
As if: Connecting Phenomenology, Mirror Neurons, Empathy, and Laughter

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I. Mirror Neurons and the Dissolution of the Isolated Self

I was a waiter in a restaurant for many years, and I had the habit of repeating what the patron ordered as I wrote it down on my pad. As it turns out, this can be an effective tactic for increased tips. It has even been studied at some length and is known as the “Chameleon Effect” (see Chartrand and Bargh). I would go around the table asking, “What can I get you?” Someone would respond, “I’ll have a coke,” and I would repeat it. The next would say, “Gin and tonic,” and then I would repeat, “Gin and tonic.” At one point a customer who had a noticeable lisp ordered a “*sthoda*” (soda), and I faithfully mimicked “*sthoda*” back to her. There is a fine line between mimicry and mockery and I would like to think I was engaged in the former. This anecdote may not immediately sound like a profitable pathway into the complex phenomenological or neuroscientific study of empathy or laughter, but current neuroscientific discoveries of “empathy” neurons, as V. S. Ramachandran calls them, seem to be confirming much of Husserl’s phenomenological picture of the role of passive synthesis in empathy in humans and non-human animals. Looking back, it appears this story may reflect an instance in which my mirror neuron system was non-consciously activated, instinctively encouraging me to mimic (empathically) those around me. Ramachandran writes:

Neurons in the anterior cingulate will respond to the patient being poked with a needle; they are often referred to as sensory pain neurons. Remarkably, researchers at the

University of Toronto have found that some of them will fire equally strongly when the patient watches as someone *else* is poked. I call these “empathy neurons” or “Dalai Lama neurons” for they are, dissolving the barrier between self and others. Notice that in saying this one isn’t being metaphorical; the neuron in question simply doesn’t know the difference between it and others ... You have a sense of “introspecting” on your own thoughts and feelings and of “watching” yourself going about your business—*as if you were looking at yourself from another person’s vantage point.* (*Neurology*, my emphasis)¹

I believe there can be abundant insights into consciousness studies with either a phenomenologically inspired neuroscience, or a neuroscientific phenomenology. An investigation into empathy and laughter via mirror neurons might provide a fecund bridge.

From a phenomenological perspective, it is important to leave open the particular form or type of embodiment that is “ensouled” with consciousness.² Consider the neurophysiological discoveries in non-human subjects by Vittorio Gallese:

In a series of single neuron recording experiments we discovered in a sector of the monkey, ventral premotor cortex, area F5, that a particular set of neurons, activated during the execution of purposeful, goal-related hand actions, such as grasping, holding or manipulating objects, discharge also when the monkey observes similar hand actions performed by another individual. We designated these neurons as “mirror neurons.” (“Shared Manifold Hypothesis” 35)

The “goal-directedness” is important as this implies there might be more than merely blind mimicry of the specific bodily movements of the other. While a certain form of mimicry might be the case initially, the foundation of a possible cognitive bridge between self and other has been established. It is significant that studies in human behaviours reveal similar results, indicating a very early capacity in the human infant to distinguish animate from inanimate entities; infants attempt to mimic the expressions only of *living* and *human* visages. Importantly, very young infants are capable of re-enacting the intentional behaviours of adults but do not do so when the mirrored activity of the adult is replaced with a mechanical device. Gallese notes that:

These results tell us that in order to understand the intended goal of an observed action, and to eventually re-enact it, a *link* must be established between the observed agent and the observer. My proposal is that this link is constituted by the *embodiment* of the intended goal, shared by the agent and the observer. (“Shared Manifold Hypothesis” 36, emphasis in original)

This is fascinating because the implications extend beyond a purely empirical investigation into the possible correlation between brain states and behaviour. It also supports the important distinction between what Husserl calls the living body (*Leib*), and the purely mechanical body (*Körper*), indicating that young children already seem to have a primitive grasp of this distinction. The individual sees purpose in the actions of the other rather than inferring it through some complex theory of mind. Gallese’s work suggests that this is so for human and non-human subjects alike. In human beings—and monkeys too—the “triggering feature for neurons responsive to the observation of goal-related behaviors is the embedded motor schema rather than a purely visual representation of the observed behavior” (“Shared Manifold Hypothesis” 35). So when we see and mimic the other, the act or re-enactment is not merely the result of dumb perception but what Husserl might call passive synthesis, a likely candidate for a phenomenological explication of the work of mirror neurons. The “passivity” of the synthesis should not mislead us. We are not inert blank slates reflexively responding to a pre-given world, but are always already intersubjectively engaged with other conscious and situated beings who become prominent to greater or lesser degrees depending upon the level of attention directed at them by the ego. At the very least, there is a basis for further and expanded synthesis that would not otherwise be possible without the grounding in mirror neurons discovered by neuroscientists and passive synthesis described by Husserl, which in the first place allows for practical activity and meaningful situations.³

In Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, he makes it clear that when I perceive another person, or any other conscious being for that matter, I am not connected to them by way of an inferential process through which I take in piece by piece the sensuous data available and then logically compile this together to form the image of the other. Furthermore, our empathic relations with the other enable us to maintain our sense of self while recognizing the living mentality of other minds:

Apperception is not inference, not a thinking act. *Every* apperception in which we apprehend at a glance, and noticingly grasp, objects given beforehand—for example, the already-given everyday world—every apperception in which we understand their sense and its horizons forthwith, points back to a “*primal instituting*,” in which an object with a similar sense became constituted for the first time. (*Cartesian Meditations* 111)

It seems as if we make the inductive leap, but without any underlying inductive processes in which we consciously or non-consciously compare two different scenarios—one we already know something about, and that which we do not (yet) comprehend. The new case is not logically predicted, but rather *felt* as if in anticipation—apprehensively (Husserl, “Amsterdam” 227). To indicate this, Husserl uses the example of the child with scissors, who sees the object in the “final sense.” She already understands the scissors in a way that enables her to *cope* with the object without having to make continual logical inferences with respect to the proper manipulation and use of the tool. The scissors, or any culturally embedded or situated tools, are what Husserl calls “cultural objects” (*Crisis*, 26-7). That is to say, these objects are more than inanimate things wholly disconnected from other subjective users of these tools. The child is able to handle the scissors effectively and with purpose due to the collective cultural meanings such objects carry with them. They are always seen to be intersubjectively meaningful.

