. The goal of this project is to make empathy less of a rumor and an expanded presence in the community and the world. The commitment of this work is to be true to what individual thinkers wrote and intended in mentioning “empathy.” However, in the final analysis, this work takes its guidance from empathy, not from what Lipps wrote about it; from empathy, not from what Freud said about it; from empathy, not from what Scheler, Stein, or Husserl published about it. Hume and Kant, who did not have access to the word, have much to contribute to the explication of the deep history of empathy, but do so by way of reconstruction. As if parents, teachers, doctors, therapists, friends, and neighbors did not use empathy before the invention of the word. They did. Here too the commitment is to be true to what any thought leader wrote or intended, but within a conversation guided by a commitment to expanding empathy—its use and application, not just the word—in the community. When all the philosophical distinctions, arguments, and categories are specified; when all the describing and redescribing of intentions is finished; when all the neurological data mirroring is captured and stored; when all the phenomenological brackets are reduced; when all the hermeneutic circles are spun out; in empathy, one is simply in the presence of another human being.

Acknowledgments

In addition to Michael F. Basch, Drs. E. Wolf and A. Goldberg—and others too numerous to name here—also provided generous written and personal responsiveness in engaging early versions of this work. All translations of Husserl's *Nachlass* and texts by Lipps are by Lou Agosta. Other people who have given graciously in engaging and reading early versions of parts of this work include Marty Cohen, the late Ted Cohen, Paul Holinger, David Howe, Meghan Kennedy, Arnon Rolnick, Robert Stolorow, Fredrik Svenaeus, Steve Zafron, and Dan Zahavi. Thanks also to Burke Gerstenschlager for his editorial expertise and guidance.

Introduction: Rewriting the Definition of Empathy



Abstract: *This inquiry examines empathy as used in context even when the word “empathy” is not explicitly mentioned. The capacity for empathy, not the mere word, is engaged in diverse intellectual traditions. The difference between the mention of the word “empathy” and its use is indicated by enclosing the mention in quotation marks. A definition of empathy is proposed in which it is a unified multi-dimensional process that includes empathic receptivity, empathic understanding, empathic interpretation, and empathic responsiveness. These aspects of empathy form a unified whole and the application of this definition makes sense out of a diversity of apparently conflicting examples, applications, descriptions, and definitions of empathy.*

Keywords: empathy; interpretation; narrative; point of view; understanding of possibility; vicarious experience

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The mention of “Empathy” and the use of empathy

This inquiry into the uses of empathy in philosophy and intellectual history distinguishes between those thinkers who mention “empathy” explicitly and those who use empathy without mentioning it. Instances also exist where the word is mentioned but not used, as when empathy is interpreted (and debated) as “projection,” “altruism,” “compassion,” “agreement,” and so on. Conventionally, the mention of the word has quotation marks, while the use of the word does not. The first occurrence *uses* empathy in context; the second, *mentions* “empathy” in the following example:

His project aimed at expanding empathy in the community but he was regarded as just another voice in the wilderness, crying out “empathy” to the world.

The challenge is disentangling empathy—the capability, not the word—in those thinkers who use empathy and contribute to expanding empathy in the world without explicitly naming it. The relationships are many-to-many. Mapping the word “empathy” onto the distinctive uses of empathy as the latter lives in the relatedness between persons—parent and child, student and teacher, patient and psychotherapist, friend and neighbor, friend and enemy, painter and viewer, performer and audience, novelist and reader—is one of the challenges of this work. The term “empathy” itself is a significant clue to its implementation in diverse contexts of human relatedness, but it is not the only consideration. Expanded empathy is needed—the capability, not the mere word—to hear the distinction as it is used in diverse intellectual traditions and contexts such as human relations, aesthetics, ethics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, phenomenology, and the history of ideas.

