



EMPATHY MOMENTS

Nathalie Barbosa de la Cadena

Professor of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), Juiz de Fora, MG – Brazil.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4271-1025> |  nathalie.cadena@ufjf.br

CADENA, Nathalie Barbosa de la. Empathy moments. *Trans/Form/Ação: Unesp journal of philosophy*, Marília, v. 48, n. 2, e025037, 2025.

Abstract: In this paper, I analyse the act of consciousness called empathy, as proposed by Husserl in *Ideas II*. By applying Husserl's phenomenological reduction, I evidence three moments that constitute empathy: first, to recognize the other Ego; second, to open myself up to the other Ego; and third, to feel with the other Ego. I investigate these eidetic universalities [*Wesenallgemeinheiten*] within the limits of pure intuition (HUA III, 146). To recognize the other Ego is an involuntary act that happens in consciousness when I come face-to-face with another human being. To open myself up to the other Ego is a spiritual act derived from freedom. I can decide whether or not to open myself up. If I do not, empathy is interrupted, incomplete, and I can react either affectionately or distressfully, or I can make a hasty judgement and decide either to distance myself from the other or to act. If I open myself up to the other Ego, I can react affectionately or distressfully, without much information. Another possibility is to comprehend, reflect, judge, agree or disagree, and decide either to distance myself from the other or to act in either a compassionate or a confrontational way. In this regard, empathy does not imply agreeing or acting compassionately. In short, I present a mental map of this reasoning and conclude by pointing out the need to develop empathy and the importance of having time to empathise appropriately.

Keywords: Husserl. Empathy. Recognizing. Opening up to. Feeling with.

CADENA, Nathalie Barbosa de la. Momentos da empatia. *Trans/Form/Ação: revista de filosofia da Unesp*, Marília, v. 48, n. 2, e025037, 2025.

Resumo: Neste artigo, analisa-se o ato de consciência empatia, como proposto por Husserl, em *Ideias II*. Aplicando a redução fenomenológica de Husserl, evidenciam-se três momentos que constituem a empatia: primeiro, reconhecer o outro Ego; segundo, abrir-se para o outro Ego; terceiro, sentir com o outro Ego. Investigam-se essas universalidades eidéticas [*Wesenallgemeinheiten*] dentro dos limites da intuição pura (HUA III, 146). Reconhecer o outro Ego é um ato involuntário que acontece na consciência, quando se está diante de um ser humano. Abrir-se para o outro Ego é um ato espiritual derivado da liberdade. Pode-se decidir abrir-se ou não. Se não, a empatia é interrompida, não completa, e se pode reagir afetuosamente ou aflitivamente, ou se pode julgar precipitadamente e decidir deixar de fora ou agir. Se se abre para o outro Ego, pode-se reagir afetuosamente ou aflitivamente sem muita informação. Outra possibilidade é compreender, refletir, julgar, concordar ou discordar, e decidir distanciar-se ou agir de forma compassiva ou conflituosa. Nesse sentido, empatia não implica concordar ou agir compassivamente. Em suma, apresenta-se um mapa mental desse raciocínio e se conclui apontando a necessidade de desenvolver empatia e a importância de ter tempo para empatizar adequadamente.

Palavras-chave: Husserl. Empatia. Reconhecimento. Abrir-se para. Sentir com.

Submission: 16/09/2024 | Decision: 01/12/2024 | Revision: 17/01/2025 | Publication: 30/01/2025



<https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2025.v48.n2.e025037>



This is an article published in open access under a Creative Commons license.