With respect to other conscious beings, we easily and immediately recognize the other who is an emotional and cognitive being, not just an objectal body or corpse. Our experience of

the other is not at all foreign, even though it is by way of a body that is not ours; it is as if we see through the body of the other in much the same way we experience the “expressive transparency” of our own bodies (Plessner 65-6). The sentience and mentality of the other is thus present to the ego immediately, and one sees the inner subjectivity expressed through the body of the other. The use of “inner” and “outside,” while perhaps misleading, does not assume a form of Cartesian dualism for Husserl. The body is fundamental to his concept of subjectivity in a way it is not for Descartes. Husserl describes the access we have to the mind of the other: “Such contents too are indicated somatically and in the conduct of the organism toward the outside world—for example: as the outward conduct of someone who is angry or cheerful, which I easily understand from my own conduct under similar circumstances” (*Cartesian Meditations* 120).⁴ The question is how closely resembling must the bodies be in order for empathy and intersubjectivity not only to be made explicit for the conscious subjects, but for it to be actually present to begin with? Are we only *imaginatively—as if*—putting ourselves into really foreign situations? Or, are we truly thinking, seeing, and feeling as would the other or as we would from the other’s perspective, no matter how dissimilar? To answer this, we have to investigate Husserl’s conception of embodiment.

II. Embodiment and Experience

Essential for both neuroscientists and phenomenologists, especially of the Husserlian stripe studying consciousness, is the necessary criterion of embodiment.⁵ Traditional cognitive science emphasizes the theoretical models of mind, typically interpreting the mind as a computational device analogous in many ways to a digital computer. While much can be learned from these models about the possibilities of artificial intelligence, the many important elements

of the human intellect, and even higher learning, such models remain over-reliant on theory and are thus incapable of adequately addressing what Husserl calls the “frame,” or what Searle would call the “background.” Put another way, the problem is implicitly illustrated in Hubert L. Dreyfus’ question: “can philosophers [or scientists] successfully describe the conceptual upper floors of the edifice of knowledge while ignoring the *embodied coping* going on on the ground floor; in effect declaring that human experience is upper stories all the way down?” (1, my emphasis). We cannot “strip away” the body as if starting from “context-free facts” since we are, “as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it, *always already* in a world that is organized in terms of our bodies and interests and thus permeated by relevance” (Dreyfus 3, emphasis in original). I believe neither Heidegger nor Merleau-Ponty—or even Dreyfus, for that matter—could make such a claim without the original work of Husserl on the role of empathy in embodied intersubjectivity. Still, additional comments are needed regarding the embodiment criterion.

Descartes’ influence has been so strong that it is difficult to even speak in non-Cartesian terms when immersed in issues of the mind. Too often the role of the body is relegated to irrelevance or ignored altogether in the philosophical and scientific studies of consciousness. To illustrate the importance of the body for Husserl, in particular the living body (*Leib*), it is informative to analyze the anomalous and often unfortunate cases in which subjects experience serious deficits in consciousness due to lesions, disease, or injury. Oliver Sacks offers an interesting case study in his chapter “The Disembodied Lady” from *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. Here, Christina is suffering from polyneuritis, a condition that destroys the proprioceptive sense—the non-conscious awareness of the bodily self. This is best described phenomenologically by the patient herself: “I feel my body is blind and deaf to itself ... it has

no sense of itself ... If only I could feel. But I've forgotten what it's like” (49-50). It is as if Christina no longer views her own body as a living body. She has to navigate through her environment inferentially rather than skillfully coping, as Heidegger and Dreyfus might put it. In this example we have an already enculturated adult who is fully immersed in a life-world with all the conceptual baggage such a background brings, but she has seemingly regressed to infancy since she must re-learn how to control her entire body. Christina provides a unique phenomenological insight as she is unlike the infant in that she has access to conscious introspection, that is, the possibility of reflecting on her interaction with her own now-foreign body, and most importantly, she has language.

After the loss of Christina's proprioceptive sense, Sacks notes that, “she had, at first, to monitor herself by vision, looking carefully at each part of her body as it moved, using an almost painful conscientiousness and care” (47). Her body is in effect alien to her and she has to treat it as if it were a foreign object as she becomes a “physiologist” consciously studying herself in a way that requires her to move beyond what Sartre might call *pre-reflective* consciousness:

Her movements, consciously monitored and regulated, were at first clumsy, artificial, in the highest degree. But then ... by the power of an ever-increasing, daily increasing, automatism—then her movements started to appear more delicately modulated, more graceful, more natural (though still wholly dependent on use of the eyes). (47)

It is interesting to consider the possibility that she slowly comes to empathize with her own body in a similar way that she would the body of the other. Sacks hypothesizes that in Christina's case the visual model of the body or body-image, which is usually less dominant and in the background, compensated for or replaced the ever-present (unless completely lost) proprioceptive model. It might be better to say that in normal cases the body is “experientially transparent” or “invisibly present” (Gallagher and Zahavi 144-5). Helmuth Plessner uses similar

language in describing the break in symmetry or equilibrium between a man and his physical existence, or the “expressive transparency of the body” during uncontrollable laughter (65-6). Indeed, the phenomenological attitude encourages one to bracket the natural attitude in which we are ensconced in our tasks and, because of this, we ignore the important role our bodies play in our interaction with cultural objects, other people, and even introspection. It is noteworthy that Christina reverses the order of acclimation to her own body and to others. With infants it is assumed that non-conscious mimicry, somehow modulated by the mirror neuron system, enables the developing consciousness to repetitively imitate the salient acts of those around the infant, eventually (but not necessarily) coming to consciously direct his or her attention. In Christina’s case, she re-learns through re-enacting how to control her body, like children who consciously learn to tie their shoelaces, or like a tennis player who is learning how to return a serve for the first time. Once it is learned and repetitively modeled, the task becomes a skill or ability that need not draw upon the slow and lumbering conscious processes any longer, as it is at this stage that one’s body in effect recedes to enable one to act effectively, in much the same way one’s spectacles on one’s nose must disappear in order for one to see through them. But Christina had to learn how to do all of this consciously and thus slowly, almost entirely through vision as if operating her body from the standpoint of an external observer. With cases like “The Disembodied Lady” we can catch glimpses of how it might be to first experience oneself through observation of the other. The anomaly in this case seems to be that her own body *is* the other.⁶

Evan Thompson presents further support for a phenomenological approach to neuroscience and the study of embodied intersubjective consciousness, paralleling much of what Gallese, Sacks, and Natalie Depraz have to say regarding the body schema. In discussing the phenomenological conception of empathy, drawing on both Husserl and his student Edith Stein,

Thompson notes that it is an “intentional act that discloses or presents ‘foreign experience’ [that is] not reducible to some additive combination of perception and inference” (*Mind in Life* 386). The fluidity of this disclosure depends upon the similarity between the two interacting bodies, which very likely is also related to mirror neurons: “For this kind of sensual empathy to happen, one’s own body and the other’s body must be of a similar type or have comparable body schemas. What the limits of this body type or schema are is an open and important question” (*Mind in Life* 390). Patients who have lost a limb and claim to still feel pain in those limbs might qualify among Husserl’s “abnormal” others, yet we—and they—are capable of adopting each other’s perspective (*Cartesian Meditations* 126). Beyond placing oneself in a sensory deprivation chamber, for instance, we are still able to imaginatively and experientially connect with the other. For Husserl, “No conceivable human being, no matter how different we imagine him to be, could ever experience a world in manners of givenness which differ from the incessantly mobile relativity ... as a world pre-given to him in his conscious life and in community with fellow human beings” (*Crisis* 165). Moreover, even patients who were born without a particular limb still often experience phantom limb symptoms without ever having purposefully controlled or moved their own limb (as it was never there in the first place). So the assumptions about nerve endings still habitually sending signals to the brain (as in typical phantom limb cases) might not adequately address the congenital cases. Instead, the latter might be the result of the patients’ mirror neuron system activating when they continually observe others who are similar enough to them moving their limbs in a given manner. Again, the mirror neurons cannot seem to distinguish between self and other.