Thanks to the work of Lauren Wispé (1987), agreement is available on who said what about “empathy” and when it was said. Wispé’s contribution is substantial and an indispensable first step, which will not be repeated here. Yet the limits of such an approach are apparent. For example, although David Hume calls out the word “sympathy,” a close reading will show that Hume’s usage overlaps with what readers, informed by Max Scheler, Edith Stein, Edmund Husserl, and contemporary psychoanalysts, understand by “empathy.” In short, Hume writes in such a way that we hear in the word “sympathy” an interpersonal “glue” that underlies personal relations and community. A close reading of Hume shows

that his uses evolve from “sympathy” as an empathic-like mental mirroring, to a “delicate sympathy” in personal relations, “delicacy of taste” in aesthetics, “benevolence” in ethics, and finally a “power of suggestion and emotional contagion.” A single line in Kant about “the communicability of feelings” (1790/93b: §40 176; [AA 296]) is a clue to a rich rewriting of the analogy between aesthetic taste and empathy, which, in turn, points to parallels between relatedness to human beings and to aesthetics. Not satisfied with a mere reconstruction in Kant of an analogy between empathy and taste, as I shall argue in detail, Theodor Lipps substitutes “empathy” for “taste” at large as the foundation of aesthetics. Lipps’ use of “*Einfühlung*” [“empathy”] was most responsible for popularizing aesthetic empathy in the context of his theory of beauty. Though Lipps is sometimes accused of mentioning “empathy” without really using it, I argue that aesthetic (projective) empathy and interpersonal empathy belong together despite a tension-laden divergence in the applications. However, with the domination of Lipps’ projective empathy in its day, it was nearly impossible for thinkers as diverse as Husserl and Sigmund Freud to use the term “empathy” without invoking Lipps’ theory of aesthetic empathy. Freud’s clinical methods were demonstrably empathic to a high degree, yet Freud mentioned the term relatively infrequently. Furthermore, many explicit mentions by Freud of “*Einfühlung*” [“empathy”] are mistranslated, further complicating any inquiry that merely mentions the word. A further issue, not visible to Wispé (1987), is the discovery of a hypothetical mirror neuron system, providing Lipps with an *ex post facto* justification of his definition of empathy as inner imitation (e.g., Gallese 2001). This might in itself be warrant for reopening the inquiry into the underground history of the uses of empathy, since the results in neurology have occasioned an explosion of interest in empathy in cognitive science, philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, and mental health (Coplan and Goldie 2011; Decety and Jackson 2004; Farrow and Woodruff 2007; Jackson, Meltzoff, and Decety 2005; but see Decety et al. 2013 and Hickok 2014 for mirror neuron skepticism). On the other hand, Husserl rewrites the meaning of “*Einfühlung*” [“empathy”] in his own work as empathy moves progressively from the margins and periphery of intersubjectivity towards its center and foundation, especially in Husserl’s posthumous *Nachlass* (1929/35).

Anyone writing about empathy is trying to hit a moving target. Even if “empathy” is the heir to a family of ancestral distinctions and resemblances in diverse intellectual traditions, not a single concept, when

empathy is engaged as a multi-dimensional process, as it is in this study, a unity amid the diversity of aspects of empathy comes into view that was perhaps previously sensed yet not made explicit.

A unified multi-dimensional definition of the process of empathy

Common views of empathy alternate between an affective and a cognitive dimension, a top down and a bottom up aspect, a participation with the other and a distance from the other. These are false choices. In particular, the minimal essential constituents of the unified, multi-dimensional definition of the process of empathy include (1) a receptivity (“openness”) to the communicability of the affect of other people whether in face-to-face encounter or as artifacts of human imagination (“empathic receptivity”), the paradigm case of which is vicarious feeling; (2) an understanding of the other individual in which the other is acknowledged in relatedness as a possibility of human flourishing—a possibility of choosing autonomously, making commitments, and implementing them (“empathic understanding”), the paradigm case of which is recognition of the other; (3) an interpretation of the other person that identifies patterns of adaptation and templates of survival and development from first-, second-, and third-person perspectives (“empathic interpretation”), the paradigm case of which is a transient identification “as if” one were the other as other in the other’s situation; and (4) an articulation of optimal responsiveness in language of the indicated receptivity, understanding and interpretation, that enables the other to appreciate that he or she has been the beneficiary of a gracious and generous listening (“empathic responsiveness”), the paradigm case of which is the speech act of narrative, story telling. These four dimensions of empathy form a many-to-many relationship in a hermeneutic circle. One can enter the circle at any point and come around to the other dimensions simultaneously or in sequence (Figure I.1).

