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Empathy and the Potential Body of Imagination

Empathy and imagination are closely connected. Empathy can be defined as the ability to *imagine* the experiences, the feelings and the thoughts of others.

Imagination, vice versa, being the ability to make representations of what one cannot experience directly, such as the state of mind of other people, supposes the ability to feel or to think into (*em-pathè*) someone else. So empathy and imagination seem to presuppose each other.

In this paper, I will discuss empathy taken as the ability to share the feelings of others through imagination – even though the term is often used in a much broader sense, referring to a certain attitude (patience, openness), or behavior (listening).¹ In my view, however, empathy is taken to mean ‘knowing’ emotionally what another person feels.² The reasons for defining the term in this way can be clarified using theories on emotions, i.e. theories providing answers to such questions as: what is an emotion; how and to what extent do I know my own emotions and those of others; what happens when I empathize with someone, and when someone empathizes with me?³

1. Empathy and Emotion Theories

My position in the field of emotional theories, from which perspective I set out to answer the abovementioned questions, can be summarized as follows.⁴ I have attempted to bridge the philosophical and psychological gap between commonly accepted twentieth century cognitive emotion theories on the one hand, and William

James's supposedly outdated nineteenth century theory on the other. Since Wittgenstein's criticism of the traditional, more passion-like emotion theories, the cognitive theories have become increasingly dominant over the twentieth century. These theories consider emotions to incorporate cognition, i.e. pieces of information about reality. If I am scared of something, my fear contains the information that the object is threatening or dangerous to me, or at least seems to be. My envy tells me that someone has something desirable that seems inaccessible to me. And my joy refers to something favorable for me. It should be noted, however, that the emotional information has the character of *seeming* and *looking like* – for, as we have known since Plato and Aristotle, there are no greater mistakes than emotional ones. Although the information encapsulated in emotions is susceptible to error, cognitivists still contend that information is the essence of emotions.

Whereas the cognitive theories discuss emotions in terms of – as their name implies – cognitive, information-providing, communicative actions, while focusing on the external, visible and discussable aspect of emotions, James emphasizes the aspect of self-perception or self-experience that characterizes emotions.⁵ This aspect, which is referred to as 'inner' self-perception, implies that one always *also* experiences oneself while experiencing a certain emotion. If I am afraid of someone or something, I feel that I am afraid; if I am angry with somebody, I feel that I am angry; and if I am ashamed or relieved or happy, I feel something about myself. This feeling oneself may be quite overwhelming or absorbing, as our passions are. The cognitive theories, by reducing emotions to cognition, seem to ignore the passionate character of emotions that is connected to their self-experience aspect, which I will discuss here because of its importance to empathy.

Nevertheless, because I consider both views to be partly correct, I propose a ‘new’ linking theory, which includes the two views as aspects of a single open concept.⁶ The wording I have chosen to express the concept appears at first sight to be rather cryptic: *I feel I am v to x*. An emotion is an experience of myself (I feel I am) in relation to a reason or cause (x). The *v* in the formula *I feel I am v to x* stands for a particular feeling, and *to x* refers to the cognitive relationship with the emotion’s reason or cause. Almost all our emotions can be understood in this manner: I feel I am ashamed (v) for my wrongdoing (x); I feel I am relieved (v) about my exam result (x); I feel I am afraid (v) about increasing violence (x); I feel I am happy (v) when I see you (x). The formula articulates both the self-experience aspect of the emotion and the cognitive, informative, communicable relationship to the cause that invokes the emotion, i.e. the ‘object’ of the emotion: the persons or things to which the emotion relates. However, this does not mean that this is the form in which emotions are usually communicated, although almost all our emotions can be articulated and understood according to this formula. On the contrary, a communicative *statement* in the form of ‘I feel I am v to x’ suggests reflexivity not usually attributed to emotions. Indeed, what is typically emotional about an emotion is that one gets absorbed in it. This self-absorption goes hand in hand with one’s experience of oneself in an emotion. I will return to this point shortly.