But how might a phenomenologist describe such situations? Consider Husserl on the experience of transposing oneself into the position of the other:

Pairing is a *primal form of that passive synthesis* which we designate as “*association*,” in contrast to passive synthesis of “*identification*.” ... apperception of the alter ego by the ego—pairing first comes about when the Other enters my field of perception ... my lived body is always there and sensuously prominent ... it is equipped with the specific sense of an animate organism. (*Cartesian Meditations* 112-13, emphasis in original)⁷

In other words, the process has begun in which we first connect in tacitly recognizing the other as an animate or lived body, seeing the other as an actual focal point of consciousness, but without leaving oneself behind. We are co-experiencing the world with others without identifying ourselves with them. Or to use Dieter Lohmar’s example (below) of theatre-goers “co-experiencing” the fear and even partial evasive movements of the actors in a film, we experience the somatic movements of another subjectivity with feelings, intentions, and desires, and this experience has its neural basis in the mirror neuron system and the phenomenological basis of passive synthesis. I immediately smile or laugh when I see the smile or laughter expressed through the visage of my son, even though our bodies are dissimilar in many respects and I can only directly experience my own emotions and sensations from a single indexed point of view of. But at the very least, in such experiences I am able to transcend the mere physicality or *Körper* of the other, and see him as an embodied person rather than as a distinct body that may or may not possess a distinct mind. In other words, the body of the other does not merely act as the casement, or worse, prison, of the mind, but rather as an expressive extension of the other as a human being. Husserl continues:

Now in case it presents itself ... a body “similar” to mine—that is to say, a body with determinations such that it must enter into a phenomenal pairing with mine—it seems clear ... that, with the transfer of sense, this body must forthwith appropriate from mine the sense: animate organism. (*Cartesian Meditations* 112-13)

The ego maintains the original sense of self even during the “modification” process, and does not merely perceive the other as a duplicate of the self: “I do not apperceive him as having ... the

spatial modes of appearance that are mine from here; rather, as we find on closer examination, I apperceive him as having spatial modes of appearance like those I should have if I should go over there and be where he is” (*Cartesian Meditations* 117). This qualification is significant as it helps alleviate fears of solipsism, as Zahavi notes (151-3). Robert Sokolowski expands on the centrality and sustaining nature of the self in these pairings: “ ... we are at the center in a way that we cannot ever escape. We never become anyone else or anything else; we cannot leave ourselves behind” (33). Importantly, we also do not subsume the other when we transpose ourselves into their point of view; this would lead to a kind of sadistic solipsism, in Sartrean language, in which there is no empathy since there is no “other” who has a perspective. Instead, this situation amounts to a single ego considering what the world would be like solely from her solitary point of view, with no consideration of the lived body of the other. Indeed, this world-view can quickly lead to oppression.

Like the perception of a side or profile of an object, there is always a hidden side not sensuously given to us with the perception of another ego. Depraz expands on this encounter with the other:

Empathy is not first and foremost conditioned by my visual perception of the body of the other, which would mean that we mostly have to do with the meeting of two perceptual and reflecting body images. Empathy is grounded in a much more passive and primal experience lying in both our lived bodies (in our body schemas). Husserl has a name for such a hyletic underground: he speaks of *Paarung* (coupling). Coupling is an associative process through which my lived-body and your lived-body experience a similar functioning of our tactile, auditory, visual, proprioceptive body-style, of our embodied behaviour in the world and of our affective and active kinaesthetic habits and acts. Coupling is a holistic experience of lived bodily resemblance. It is the grounding process of empathy, without which no further intersubjective experience is possible, be it the experience of dissimilarity (pathological or not), or of focusing on one aspect of the body (face-to-face or shaking-hands experiences). (172-3)

There is an unsettling of the self as I allow my home-world to expand, enabling me to imagine myself in the space of the other; but these movements are not pure “phantasies or modes of the ‘as if’” nor “merely a moment of my own essence,” but rather a co-presenting or reciprocal appresenting of each other (*Cartesian Meditations* 108; 109). This coupling might be facilitated by the mirror neuron system which is activated, as noted above, by the passive recognition of goal-directed behaviour of other sentient beings in such a way that two lived bodies are intersubjectively connected, which leads to further empathic co-experiencing. “I experience both a self-acknowledgement of myself and a self-trespassing of myself. So self-alteration means a generative self-transcendence of my limited self as belonging to an unlimited chain of generations” (Depraz 178). I can become a foreigner to myself in recalling previous instances or experiences in which I can see myself as other, but without losing my sense of identity. At the same time, I experience the emotions, feelings, and even thoughts of the other in much the same way I do when I recall an experience that happened to me in the past. I will expound upon this more below with the use of humour in “self-transcendence,” as Robert Roberts puts it (Roberts 143).

If there is no actual feeling of some sort from my own perspective of the other, then I have not enacted empathically with the other, and I have no phenomenological access to the mind of the other. Lohmar makes this point with vivid examples, arguing that the activities of mirror neurons in empathy can be “translated” into phenomenological experiences:

If we cannot find the weakest trace of the “mirroring” brain activity in our own experience, then the feelings concerning other persons would remain unnoticed. Our way of constituting the sensations and feelings of other persons would remain completely “theoretical” and rest only on analogy. That is to say, they would be entirely inferential, resting on logical conclusions from conceptually grasped starting points (and without our own feeling). Surely this is conceivable but our own experience speaks against it. (9)

The *as if* or “phantasizing” is empathic in the sense of *Erlebnis*, or that one lives through or re-activates the thoughts and experiences of the other. This is not really possible on a purely cognitive level as such an approach is too abstract and anesthetized. The traditional cognitive science model, for example, fails to consider

our ability to co-act bodily actions and to co-will the willing of others—but in a weak, “as if,” mode. This “as-if” mode (in co-sensing, co-feeling, co-acting and co-willing) is definitely not a cognitive mode that we would conceive in concepts only but would not feel. In fact, it is a weakened mode of real sensing, real feeling and real acting—but it is not identical with the full modes of these performances. (Lohmar 11)