- 1 Empathic receptivity is an act directed at the affectivity of the other—the other’s animate expressions of life as feelings, emotions, sensations of pleasure or pain, and diverse lived experiences. Empathy is not reducible to emotional contagion, gut reactions, or fellow feeling; but empathy draws on the same function of

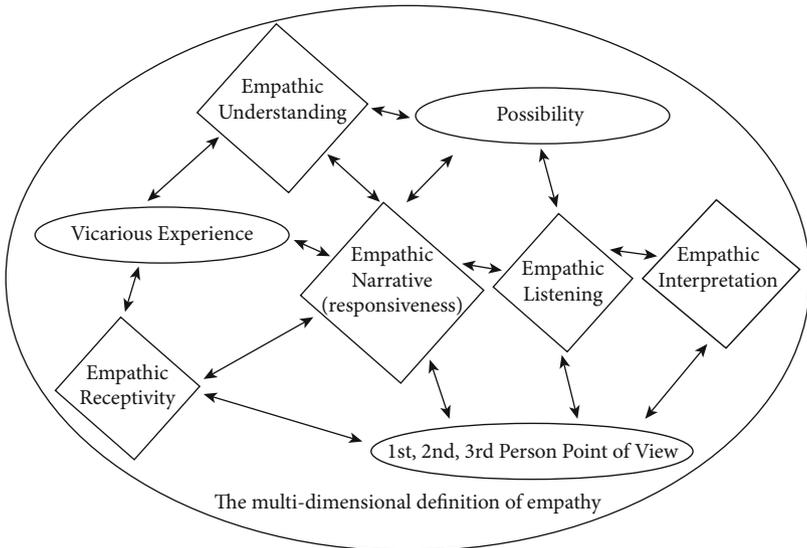


FIGURE 1.1 *The Hermeneutic Circle of Empathy*

communicability of feeling that occurs in emotional contagion.

It makes use of the same function of affectivity that occurs in vicarious feeling as a form of empathic openness to the other person. Empathy is receptively open preconsciously to the experiences of the other as a kind of empathic data gathering. But if one interrupted the process of empathy at the point of empathic receptivity, empathy would remain mere blind affect, just an emotive reaction, affective flooding, or emotional contagion.

- 2 Empathic understanding is a recognition of the other individual that makes intelligible what is possible for the other. Empathic understanding is an acknowledgement of the other, given the constraints and undeclared commitments in which the other is living and engaged. According to this definition, understanding is grasping of possibility—possibility in relatedness to the other. The term “understanding” is not used in the limited sense of understanding, in which understanding is the operation according to rules of logic or association, resulting in mental contents. Rather “understanding” is used here *writ large* as a form of life, which includes but is not limited to cognition. We live in possibilities that

we unwittingly allow to define our opportunities and limitations. Understanding is understanding of relatedness. For example, a person lives in an understanding, acquired through experience and temperament, that love is not possible with a particular person, for example, a family member. But with an expanded understanding, the person just has a different way of showing love and the possibility of developing a relationship comes into being.

- 3 Empathic interpretation is an elaborating and implementing of the possibilities of which the other person is the source. These include imaginative variations that engage first-, second-, third-person perspectives “as if” one were the other. Circumstance may have created the understanding of possibility, but ongoing interpretations, sometimes implicit and unacknowledged, sustain the engagement with possibility as an existing template, pattern, or form of life. Empathy is not reducible to a single mental function; but draws on a variety of cognitive methods of interpreting, framing, conceptualizing, and formulating otherness such as transient identification, projection, introjection, and related transformations.
- 4 Empathic speech is a form of optimal responsiveness that includes both listening and responding in behavior and speech. While an individual’s empathy could theoretically exist in isolation as an unexpressed intention, this is just a limiting case. Unexpressed empathy has a specific way of coming into speech. It does so as listening. Paradoxically, listening is the primary form of empathic speech. Under one description, listening occurs at the beginning of the multi-dimensional process as a form of receptivity. It also occurs at the end as the listener formulates an empathic response to the other person. While empathic speech as listening has a certain privilege in paradoxically being silent to hear the other individual as a possibility, that is not the only kind of optimal responsiveness available. Such a responsiveness includes the paradigm case of the speech act of story telling (Agosta 2010: 77, 103; Howe 2013: 175–176). For example, the Good Samaritan in the story of the same name empathically experienced—“heard”—the survivor’s suffering. The “hearing” is the moment of empathic relatedness; the binding up of the wounds, and so on is the altruistic, ethical moment. These are distinct, though related. Empathy told the Samaritan what the survivor was experiencing whereas morality told him