2. Empathy and Self-Experience

The self-experience aspect of emotions is particularly important with respect to empathy, because it is this aspect of somebody’s emotion that somebody else’s empathy relates to. And therefore not to the external debatable x-side, as is often

thought. Talking about the object of an emotion is not the same as empathy. Put more strongly: it is often the antithesis of it. Comforting words, such as ‘the dog will not bite’ (to a child), ‘poverty is relative’ (to a mother on social security) or ‘there are worse illnesses’ (to a patient) may be true statements about the object of someone’s fear, but they express little empathy. The primary purpose of empathy is not to bring people to a better understanding of their situation, though it may be subsidiary. Empathy is primarily supporting and empowering somebody’s self-experience, preventing them from solitary drowning in their own feelings. But how can my empathy relate to the inner aspect of someone else’s emotion? This can be answered by clarifying the kind of perception that emotional self-experience is.

I refer to the nature of the experience of one’s self in an emotion by using the phenomenological term ‘elemental’.⁷ This denotes a form of perception in which the experiencing ‘subject’ *is absorbed by* the perceived ‘object’. I touched upon this briefly above. It is an experience in which the ‘subject’ is *exposed* to or swallowed up by the ‘object’. This can be compared with being exposed to a storm, or to the glow of a fire; with being surrounded by water when swimming. Hence the term ‘elemental’. In this form of perception, rather than seeing ‘things’ as objects at a distance, the object is seen as having the character of an element – in the old sense of the word: fire, light, water – that surrounds me. (Consequently, subject and object lose their customary meaning—hence the inverted commas). Therefore, the inner side of an emotion—the experience of *feeling oneself* as fearful, angry, relieved or happy – is elemental in its make-up. While the external side of an emotion is a relationship with an object (the animal that I am afraid of, the exam result about which I am relieved,

etc.), the inner side of the emotion consists of being absorbed with oneself, being exposed to one's fearful or relieved self.

With this elemental self-perception, which I consider to form the inner side of emotions, something remarkable is happening. It differs in an important respect from ordinary sensory perception, such as seeing and hearing. In classic philosophical terms, every current or *actual* perception of something can be thought of as being surrounded by a horizon of *potential* perceptions. For example, if I see a bed before me, my actual perception of one side of the bed is accompanied by potential perceptions of the other sides of the bed (which I do not actually see at that moment, but *could* see – hence the term potential – if I walked around the bed), as well as the potential perceptions of other things in close proximity to the bed, which I am not actually focusing on at that moment. These actual and potential perceptions together form my perception of the bed. The potential perceptions form an important contribution to what I actually see. They support my perception in the sense that I really see a bed, and that this is not an apparition or hallucination. And they partly determine the *meaning* of what I see. Therefore, it makes a considerable difference to what I see, whether the bed is in a bedroom, in a hospital, or in a psychoanalyst's consulting room.

3. The Potential Character of Empathy

This brief theory of sensory perception derives from the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1982). Its fundamental categories of actuality and potentiality can even be traced back to Aristotle. When we try to transfer this theory and its categories to the

field of emotional experience, however, we appear to be faced with a problem. There seems to be no room for potentiality in an elemental perception, such as the self-experience side of emotions. If the perceiver is immersed in the perceived, there is no surrounding, and it is not possible to recognize other sides to the perceived. An elemental perception is, as it were, a perception limited to actuality. On the other hand, elemental perceptions are not always faint and uncertain, like apparitions or mirages. Moreover, they are not always meaningless. On the contrary, they are usually more or less stable and have substantial meaning. In terms of the above theory, there must be some kind of potentiality in our emotional experiences for them to become real and to be given meaning. What could this potentiality consist of?

I would suggest taking one step further than Husserl, and to admit that the horizon of potential sensations surrounding any actual perception consists not only, and not exclusively, of sensations by the same subject (who walks around the thing or turns it around in his hand) but also by other subjects. Obviously, this may seem like an evident statement, but Husserl's solipsist perspective has indeed prevented him from noticing this point. My perception of an object implies the possibility of others joining my perception and perceiving the same object themselves. In my theory, this possibility is not just a possibility, but is the very potential factor supporting my perceptions. Consequently, others guarantee the genuineness, the reality, of the things I perceive, and others constitute – to a certain degree – the meaning of my perception. This applies not only to sensory perceptions, but also to the inner self-experience side of our emotional perceptions. Applied to the elemental self-experience, the stability and meaning-giving potential of emotions comes from others: others who sympathize

with me and who instinctively empathize with me. Empathic persons add potential perceptions to my actual elemental self-perceptions, giving them stability and meaning. In this respect, others are as unavoidable as they are indispensable. Its potential character can explain the supporting effect of empathy, which most of us probably recognize from experience. Unlike Husserl's *horizon* of potentiality, I speak of the potential *body*, consisting of the other's empathy with me.