It cannot be the same exact experience that the other has, as that would reduce the actual distinction between self and other. But the co-experiencing is still a real experience, if only less pronounced and perhaps somewhat incomplete. Lohmar gives an example from the movie *Jurassic Park* in which the main character is desperately attempting to avoid the enormous teeth of the T-Rex. The man remains partially hidden beneath a jeep, legs jutting out just enough to entice the carnivorous beast. In the theatre, movie-goers instinctively draw back their legs, mimicking the goal-directed behaviour of the character on the screen. As Lohmar explains:

We experience the fear and the will to defend ourselves or to flee the dangerous situation of the other person in a vivid and intense manner. That entails that we exceed the mere intellectual understanding of the willing act of the other and engage in a low-level co-willing. This mode of co-willing, however, is not strong enough to move us to real acting. Sitting in the cinema, we know intellectually that we do not have to flee the saurian—but this intellectual knowledge does not hinder our co-experiencing: It looks as if our legs do not know that they are not really endangered. (15)

Again, our mirror neurons do not clearly and distinctly cordon off the other from the self.

The reason Lohmar, Gallese, Zahavi, and Husserl speak of the re-enacting in terms of *as if* is not because there is only a conceptualization of what the other is going through. Rather, they offer that what occurs is actually a weaker version of that same experience that the other has, a distinction in some ways analogous to Hume’s distinction between the vividness of an

impression versus the still real but less vivid after-image of that same impression.⁸ Gallese argues:

Whenever we are looking at someone performing an action, beside the activation of various visual areas, there is a concurrent activation of the motor circuits that are recruited when we ourselves perform that action. Although we do not overtly reproduce the observed action, nevertheless our motor system becomes active *as if* we were executing that very same action that we are observing. To spell it out in different words, action observation implies *action simulation*. (“Shared Manifold Hypothesis” 37, emphasis in original)

This key point is consistent with Lohmar’s regarding partial or incomplete intentional actions (i.e., where we non-consciously move our legs to “escape” the jaws of T-Rex, but without completing the act by actually fleeing from the theatre), and also Husserl’s understanding of empathy through the transposition of self without the complete loss of self. Husserl continually emphasizes the importance of the intersubjective act (*Crisis* 108; 360). But there are other actions that do seem complete (or surely completable) that result from observing the other, such as yawning and laughing. In the next section I will offer an introductory investigation of laughter from a phenomenological standpoint to investigate just how much one’s home-world can be expanded through empathy. I will use laughter as an example of passive synthesis that could facilitate an expansion of the life-world by encouraging the active or cognitive re-enactment of the other’s thoughts. If this is possible—even with respect to our contact with non-human animals, as has been argued for above—it should follow all the more so among various human populations, which are distanced from one another by the accidents of geography, time, cultural background, or even the particularities of embodiment.

III. The Phenomenology of Laughter

In 1962 there was an outbreak of laughter in a girls' boarding school in Tanzania. Somehow, three girls got the giggles, and eventually the wildfire laughter spread to 95 students who could not stop laughing. They were sent home after the school was forced to shut down. The "epidemic" ultimately affected 1,000 people in tribes in and around Tanzania. Psychologist Robert Provine notes that it is extremely difficult to sit still and not laugh among a large guffawing audience witnessing a comedy routine (even if you would not laugh at the jokes alone). This illustrates the (perhaps obvious) point that laughter is a social phenomenon. It is extremely rare that genuine laughter can occur in isolation; there must be some interaction with others even if it is vicariously through the medium of TV, radio, or print. Thus when viewers hear the canned laughter artificially implanted into a script, properly following the given punch line, they are induced to laugh along with the pseudo-laughter. This even works with cheap plastic laugh boxes that can be purchased at novelty stores. According to Provine: "Laughter has the innate capacity to trigger laughter" (149). He posits that there might be "an auditory *laugh-detector*—a neural circuit in our brain that responds exclusively to laughter. Once triggered, the laugh-detector activates ('releases') a *laugh-generator*, a neural circuit that produces the movement that we hear as laughter" (149). The contagious factor of laughter is relevant to a discussion on empathy and its role in intersubjectivity as a mechanism to bring people together in shared experience. For instance, in India, it has become a popular practice to join *Laugh Clubs*, in which participants gather weekly or daily, form a circle, look each other in the face, and pretend to laugh. This absurd exercise eventually leads to the laughter becoming genuine, which spreads among the group. This results in participants forming closer bonds with each other, in addition to improving blood pressure and feeling all-around good. As Provine argues,

evolution seems to have provided many conscious beings with a natural mechanism in laughter to establish and maintain pair-bonds between two individuals, and communal interconnections within larger groups (32-5; 149-51).

Studying laughter phenomenologically is helpful for a number of reasons. First, it is likely connected to mirror neuron systems in much the same way as are the mimicked behaviours described in the foregoing section; since laughter is essentially a social phenomenon that brings people together, it is thus relevant to an investigation of empathy and intersubjectivity. Second, it is one of those characteristics that is ubiquitous (everybody laughs, possibly even non-human animals) and spontaneous. As such, laughter is not amenable to laboratory testing and thus best studied “in the field”—not abstracted from the lived experience of the laughers.⁹ This point is elemental to any phenomenological study that seeks, as far as is possible, a pre-theoretical account of the subject matter. Finally, seeking laughter and adopting a humorous attitude is analogous to taking a philosophical and notably phenomenological stance or attitude towards the world, which continually questions the presuppositions of others and of oneself.¹⁰ In sum, laughter seems to be a phenomenon largely neglected by scientists and phenomenologists,¹¹ and yet I believe both have much to gain by such an investigation. In fact, such an inquiry might even encourage a broadening of both the scientific and phenomenological worldviews into a larger encompassing community. But we first have to take a brief and general look into the conditions needed for laughter and the parallels with Husserl’s phenomenology.

Humans are very good at recognizing patterns and inferring structures and relations among and between given objects or states of affairs, even from ambiguous or vague presentations. In fact, this is an essential capability in order to create and appreciate humour. We expect patterns to emerge and remain consistent and congruous. When they do not, we are open

to noticing such incongruity, and we often laugh in response. Consider our ability to immediately recognize familiar faces, that is, to distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar faces and (perhaps more importantly) to see faces where none are overtly presented. The latter is called *pareidolia*, where we project recognizable images such as faces in clouds, on Mars, in surrealistic paintings, and sometimes very specific visages under bridges or even on our toast. Of course there is no actual face in these instances, but likewise, as Husserl claims, there is no actual relation of “two-ness” when we perceive two objects close together. That is, such two-ness—what Husserl calls the universal category of “plurality” or that which is “purely categorical”—is not visually present in an intuition (*Logical Investigations* 307).