EMPATHY MOMENTS

Nathalie Barbosa de la Cadena¹

Abstract: In this paper, I analyse the act of consciousness called empathy, as proposed by Husserl in *Ideas II*. By applying Husserl's phenomenological reduction, I evidence three moments that constitute empathy: first, to recognize the other Ego; second, to open myself up to the other Ego; and third, to feel with the other Ego. I investigate these eidetic universalities [Wesenallgemeinheiten] within the limits of pure intuition (HUA III, 146). To recognize the other Ego is an involuntary act that happens in consciousness when I come face-to-face with another human being. To open myself up to the other Ego is a spiritual act derived from freedom. I can decide whether or not to open myself up. If I do not, empathy is interrupted, incomplete, and I can react either affectionately or distressfully, or I can make a hasty judgement and decide either to distance myself from the other or to act. If I open myself up to the other Ego, I can react affectionately or distressfully, without much information. Another possibility is to comprehend, reflect, judge, agree or disagree, and decide either to distance myself from the other or to act in either a compassionate or a confrontational way. In this regard, empathy does not imply agreeing or acting compassionately. In short, I present a mental map of this reasoning and conclude by pointing out the need to develop empathy and the importance of having time to empathise appropriately.

Keywords: Husserl. Empathy. Recognizing. Opening up to. Feeling with.

INTRODUCTION

The grounding of intersubjectivity is the act of consciousness called empathy [Einfühlung] and, therefore, is the basis of ethics, morals, politics and law: all spiritual sciences. According to Husserl (2006, p. 23/HUA XXVII, 7)², these sciences lack a metaphysics of customs, an a priori practical science, that is to say, the *mathesis* of spirit and humanity's. It would be a system developed from pure rationality, with truths rooted in the human beings' essence. It would be a science that makes a rational clarification of empirical facts, just as pure mathematics enables the clarification of nature through empirical natural science. Such a science should consider the peculiarity of the spiritual sciences as there are general norms which belong to the rational humanity's a priori essence, and there is a factual praxis subject to such norms (2006, p. 23/HUA XXVII, 7).

In this sense, Husserl (1977, p. 9-10/HUA IX, 14-15) has already set the limits for this investigation:

¹ Professor of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), Juiz de Fora, MG – Brazil, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4271-1025>. Email: nathalie.cadena@ufjf.br or nbcadena@gmail.com.

² Husserliana (HUA): Edmund Husserl Gesammelte Werke. Husserl Archives Leuven.

Psychology is nothing else but description and analysis of this one nexus given internally as life itself and indeed, according to Dilthey, the question concerns always the life-nexus of the developed “typical human”. Nature we explain; psychic and mental life we understand; to produce understanding is the task of all historical and systematic socio-cultural sciences, which for that very reason are referred back to descriptive and analytic psychology as the fundamental science of understanding. [...] It is clear that this holds of all socio-cultural sciences, no matter which cultural systems or which external organizations of human society they refer to, such as family and local community, church and state. Having originated in the living nexus of the human psyche, they can be understood only on this same basis. Only because there is uniformity and regularity in psychic life can they arise as forces overreaching the individual and making the same order possible for all individuals.

In view of this, what I am proposing is to apply Husserl’s phenomenological reduction to empathy and, based on the findings, convert them into cases that exemplify eidetic universalities [Wesenallgemeinheiten], which I would systematically study within the limits of pure intuition (Husserl, 1983, p. 176/HUA III, 146), an analysis of the act of empathy, breaking it down into moments. For this purpose, I firstly highlight the Husserlian understanding of empathy as presented in *Ideas II*, then analyse the concept, decompose it and, finally, I will reflect on the possible consequential empathetic actions.

1 EMPATHY

In *Ideas II*, Husserl (1993, p. 170/HUA IV, 162) explains that a multiplicity of things is originally given in time and space. Within this multiplicity, there are animals and, among animals, there are humans. Things, animals and humans are all originally given. However, humans are unities of two strata: body and psyche.

The first stratum is the material corporeal body [Körper] which, like all material things, has its position in space. The body is given in primal presence (protopresence) [Urpräsenz]. It is “actually” there. However, it is given in continuous perception, but in manifold appearances, which makes it impossible to apprehend all of its characteristics, inner determination or unique attributes. The totality of objects primally present *idealiter* to all subjects is nature in the first and original sense: spatial-temporal-material nature.