This allows a persistent misunderstanding concerning empathy to be eliminated, namely that empathic sympathy does not help someone who is suffering, or even that it intensifies their suffering. Nietzsche – the most prominent critic of this point – rejected empathy, especially in the shape of compassion, as a malign form of pity, because it has the effect of doubling the suffering: not only does the victim suffer, but also the person who shows him pity.⁸ Nietzsche and his followers would have been right, however, if the person who shows empathic sympathy actually feels the same as the person he empathizes with. Unlike Nietzsche, however, empathizing with someone, I do not have the *actual* feelings that he or she has, but *potential* ones. If the other has feelings of grief or pain as a result of a loss, my empathy involves potential grief. It is, after all, not my loss. Consequently, I do not actually feel grief or hurt while empathizing, but potential grief or *vulnerability*. This potential character of empathy, a reasoned theoretical conclusion from our line of thought, can be explained practically (though not exhaustively) in the realization that 'this could happen to me'. This feeling of vulnerability is a characteristic or a part of the experience of empathy. The realization that fear also contributes forms an additional argument for the potential character of empathy. After all, fear can be understood to be potential pain. (There is

another possible misunderstanding concerning empathy, which is discussed in the following section.)

4. Gruesome Sham-Empathy

Nevertheless, Nietzsche touches on an important point. There is such a thing as a cumulative build-up of emotions – good and bad, pleasant and nasty –, which seems to be caused by an instinctive sympathy of people with each other. But is this empathy? The best example of such an accumulation is the mass outburst of grief following the death of Princess Diana in 1997. To say that people were infected by each other's heartache is an understatement. A collective sea of sadness, in which people became immersed, swept across most of England (and elsewhere) – partly fueled by media attention. Happier examples of a collective immersion and the sharing of each other's emotions may be found in cases of sport fanaticism and in the sweeping idolatry of pop stars. But there are smaller-scale examples of such diving into each other's emotions, whether this bathing occurs voluntarily or involuntarily. Who has never had the giggles in the company of others? This is a strange phenomenon, in which people wind each other up into a collective fit of laughter that steadily increases in intensity, even though nobody can remember what started it. And who has not experienced a dejected mood, which hangs in the air and gets the better of you? A less innocent example is the panic that can spontaneously occur in a certain situation and spreads to everyone present. And the most serious examples also deserve mention: the furious collective hate of a lynch party and the hysteria of the Nazi rallies. No, Nietzsche was right: when people wallow in each other's feelings, things only get worse.

However, I think that these examples do not involve empathy, in the abovementioned sense of potential feelings, with respect to the actual feelings of others with whom one sympathizes. What is striking in the abovementioned examples of collective immersion in each other's emotions – irrespective of how different they are, and though there is still much to say about each of them – is that they relate to *actual* feelings. One is immersed in the actual grief, the actual joy or the actual hate that people take on from others. It is no coincidence that one can describe what happens in these examples with 'elemental' metaphors, such as diving in, bathing, being washed over and being immersed. In these situations, feelings are shared, but not, I feel, in an empathic manner. Empathy is not the same as collectively bathing or immersing in actual feelings. Empathy is the inclusion of one's own potential feelings in the actual feelings of the other, connecting my potential feelings to the other's actual experiences.

5. Good Empathy and Imagination

The distinction between actual and potential feelings is very important to a general understanding of empathy. Imagining oneself in someone else's emotions occurs, if done correctly, based on one's own potential emotions. Emotional empowerment consists of linking potential feelings to actual ones. In this last section, I will attempt to articulate this somewhat abstract-sounding proposition in a more tangible fashion, through the potential body of imagination.