The full perceptual image of the face or the two-ness that Husserl speaks of is not given directly through the straightforward intuition, that is, the mere sensuous perception of an object or state of affairs. Rather, this image is something the perceiver has to bring to the experience, or somehow take out of the experience in a way that cannot be entirely dependent upon perception. At first blush, this seems very similar to Locke’s distinction between primary and secondary qualities, where in this case the secondary qualities might be analogous to Husserl’s purely categorical, and the primary qualities similar to the purely sensuous and thus measurable. But the main difference is that Husserl does not posit indirect imagistic perceptions or sense data that give us what is really “out there” as re-presented in visual intuition. Husserl seems to make this point: “*The realm of meaning is much wider than that of intuition, i.e., than the total realm of possible fulfillment*” (*Logical Investigations* 312, emphasis in original). So the first examples of seeing faces in different patterns might be a simple case of Husserl’s “categorical admixture,” at least when it is seen as a face. This is the case with so-called “degenerate stimuli.” So when a few lines might be randomly drawn on a page, each might be seen individually as a separate

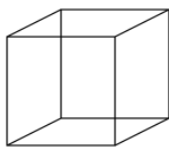
image, but upon being perceived they immediately become or are constituted as parts within a larger whole—a face. The form of a face is in a sense excavated or compiled, but not in inferential stages; it is presented all at once, as illustrated by the following annoying (and degenerate in more than one way) emoticon—☺. I am not presented with the complete perceptual image in a single glance, but I *am* conscious of entire objects as if in one grasp. It is analogous to the *a-ha* moment of “getting” the punch line of a joke, as will be shown below. This seems to be the reverse of what many in cognitive science claim about how much our senses serially and non-consciously perceive the world.

The givenness of objects that are in part perceptually present and in part absent seems to require a new mode of investigation that could at least augment the methods of traditional cognitive science, which presume an underlying set of non-conscious rule-following at the neuronal level. Husserl’s ideas of perception appear to describe conscious beings as having abilities to actually be conscious of more than is sensuously available to us in any given perception. This is because we never actually see the entirety of any object. As such, sensuously ubiquitous vision is impossible for we can only perceive a given side or profile at once, but we fill in what is absent in the perception through accessing an intersubjective perspective. We apperceive absent profiles of the object or states of affairs from the viewpoint of the other in such a way that it would have to be seen by another consciousness. Robert Sokolowski’s example of perceiving a cube helps to illustrate this point:

At any given moment, only certain sides of the cube are presented to me, and the others are absent. But I know that I can either walk around the cube or turn the cube around and the absent sides will come into view, while the present sides go out of view. My perception is dynamic not static ... As I turn the cube or walk around it, the potentially perceived becomes the actually perceived, and the actually perceived slips into absence ... On the subjective side, the empty intentions become filled and the filled become empty. (18)¹²

I think this phenomenological study of perception could be helpful in analyzing particular examples of laughter from humour, which in turn might illuminate phenomenological accounts of experience in general.

In many cases of laughter resulting from humour, we recognize a break in an expected pattern, or a sudden and incongruous shift either in a visual or conceptual pattern, which can elicit a pleasant psychological shift, as John Morreall puts it (133-4). Related to the cognitive element in perceptual experience, Husserl writes: “Because of their anticipations of experienceability, and because every direct perception itself includes inductive moments (anticipation of the sides of the object which are not yet experienced), everything is contained in the broader concept of ‘experience’ or ‘induction’” (*Crisis* 127, marginal note). An analogy of the capacity to shift among a variety of different and sometimes contradictory perspectives can be illustrated with the visual shift that occurs when one views a Necker Cube and is able to amend the image so that a given face is perceived as in the foreground, as opposed to the background.¹³ This same face can then be pushed to the background as the viewer flickers between two (in this case) possible interpretations, usually immediately and often without willful control.



This sort of ambiguous visual display is analogous to what often happens when we shift back and forth between alternating concepts, meanings, or possible situations in humour. Interestingly, when the observer makes this perceptual shift in the cube-image for the first time, the response is

often at least a smile, but usually it is a bit of laughter in the *a-ha* sense of “now I see it” (Morreall 188-207). I imagine this is much the case with the *a-ha* experience of getting a joke or recognizing a non-threatening incongruity. Moreover, the parallels with Sokolowski’s cube, with its present and absent sides, provide a phenomenological insight into the experience of laughter. It is as if the two possible perceptions of the cube cancel each other out in this case—when one is present the other is absent.

But when I am aware of the meaning of the punch line and get it, it is not usually because I follow some conscious or non-conscious rules of inference; rather, it hits me as if in one fell swoop, even though the “responsibility” is on me to fill in what is intentionally omitted. It could be argued that the more left unsaid, or absent in Husserl’s parlance, the better the humour. Consider the following parsimonious joke in which the majority of what is needed to get it is in an important sense absent, or at least not completely presented, and the audience is forced to oscillate between two or more possible states of affairs to fill in the missing aspects: *A masochist says to a sadist “hit me.” The sadist says “no.”* The laughter is triggered in a moment, not from the arduous logical meanderings from concept to concept. Indeed, when we do take the time to analyze the conceptual roots of the humour (in this case, at least), it changes the phenomenology—it is no longer funny as all the humour has been “sucked out,” and the sense of immediacy, anticipation, and surprise is lost. While there is likely cognitive shifting or oscillating in some sense occurring, phenomenologically speaking the experience is one of an instant and pleasant transposition in which the audience shifts perspectives and reinterprets what they initially perceived. In the joke, we imaginatively perceive the two characters involved, anticipating something to happen (such as a punch to the face), and when our expectation is dissolved and nothing happens, we laugh at the pleasant and surprising incongruity. The

immediate impression is of an absurdity, but we are forced to shift perspectives and re-interpret the initial presentation with great rapidity, and we enjoy the recognition of the absent or hidden sense beneath the façade of ridiculousness. It is important to note that even those who do not get it will tend to laugh anyway, perhaps out of embarrassment, but also quite likely from the mere observation of the acts of laughter of those around them, as implicated in the discussion of mirror neurons above. When we listen to someone telling a funny story, anecdote, or joke, we want to hear and understand the punch line; we want to be part of the community that gathers around laughter. In the next section, we will see whether such pleasant transpositions within the self might provide for the possibility of letting others into our sphere of ownness (in Husserlian terms) and in so doing, expand our conception of the life-world.