The second stratum is the soul, the *anima*, which reveals a psychic life. A human being’s psychic life is given in *appresence* [Appräsenz]. It is private, unique to the individual, a complex of inner attitudes. However, human *apperception* [Mensch-Apperzeltion] is given through bodily expressions, facial expressions, tone of voice, intensity of touch and approximation.

In short, for Husserl (1993, p. 170-171/HUA IV, 162-163), when I experience an animated being, I experience his body in primal presence, and his psychic life in *appresence*. Husserl (1993, p. 172/HUA IV, 164) writes:

Human beings as components of the external world are originally given insofar as they are apprehended as unities of corporeal Bodies and souls. The Bodies which are externally standing over against me are experienced by primal presence just like other things, whereas the interiority of the psychic is experienced in appresence.

Primal presence and *appresence* have their positions. The first has a space-time position, under physical laws and material causality. The second has a relational position, which is affected by the others' actions and how they impact and are received by the subject.

In empathy, I firstly apprehend the body, and then, in continual coordination of the physical and the psychical, bounded by the soul, I apprehend the other Ego. However, his body is not like all others. he is animated in a peculiar way, he moves with purpose, and he communicates. I intuit a psychic life in *appresence*. It is possible to establish unique mutual relations. Husserl explains (1993, p. 175/HUA IV, 167):

It is only with empathy and the constant orientation of empirical reflection onto the psychic life which is appresented along with the other's Body and which is continually taken Objectively, together with the Body, that the closed unity, man, is constituted, and I transfer this unity subsequently to myself.

In order to engage in a mutual relationship, a bodily connection between me and the other Ego has to be established. I recognize the resemblance. Moreover, there is a space and time connection. Our bodies share the same surrounding world, and all physical features in it play a significant and similar role for me and for him. In this context, I can assume, by analogy, that events will have a similar impact on me and on him, our bodies will feel the same, and our psyches will react correspondingly. Husserl (1993, p. 176-177/HUA IV, 168-169) writes:

I then posit with this reality an analogon of my Ego and of my surrounding world, thus a second Ego with its "subjectivities," its sense data, changing appearances, and things appearing therein. The things posited by others are also mine: in empathy I participate in the other's positing. E.g., I identify the thing I have over and against me in the mode of appearance α with the thing posited by other in the mode of appearance β . To this belongs the possibility of substitution by means of trading places.

I place myself at the standpoint of the other, any other whatever, and I acknowledge that each encounters every other as the natural being, man, and that I then have to identify myself with the man seen from the standpoint of external intuition. Man as object is thus a transcendent external Object, and Object of external intuition; that is, we have here an experience of two strata: interwoven with external primally presenting perception is appresenting (or introjecting into the exterior) empathy, in an apperception, specifically, which *realizes* the entire psychic life and psychic being in a certain sort of unity of appearance [...]

Considering this common ground, similar bodies and the common surrounding world, Husserl proposes something relatively easy to say, but challenging to execute: trading places, putting myself in the other's shoes. It is essential we do not forget that, even though we have similar bodies and sensibility, live in the same surrounding world, share the same time and space, and can experience the same events, each person has his appearances, and only in the manner of *appresence* can appearances be co-given. Therefore, to put myself in the other's shoes is a rather tricky task. It requires a strong-minded decision.

As the subjective sphere cannot be originally shared with any other subject, empathy allows us to experience the other's experiences as a form of *presentification*, one that serves to substantiate the co-existence. It is still co-existence (*appresence*), not existence (primal presence), but analogy makes it possible to share an experience. There are, then, two levels of experiencing subjectivity. The first is pre-social subjectivity, which does not presuppose empathy. This subjectivity knows inner experiences in primal presence, and external experiences in *appresence*. The second is social subjectivity, which depends on empathy. This subjectivity experiences objects of the spirit, social and communal ones, whose *presentification* is given through empathy. These intersubjective objects are separated into two groups: those experienced immediately and originally by the self as primal presence, and those experienced only mediately by the self as co-presence. Husserl (1993, p. 210/HUA IV, 200) explains:

I can have a "direct" experience of myself, and it is *only my intersubjective form of reality* that I cannot, in principle, experience. For that I need the mediation of empathy. I can experience others, but only through empathy. Their own content can be experienced only by themselves in originary *perceptio*. Likewise, my lived experiences are given to me directly, i.e., the lived experiences in their own content. But others' lived experiences can be experienced by me only mediately, in empathy.