How is empathy related to what I call the potential body of imagination? I assume that, when someone with empathy engages with the emotions of another, he experiences

some kind of recognition. Let us take the context of care, counseling and guidance as the paradigmatic situation of empathy.⁹ The emotions of the client are not entirely alien to the empathizer. He knows them from personal experience, from experiences with other clients, from professional literature, from impressions of films or novels, etc. The empathizer's recognition of the client's emotions entails that the empathizer approaches the client's emotions based on his own potential emotions – recalled emotions of what he himself has experienced or learned, provided that he has come to terms with these. His emotions were probably once actual emotions. When the experience now being remembered occurred, it was accompanied by actual emotions that were relevant to the actual situation. With the passing of time, they are no longer actual but potential. In this potential capacity they form precisely the framework for new experiences that occur, e.g. expectations in which new experiences are interpreted. But this assumes that one has *come to terms* or has *coped* with these memories. If an empathizer himself has emotions that he has not yet come to terms with, e.g. emotions relating to a traumatic experience, then there is the chance that a client's similar experiences and emotions will reawaken his emotions, with all the gruesome dangers that were discussed above. What in ordinary language is called *coping* or *coming to terms with one's emotions* is, as I would express it, a case of one's emotions becoming potential.

For good empathy, the client's emotions are therefore approached and interpreted in the light of these 'potentialized' memories. Empathically engaging with the client's emotions, interpreting these actual emotions from the empathizer's potential emotions, means reconstructing the emotions of the client. In doing so, the empathizer is

constructing a potential body. It may sound strange – empathy as reconstruction – but it is through this that the client’s emotions are released from their loneliness, acquire meaning, and are placed in a cultural context. Thus empathy can be empowering.

I consider the best way to understand the reconstruction of a potential body referred to here – the interpretation of the client’s emotions in the light of the ‘potentialized’ memories of the empathizer – is as a narrative process. The empathizer writes or rewrites the story that the client tells. In narrative theories a distinction is generally made between the author, the narrator, the characters and the reader or listener of the story.¹⁰ According to these theories, the empathizer may be regarded as the author, and the client both as the narrator and as principal character of the story that they reconstruct together.¹¹ Of course, the empathizer may also become a character in the client’s life story. That the client has the part of the narrator and is usually the principal character appears to be self-evident. But why is the empathizer the author of the story, and not the client? Or, perhaps both should be co-authors? This relates again to the difference between the actual and the potential, and to the division of roles between empathizer and client. Care relationships are concerned with the actual emotions of the client and the corresponding potential emotions of the empathizer. The empathic help of the care worker includes – based on his own potential emotions – opening up, putting them in perspective, linking, and adding meaning with respect to the actual emotions of the client. It is the writer who has the power of empowerment. The potentiality that the empathizer contributes clearly includes the imaginative power with which he engages with the client’s actual emotions. It is precisely this imagination, with all its potentialities, that is able to force open the inner side of the client’s

emotions, give room to his feelings, let them breathe, add meaning, link them with other experiences (whether one's own or not), put them in perspective and place them in a cultural context, or – to summarize all this in one word – *empower* his self-experience. And because the imagination does not remain in the head of the empathizer but is communicated to the client, in such a way that the client remains the narrator and principal character, the empathizer can, in narrative terms, be compared with an author. An empathic care worker or counselor must be like a good novelist.

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¹ As is the case, for example, in Becky L. Omdahl, *Cognitive Appraisal, Emotion, and Empathy* (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1995); R.H. van den Hoofdakker, "Empathie," *Tijdschrift voor Humanistiek* 5 (2001): 7-15; N. Eisenberg and J. Strayer (eds.), *Empathy and Its Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

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³ A. Ben-Ze'ev, *The Subtlety of Emotions* (Cambridge Ma: The MIT Press, 2000)

⁴ Joachim Duyndam, *Denken, passie en compassie* [Thinking, Passion, Compassion] (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1997).

⁵ William James, "What is an emotion?," *Mind* 9 (1884): 188-205.

⁶ Joachim Duyndam, "De Stuipen of het Lijf. Over Goede en Griezellige Empathie," *Tijdschrift voor Humanistiek* 5 (2001): 16-23; Joachim Duyndam, "Empathisch Denken: Over zingeving, Creativiteit en de Ervaring van Anderen," idem, *Deugden van de Humanistiek* (Amsterdam: SWP Boos, 2008), 35-47.

⁷ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh PA: Dusquesne University Press, 2000): 130-142.

⁸ F. Nietzsche, *Werke* (ed. Karl Schlechta, Frankfurt/M: Ullstein, 1979): II 341-401, II 685-686, II 1168-1169.

⁹ M.L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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