IV. Expansion of the Life-World Embodied Through Laughter and Mirroring the Other

When Socrates walks into a room in which some of the most attractive people in Greece are present and he exclaims: “I am the most beautiful man in all of Athens,” this causes much laughter. There are many reasons for this, one of which is the obvious incongruity between his ironic statement and the reality of his physical appearance (Socrates was, of course, famously homely). What seems to be at play here, at least in part, is what Edith Stein calls “reiterated empathy,” in which one is able to see oneself as others do. Socrates’ use of self-deprecating humour, presuming it is genuine, would likely not be possible without something like this intersubjective movement in perspectives from self to other and back again. For Husserl, it is a bit more complicated than that, as I am already always immersed in what Husserl calls the life-world, which is at least implicitly revealed to me, for instance, in my laughter at myself. Such laughter is directed at my home-world or sphere of ownness, that is, what I take to be the realm

of all that is important and relevant to me. But what I take to be important is in large part dependent upon my expectations and habituated through my background. It is the background or presuppositions of a nation, community, or individual, that often elicit the response of laughter from those “outside” or “looking in,” who recognize an incongruity or break in an expected pattern. This is commonly presumed to be the role of the humourist or comic wit. From a phenomenological perspective, this wit must in some degree already be part of that community at which she is directing her laughter, making her humour both a laughing *at* and a laughing *with*. In the act of laughter there is the manifestation of the recognition of something that does not quite fit. In a way, the object of the laughter might even be somewhat foreign yet accessible in much the same manner as one might eventually become enculturated into a new environment. There is the possibility of the interchange of ideas and experiences the moment the individual’s sphere of ownness or home-world comes into conflict or agreement with that of an other. In the case of Socrates or “road rage” (below), this even includes one’s own previous sphere. The conflict or agreement is already to presume a common larger world or intersubjective life-world that enables one to recognize that her particular sphere of ownness is not the only one—it is not *The Life-World*. If it were, there would be no consciousness of any other home-world with which to come into conflict or agreement—and likely nothing to laugh at either.

The interaction between and among home-worlds is integral to Husserl’s conception of intersubjectivity. But such communication is also relevant for the individual ego who can perceive herself as herself at different times and places. Husserl writes:

When the new direction of interest is established, and thus also its strict epoché, the life-world becomes a first intentional heading, an *index* or *guide-line* for inquiring back into the multiplicities of manners of appearing and their intentional structures ... the same ego, now actually present, is in a sense, in every past that belongs to it, another—i.e., as that which was and thus is not now—and yet, in the continuity of its

time it is one and the same, which is and was and has its future before it. The ego which is present now, thus temporalized, has contact with its past ego, even though the latter is precisely no longer present: it can have a dialogue with it and criticize it, as it can others. (*Crisis* 172, emphasis in original)

This is reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes on laughter: “I may therefore conclude that the passion of laughter is nothing else but the sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity in others, or with our own formerly ...” (quoted in Morreall 20). While Hobbes is likely wrong about the presumed necessity of feelings of superiority over those to whom we direct our laughter, including our former selves, his pointing out the suddenness of the laughter is relevant, I think, to what Husserl takes to be an immediate and perhaps passionate response to the behaviour of other consciousnesses that enliven bodies similar to our own.¹⁴ But the emotional character of the connection need not be the only element involved; it might be a necessary precursor to further cognitive dialogue with the other, even a former version of oneself.

There was a time when I suffered from “road rage,” and I would often yell and pound my fist in the air at my freeway opponents. In one instance, after being perhaps justifiably mocked by my wife about my character flaw, I briefly caught sight of myself in the rear-view mirror, and in that instant I felt what Roberts calls “self-transcendence” and was able to laugh *at* myself in that moment. It was not the ridiculing or sense of superiority type of laughter espoused by Hobbes, as I would then have had to be feeling superior to myself in that very moment—this would be incoherent. The sense of humour in that instance put me in the right distance metaphorically from the source of the humour (myself, perceived in an unappealing light), and enabled me to see, understand, and perhaps feel what I must have looked like from someone else’s perspective. My ego was in an important sense split, but not permanently so, as I could

still oscillate between multiple perspectives. In other words, I could easily slip back into the irrational rage, but temper it by adopting a *reflective attitude*: “In reiterated empathy, I see myself from your perspective. Stated more precisely, I empathetically grasp your empathetic experience of me” (*Mind in Life* 392).

Laughter is akin to an ability or skill, as suggested by Dreyfus and anticipated in Husserl’s assessment of the young girl who copes effortlessly with the scissors. Beyond that it is also an attitude towards the world and others in it. If this is so, then it seems we can practice and improve upon our abilities to laugh and bring others together empathically through laughter. But to foster a humorous attitude, one must be capable of doubt, of cognitive shifting, and of seeing the world from more than a single absolute perspective. When one cultivates and habituates the sense of humour, then healthy skepticism, open-mindedness, and a general interest in the way the world *is* versus how it *ought* to be is also nurtured. Doubt is needed because someone with a presumed sense of certainty about the world and/or himself is far less prone to finding anything funny, especially if the humour is directed at himself. In this way the goals of humour and philosophy intertwine, since, to quote Bertrand Russell from his “Philosophy for Laymen”: “The goal of *humour* is to dissipate certainty; whether of knowledge or of ignorance” (45). Russell might caution that in humour, the Aristotelian mean is sought between these two extremes of certainty—the former is dangerous and the latter useless. If I am fully and dogmatically committed to certain scientific, religious, or political beliefs, for instance, it is very unlikely that I would merrily entertain attempts at humour directed at those beliefs. One has to be open to the prospect of opening one’s home-world, and this requires the ability to see other perspectives.

Fresh perspectives are essential if one is to succeed in Roberts’ self-transcendence, or developing one’s talent for seeing beyond one’s own current self. This “dissociation,” here

viewed in an important sense as analogous to Husserl's transcendence, is also imperative in the development of a phenomenological point of view. We are able to shift perspectives when there is appropriate cognitive and emotional distance from the incongruity. In other words, we have to avoid being too close or too invested in the humorous event, while not being completely disengaged from it either, so as not to risk a hyper-rational abstraction that leaves us with no visceral connection to the scene before us—we must adopt something like a disinterested “humorous attitude,” which we might interpret as akin to the Husserlian phenomenological attitude. This humorous training involves the habituation of appropriate distance, and it is reinforced in every instance one finds oneself immediately and often unconsciously laughing at a perceived incongruity. In everyday social settings, the person with a highly developed sense of humour is able to engage an audience by bringing them into her perspective of the world, if only for brief moments at a time. In doing so, the wit can get us to laugh at or with her, at others, or at ourselves. As Roberts puts it, we are forced to “adopt [her] perspective” (141). He also notes that “A sense of humor about oneself is a capacity for that self-transcendence which is fundamental to the formation of virtues and to the moral life under the conditions of this world. It either is like, or is part of, such self-management virtues as courage and self-control, and is a form of humility” (Roberts 143). People with a sense of humour will likewise more readily see the world or a given situation from another's view, and thus be open to empathically expanding their conception of the life-world.