Once I have briefly presented Husserl's central idea of empathy, I will perform an analysis, proposing some empathy moments, but, first, it is essential to emphasize that it is Husserl's idea that empathy has different levels, or moments, as described by Zahavi (2014, p. 136):

If we move on to Husserl, we also find him distinguishing different levels of empathy. The most fundamental form of empathy is the one that allows us to apprehend the perceptually given body as a lived body, i.e., most fundamentally as a sensing body (Husserl 1973a, 70, 66, 435–436). This form of sensual empathy [to use a term by Stein (2010, 66)], which Husserl also calls animal perception (*animalische Apperzeption*) or experience of animality, happens passively or associatively (Husserl 1973a, 455, 475–476). Husserl then contrasts this most basic and fundamental kind of empathy with a more active form that targets the understanding of that which is expressed in bodily expressions, namely beliefs, decisions, attitudes (Husserl 1973a, 435). In a manuscript from 1931 or 1932, he operates with even more levels. The first level of empathy is the appresentation of the foreign lived body as sensing and perceiving. The second level is the appresentation of the other as physically acting, say,

moving, pushing, or carrying something. The third level goes beyond this and attends to the purposefulness of the action and grasps, say, the running of the other as flight, etc. (Husserl 1973c, 435). On a few occasions, Husserl goes even further and also speaks of the kind of empathy involved in appropriating foreign traditions (Husserl 1973c, 436; 2006, 372-373).

1.1 RECOGNIZING THE OTHER EGO

In the same way that intentional consciousness experiences objects, it is capable of experiencing other individuals. In any living experience, in addition to having the evidence of the particular, I also have the evidence of his essence; that is to say, alongside empirical intuition, I have eidetic intuition. When I perceive another Ego in his individuality, I also intuit what is universal in him, and even though I cannot give a single and precise definition of what a human being is, I can intuit his essence from the first moment.

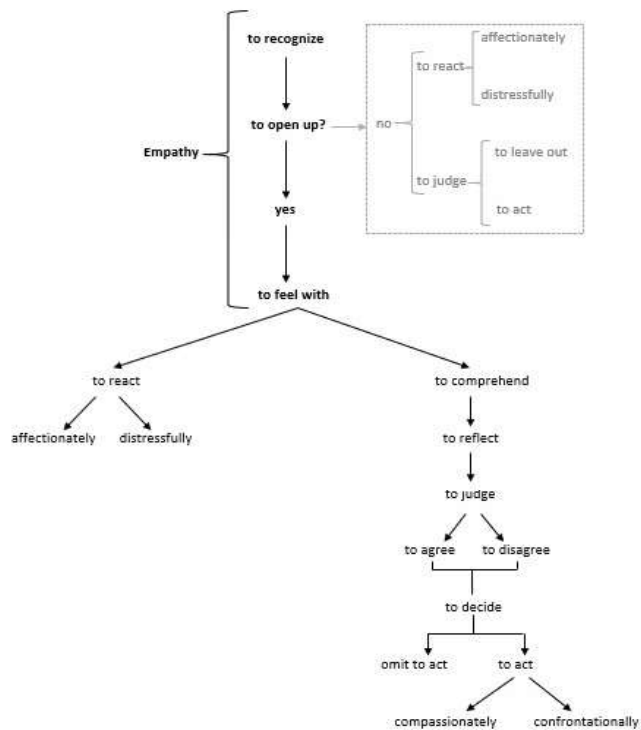
The living experience is composed of noesis, the act of consciousness through which the other Ego is experienced, and noema, the given, in this case, the other Ego. Noema is composed of the empirical intuition of the particular, the perception of that unique individual, and the eidetic intuition of his essence as a human being, which is universal. Husserl (1983, p. 7-10/HUA III, 9-12) considers that this universality is the manifestation of an *essential need* that, in turn, is a reflection of an *essential universality*. Husserl (1993, p. 171/HUA IV, 163) explains:

At first, there is a primal presence of the body [Körper] of the other Ego as a physical thing. The totality of objects that can be given as primally present and that make up a domain of common primal presence for all communicating subjects is nature in the first and original sense. It is spatial-temporal-material nature: the one space, the one time, the one world of things for all: the one that can be given as primally present to all.

The other Ego is present in my perception as any external object. His physical and corporeal features are given in primal presence. I recognize the other Ego through hyletic data, material content and his body [Körper]. The content is the other's body given through my senses, just like with any other object. I can see it, I can hear his voice, I can feel the other holding my hand. Simultaneously, I locate the other's body in space and time; in other words, I recognize his body as part of our common surrounding world.

However, his body [Körper] moves peculiarly. It is not only subject to laws of causality, laws of physics and biology. His movements are not mechanical. They express motivation, will and initiative. His body reveals a psychical and emotional content: it is a Body [Leib]. It is the recognition of the other as a corporeal-psychic-spiritual being with

Figure 1 – Mental map



Source: Own Authorship

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this paper, I present Husserl's compression of empathy and submit his concept to analysis. I ascertained that empathy has three moments: (i) recognizing the other Ego, (ii) opening myself to the other Ego and, if I decide favorably, (iii) to feel with him. Then, if I decide unfavorably, and the act of empathy is not complete, I propose several possible consequences. I can react affectionately or distressfully, or I can make a judgement and decide either to omit to act or to act. Next, if the act of empathy is complete, I determine two possible paths: one is to react affectionately or distressfully; the other is to comprehend the other Ego's feelings, and what follows is to reflect, to judge, to agree or disagree, to decide, to omit to act or to act compassionately or confrontationally. Lastly, I present a mental map of this process: a first attempt to break down the act of empathy and its possible consequences.

Another result of this analysis is that time is crucial for realizing these acts. During empathy, to decide to open up to the other Ego and feel with him requires attention, interest, curiosity, seeing and listening, and all these require time. Following empathy, it is possible to take a path of comprehension and to reflect, to judge, to agree or disagree, to decide to

omit to act or to act compassionately or confrontationally, and all these take time. However, nowadays, there is a strong demand for quick interaction and response. These actions are superficial, and the responses are unthinking and not well-founded. This way of acting and reacting can generate conflict, as the agents involved do not empathise properly and do not fully understand each other. To paraphrase Husserl (1998, p. 34-35/HUA I, 35), the idea of a transcendental subjectivity extending to become intersubjectivity, to become an intersubjective and transcendental community which, in turn, is the transcendental grounding for the nature's and the world's intersubjectivity in general, is totally compromised.