what to do about it. He decided to act altruistically and intervene compassionately, stopping and helping. Granted, where empathy stops and altruism begins will continue to be the subject of debates (e.g., Batson 2012, Baron-Cohen 1995; Kohut 1971; see also Agosta 2013, Howe 2013, Riker 2010). Jesus answers the question “Who is my neighbor?” by telling the story. At one level, the story of the Good Samaritan contains an example of the use of empathy. At another level, the speech act of telling the story provides an example of how to expand the community of neighbors through the empathic response in language of story telling. The minimalist interpretation of the Samaritan is that empathy conveyed information about the suffering of the survivor. Whereas the Priest and the Levite experienced empathic distress and passed by, the Samaritan consulted his sense of right and wrong to decide what to do about it (on “empathic distress” see Hoffman 2000).

The advantage of empathy as a multi-dimensional process is that it organizes much of the literature on empathy. It suggests that the controversies about empathy are occasioned by focusing on only one aspect of the definition. Those starting from the neurological perspective or a hypothetical mirror neuron system work bottom up from empathic receptivity, and how human beings (and higher mammals) resonate together empathically (e.g., Decety, Jackson 2012, Gallese 2001, Iacoboni 2007; but see Decety et al. 2013 and Hickok 2014 for an alternative view). Those starting with mindreading work top down from empathic interpretation (and understanding), and how human beings take diverse “as if” perspectives. They build models of the experiences of other individuals (e.g., Baron-Cohen 1995, Gordon 1996, Goldman 2006). Naturally, such an approach is an over-simplification, and ultimately researchers implicitly cycle through all four moments of the multi-dimensional definition, encompassing all aspects of the process, while devaluing one or another of the opponents’ privileged perspectives.

This continuum between diverse dimensions of the process of empathy—an affective empathic receptivity and a cognitive interpretive one encompassing understanding—is prominent in the clinical literature in psychoanalysis. Although this is a philosophical not a clinical study, the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1959) was responsible for putting empathy “on the map” in our time; and Kohut’s “sustained empathy” (Goldberg 2011) provides rich examples of empathic human interactions. Empathy’s

historic link between philosophy and psychoanalysis is Lipps (1909), who Freud studied and who the phenomenologists Scheler, Stein, and Husserl critiqued. Admittedly an oversimplification of subtle psychoanalytic inquires into diverse aspects of empathy, Kohut's (1959) vicarious introspection as data gathering privileges empathic receptivity; Michael Franz Basch's (1983) empathic possibility and Ralph Greenson's (1960) model of the other emphasizes empathic understanding; Robert Fliess' (1942) transient identification highlights empathic interpretation; and Arnold Goldberg (2011) on narrative and sustained relatedness develops empathic responsiveness.

Although complex, the approach of a multi-dimensional definition of the process of empathy clarifies many of the disagreements in the literature, which are really differences in emphasis, grasping a different part of the whole and making it into the totality. What is new in this book—at least as an original synthesis of existing ideas—is the appreciation of just how well the multiple dimensions of affect and cognition map to a unified, coherent, multi-dimensional process of empathy that includes, but is not limited to, communicability of feelings (receptivity), understanding, interpretation, and optimal responsiveness in speech and listening.

1

A Rumor of Empathy in Hume's Many Uses of Sympathy

Abstract: *David Hume has at least four distinct meanings of “sympathy.” These are mapped in detail to the multi-dimensional aspects of empathic receptivity, empathic understanding, empathic interpretation, and empathic responsiveness. In turn, “sympathy” is engaged as receptivity to affects; as understanding of exemplary other individuals as possibilities (from ancient Roman and Greek times); as the empathic interpretation of the other using a general point of view of an ideal observer; finally, as the optimal response of benevolence. Hume delimits the difference between sympathy and emotional contagion as a double representation. Hume leaves undeveloped the parallel between a “delicacy of taste” and a “delicacy of sympathy,” the latter capturing today’s “empathy.” The “delicate” aspects of sympathy are gathered together with “delicacy of taste” and considered here.*

Keywords: aesthetic taste; benevolence; David Hume; empathy; ideal observer; narrative; sympathy; the other

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