V. Conclusion

When one perceives another conscious body, as opposed to the perception of inanimate objects, there is an immediate and non-inferential empathic connection. Thompson adds the

following, quoting from Edith Stein's *On the Problem of Empathy*: "Interwoven with sensual empathy is the perception of the other's bodily presence as expressive of subjective thoughts and feelings: 'we 'see' shame 'in' blushing, irritation in the furrowed brow, anger in the clenched fist [and mirth in smiles or laughter]'" (*Mind in Life* 390). Of course, the subjective feelings are not strictly speaking visible to an outsider looking in, but nor are they merely inferred as if through analogical argument comparing my bodily posture and internal feelings and emotions to that of the other. Were this the only manner in which we could succeed in seeing the mental life of the bodies before us, we would never have been able to learn from imitating the behaviour of others.

But, as Thompson notes:

newborns (less than an hour old in some cases) can imitate the facial gestures of another person. This kind of imitation is known as "invisible imitation" because the infant uses parts of his body invisible to himself to imitate the other's movements as the parts that the infant uses to imitate the other are not visible to the subject. ("Empathy and Consciousness" 7)

This does not seem to be an acquisition but rather a skill or capacity that is present at birth. Novel experiences (which includes everything, for infants) use proprioceptive awareness that might be analogous to Husserl's passive synthesis. As we mature, this capacity develops further, and we are more readily able to see in the other a subject who not only has a home-world of her own, but shares in our home-world as well. All of this might be made possible by the physical embodiment of mirror neurons, which, as shown above, enables sentient beings to non-inferentially couple their own lived body with that of the other. Indeed, this seems to substantially validate Husserl's understanding of empathy and the role it plays in embodied intersubjectivity.

The *as if* phrase used throughout this paper in reference to the empathic transposition of oneself into the place of the other is somewhat ambiguous. It is important to Husserl's

conception of empathy, which at times seems to imply the possibility of multiplying oneself or even of alienating the self from the self (i.e., as when one is pulled into the sphere of ownness of an other). The *as if* finds possible synonyms in Husserl's use of "irreality" from the *Cartesian Meditations* (78), and in the idea of "fantasy variations"¹⁵ in "The Amsterdam Lectures on Phenomenological Psychology," where Husserl speaks of the "interrelated life of consciousness" in perceiving any given object or state of affairs. In such a case

we are immediately drawn into a disclosure of fulfillment [of sense] which [shows] itself as evident from the given perception precisely by means of a series of *fantasy variations* which offer a multiplicity of possible new perceptions projected as possible ... it is an *anticipatory* sketching out of new moments which belongs to the way of being of the perceived. ("Amsterdam" 227, my emphasis)

Here, Husserl is addressing the transcendent nature of any given sense experience for which there is always more to the conscious experience than what is merely sensuously given, or in the case with laughter resulting from humour, we are primed to anticipate a conclusion based upon incomplete (but completable) information. Gallese speaks of "action potentials" as the mirror neurons are in a sense priming us expectantly to see the world around us in a complex and intersubjective manner that is not present in the brute perception itself:

Our seemingly effortless capacity to conceive of the acting bodies inhabiting our social world as *goal-oriented persons* like us depends on the constitution of a "*we-centric*" shared meaningful interpersonal space ... I propose that this shared manifold space can be characterized at the functional level as embodied simulation, a specific mechanism, likely constituting a basic functional feature by means of which our brain/body system models its interactions with the world. ("Intentional Attunement" 5, my emphasis)

It seems these comments support Husserl's suggestion to amend the phrase "I perceive" to "we perceive."

Husserl's *as if* can then be viewed as perception of the world from an already intersubjective stance in which we model the behaviour and purposeful acts of those in our

world. This act of perception already assumes a “we” in much the same way that the laughter at the other is already laughter with. The laughter encourages mimicry in those around us, drawing them into one’s home-world, but often at the same time it is a recognition of something unsettling that pulls us from our comfort zones, forcing us to expand what we take to be relevant and important to our particular existence. Of course, a simulation of the sort advocated by Gallese is not a duplication of the acts I observe in the other. I am not a duplicate of the other, nor is the embodied other a duplicate of me—thus, the importance of fleshing out the sense of the *as if*. The analogizing involved in the initial contact with the other, in this case through the passive synthesis in laughter, might be a stepping-stone to increasing the scope of passive synthesis as it facilitates the possibility of cognitive re-affectuation.¹⁶ We cannot help but see the life in the body of the other as expressed through gesture, voice, and most importantly here, laughter. Plessner puts it well:

The aural impression [of laughing or crying] may control the optical; more than this it holds us in its spell, it is contagious. Only by self-control can we continue to be disinterested spectators in the presence of genuine laughing or crying. More forcefully than any other expressive pattern, the laughing and crying of our fellow man grip us and make us partners of his agitation without our knowing why. (56)

Through *as if* re-affectuation, there is the possibility of recognizing a shared or intersubjective intentionality.

There is a communal exchange in the imaginative sense that permits me to inhabit the place in which the other stands. At the same time, the other is able to inhabit my place in keeping with how she sees me, but without either of us threatening the other with annihilation or dissolution. While each does not simply copy the thoughts, feelings, and acts of the other, it is also not the case that each experiences the world in isolation—their thoughts, feelings, and acts are sharable. I know I am in my home-world even when I realize there are other home-worlds. I

can transcend myself and realize I am only one appresentation of another subjective source—I am within the stream of a larger co-consciousness. Observing the laughter of the other invokes my own laughter, just as the intense action scenes on the screen compel me to mimic the evasive action taken by the character who narrowly escapes the jaws of a monster. These are truly my actions, but I am not alone when I re-enact or re-effectuate them. The individual ego is the point of departure in all of these interactions only because there is no other way for such embodied consciousnesses to experience anything. We have to start with our particular individual consciousness, just as we have to start with our *human* consciousness—but it is not and cannot be isolated, nor is it the only conceivable type of consciousness (*Crisis* 262). Here is Husserl from the *Cartesian Meditations*: “In this pre-eminent intentionality there becomes constituted for me the new existence-sense that goes beyond my monadic very-ownness; there becomes constituted an ego, not as ‘I myself’, but as mirrored in my own Ego, in my monad” (94).