REFERENCES

- ALVES, P. Empatia e ser-para-outrem: Husserl e Sartre perante o problema da intersubjetividade. **Estudos e Pesquisas em Psicologia**, Rio de Janeiro, UERJ, ano 8, n. 2, p. 334-357, 1º sem. 2008.
- BATTALY, H. Is Empathy a Virtue? *In*: COPLAN, A.; GoOLDIE, P. (ed.). **Empathy**. Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. p. 277-301.
- CASTRO, F. O problema da empatia na fenomenologia da intersubjetividade de Husserl. **Veritas: Revista de Filosofia da PUCRS**, Porto Alegre, v. 68, n.1, p. 1-17, jan./dez. 2022.
- HUSSERL, E. **Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge**. Hrsg. und eingeleitet von Stephan Strasser. Nachdruck der 2. verb. Auflage, 1991. (HUA I).
- HUSSERL, E. **Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie**. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie. In zwei Bänder. 1. Halbband: Text der 1.-3. Auflage; 2. Halbband: Ergänzende Texte (1912 – 1929). (HUA III).
- HUSSERL, E. **Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie**. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution. Hrsg. von Marly Biemel. Nachdruck, 1991. (HUA IV).
- HUSSERL, E. **Phänomenologische Psychologie**. Vorlesungen Sommersemester, 1925. Hrsg. von Walter Biemel. 2. verb. Auflage. 1968. (HUA IX).
- HUSSERL, E. **Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie**. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie. Hrsg. von Walter Biemel. Nachdruck der 2. verb. Auflage, 1976. (HUA VI).
- HUSSERL, E. **Analysen zur passiven Synthesis**. Aus Vorlesungen und Forschungsmanuskripten (1918-1926). Hrsg. von Margot Fleischer, 1966. (HUA XI).
- HUSSERL, E. **Fünf Aufsätze über Erneuerung**. Aufsätze und Vorträge (1922-1937). Hrsg. von Thomas Nenon und Hans Rainer Sepp, 1989. (HUA XXVII).
- HUSSERL, E. **Cartesian Meditations**. An Introduction to Phenomenology. Translated by Dorion Cairns. Dordrecht: Springer-Science+Business Media, B.V., 1960.

HUSSERL, E. **The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology.** An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy. Translated by David Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

HUSSERL, E. **Phenomenological Psychology.** Translated by John Scanlon. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977.

HUSSERL, E. **Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy.** First book. The Hague, Boston, Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983.

HUSSERL, E. **Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy.** Second book. The Hague, Boston, Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff, 1993.

HUSSERL, E. **The Paris Lectures.** Translated by Peter Koestenbaum. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1998.

HUSSERL, E. **Analyses concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic.** Translated by Anthon J. Steinbock. Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic, 2001.

HUSSERL, E. **A Europa sob o signo da Crise e da Renovação.** Trad. Pedro M. S. Alves e Carlos Aurélio Morujão. Lisboa: CPhainomenon, 2006 (Clássicos de Fenomenologia).

HUSSERL, E. **A Crise das Ciências Europeias e a Fenomenologia Transcendental.** Uma Introdução à Filosofia Fenomenológica. Trad. Pedro M. S. Alves e Diogo Falcão Ferrer. Lisboa: CPhainomenon, 2008 (Clássicos de Fenomenologia).

LUO, Z. Motivating Empathy: The Problem of Bodily Similarity in Husserl's Theory of Empathy. **Husserl Studies**, New York, v. 33, p. 45-61, 2017.

STEIN, E. **Gesamtausgabe. B. Philosophische Schriften.** Abteilung 1: Frühe Phänomenologie. Band V: Zum Problem der Einfühlung.

STEIN, E. **Gesamtausgabe. B. Philosophische Schriften.** Abteilung 1: Frühe Phänomenologie. Band VI: Beiträge zur philosophischen Begründung der Psychologie und der Geisteswissenschaften.

STEIN, E. Escritos Filosóficos. In: STEIN, E. **Obras Completas**, v. II. Tradução Constantino Ruiz Garrido y José Luis Cabellero Bono. Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 2005.

ZAHAVI, D. Empathy and mirroring: Husserl and Gallese. In: BREEUR, R.; MELLE, U. (ed.). **Life, Subjectivity, and Art: Essays in honor of Rudolf Bernet.** New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2012.

ZAHAVI, D. Empathy and Other-Directed Intentionality. **Topoi**, New York, v. 33, p. 129-142, 2014.

ZAHAVI, D.; OVERGAARD, S. Empathy without Isomorphism: A Phenomenological Account. In DECETY, J. **Empathy: From Bench to Bedside.** Massachusetts: MIT, 2012. p. 3-20.