I suggest that a phenomenological investigation into empathy with laughter as a central focus, coupled with a scientific investigation into mirror neurons as the neural substrate of empathy and laughter, might help to bridge the widening gap Husserl warns about between science and phenomenology. Cognitive science and artificial intelligence, for example, could benefit from such a study by focusing on the embodied criterion of consciousness rather than assuming a strict neural-substrate model or a Cartesian dualism, in which the inanimate body houses the animate mind. To my mind, this kind of analysis would best proceed by coupling contemporary natural sciences of the mind with phenomenology. Furthermore, study of mirror neurons and passive synthesis in connection with the contagious effect of laughter could yield important insights into human cooperation (or lack thereof) within and among groups. What is the causal relation between mirror neurons and empathy; that is, can one train oneself to be more

empathetic and if so, does such training succeed in strengthening neuronal connections in the motor cortex, for instance? To what extent do our mirror neurons activate, or fail to, when confronted with overt goal-directed behaviour from someone not only different or from a foreign home-world than ourselves, but one who is perceived as an enemy, oppressor, or someone we happen to oppress, and thus with whom we do not empathize? These sorts of questions could allow us to discover not only how it is that we often learn from others through mimicry, but also how we can comprehend immediately the thoughts, intentions, and feelings of the other through empathy; that is, how we can expand our worlds. The phenomenologist herself, after all, is part of a particular home-world that ought to be open to further worlds that might enhance or enlarge her own—empirical sciences are one avenue that Husserl is not afraid to seek, so long as science, for instance, does not obliterate those different worlds that have come before, but rather allows for the possibility of a true “we community.”¹⁷

Notes

¹ Ramachandran is promoting a version of the theory of mind in which mirror neurons play a role in “the ability to read others’ minds.” This is not what I would argue for, as I am leaning more toward the view that we intersubjectively *see* the mentality of the other through their bodily expressions.

² See Husserl’s *Crisis* on the possibility of broadening the localization of souls so as to extend the world horizon (255-6), and for his qualification that “as the subjectivity which objectifies itself ... human subjectivity” is only the necessary starting point for us (262). The point is that Husserl’s study of consciousness is not confined to merely human subjectivity.

³ See Husserl’s *Analyses* for a distinction between passive and active synthesis (145-7; 280-2), and also for more on his concern with the initial connection with the “living-body” with which the ego becomes “co-conscious” through empathy (373; 544). Helmuth Plessner addresses the inherent ambiguity of humans both being a body and having a body: “He responds to something by laughing and crying ... He responds—with his body as body, as if from the impossibility of being able to find an answer himself. And in the loss of control over himself and his body, he

reveals himself at the same time as a more than bodily being who lives in a state of tension with regard to his physical existence yet is wholly and completely bound to it" (31).

⁴ See Zahavi (152-3) for an analysis of Husserl's non-inferential linking of "other minds." For Husserl's own commentary see "Amsterdam" (51).

⁵ See Husserl's *Crisis* for his discussion on "sensible embodiment" (26-27), and for his emphasis on the "bodily character" as essential for experience in the life-world, "even if it is not a mere body, as, for example, an animal or a cultural object, i.e., even if it also has psychic or otherwise spiritual properties" (106-7).

⁶ It is important to note that anomalous cases, such as this one, are studied by neurophysiologists not because they provide data about radically different kinds of conscious beings, but because they provide information that would be inaccessible in the "normal" cases, which are different by matters of degree, not type. See Gallagher and Zahavi for their "IW" case, which is similar to Sacks' "Christina" since both lack "proprioceptive feedback" that could only be compensated for by "intense mental concentration and constant visual vigilance" (146-7).

⁷ See also Husserl, *Analyses* (373; 544).

⁸ This is what can generally be called the simulation theory of mind, in contrast to the traditional cognitive science theory-theory of mind, which is far more abstract and less interested in the importance of embodied cognition. There is also a more direct intersubjective view in which the observable expressions of the body (inter)connects people. This latter view is found in Gallagher and Zahavi (171-194) and Plessner (25; 56). I think it is representative of Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, for example. I am sympathetic to this approach, but I am leaving it an open question in this paper.

⁹ Plessner notes that: "Methodological procedure always follows the path of isolation. Isolation, in turn, implies abstraction ... To understand laughing and crying as expressive phenomena, therefore, does not mean that we subject them first to the isolating techniques of psychological and physiological methodology ... On the contrary; it means first and foremost to put them back into their original living context" (15-6). Provine's outside-of-the-lab scientific study of laughter "wherever it is found" might be an exception (20; 32-5).

¹⁰ This point is beyond the scope of this paper, but I intend to address it in another work. Briefly put, the humourist, like the phenomenologist, is adept at consciousness-raising or simply bringing to light presuppositions of our everyday experience, but this requires achieving the appropriate distance from that which is intended, doubted, or laughed at/with. See Sokolowski (48; 54; 64) on intending and doubting and Morreall (128-38) on laughter, and below on incongruity.

¹¹ One exception is Stuart Grant's phenomenological study of laughter, "Abysmal Laughter," which empirically investigates the preconscious grounding for the experience of laughter that is

found to straddle the gap between the rational and the bodily/emotional. Importantly, Grant recognizes the empathic elements to laughter, in contrast to Agnes Heller's assertion that laughter is "always a judgment" (43; 54-5), and thus primarily rational. His analysis expands upon Plessner's earlier work and offers a rich foundation for further phenomenological and scientific investigation into the intersubjective phenomenon of laughter.

¹² See Husserl, "Amsterdam" (226), *Crisis* (157-8).

¹³ This example is drawn from Paulos' description of humour resulting from "relational reversals" of incongruous meanings (59-60). Another example would be Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit head/rabbit-duck head, borrowed from psychologist Joseph Jastrow. Wittgenstein notes, distinguishing between the "continuous seeing" of an aspect and the "dawning of an aspect," that we do not say of our perception of the ambiguous figure: "Now it's a rabbit"; we just say something like: "It's a rabbit" (166). But when it dawns on one that there is more than a single aspect of the same percept, one is inclined to oscillate (perhaps even vacillate) between the two incongruent possibilities. The image is unchanged, but our interpretation of it is expanded in a sense. Those who lack a developed sense of humour, or have too rigid of a world-view, or simply possess a limited vocabulary, or even those in a bad mood, miss (or do not care about) the incongruity before them, and thus do not laugh, in much the same way one who is unperceptive might fail to recognize the dissonance in a given image. In other words, as Wittgenstein puts it: "Had I replied 'It's a rabbit,' the ambiguity would have escaped me, and I should have been reporting my perception" (167).

¹⁴ The laughter is often passive, immediate, and beyond conscious and willful control. Furthermore, it is also more often the case that we laugh *with* others, rather than at them. See Provine (32-53) and Morreall (128-138) for the argument that laughter likely evolved to bring people together, not deride and separate them.

¹⁵ It should be noted that Husserl uses this term to refer to acts that are more methodological and thus in a sense logically posterior to the immediacy of the acts in passive synthesis, the latter making possible the former.

¹⁶ "A fictitious objectivity as *fictum*, an image as image, yields a kind of objectivity, an ideal, noematic one insofar as what the ego has formed in this manner in play can be identified in the repetition of play and in maintaining the constituted sense, and can then be explicated in cognitive acts. Every such formation, which nevertheless first crystallizes into a firm unity in free activity, is called a free possibility, a possibility of phantasy" (*Analyses* 286).

¹⁷ Although Husserl has his reservations: "Merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people ... The mere science of bodies clearly has nothing to say; it abstracts from everything subjective" (*Crisis* 6). See also his claim that "... no objective science ... explains or ever can explain anything in a serious sense" (189).

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