

See also Affective Intelligence in the Social Sciences; Decision Theory; Emotions; Heterodox Economics; Neuroeconomics; Philosophy of Economics, History of; Social Choice Theory

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EMPATHY

The British psychologist Edward Titchener introduced the term *empathy* in 1909 as an English translation of the German word *emfühlung* (“feeling into”). *Emfühlung* is rooted in philosophical aesthetics. It was used by German philosophers toward the end of the 19th century to describe our ability to imaginatively “feel into” works of art and nature. However, it was the German philosopher Theodor Lipps who broadened the term to encompass our experience of other people. Lipps transformed empathy from a predominantly aesthetic concept into a concept at the center of philosophical and psychological analyses of sociality. This emphasis on the

social-scientific significance of empathy continues to inform current discussions.

This entry looks at empathy within the context of social cognition. It considers empathy in relation to the philosophical problem of other minds, the mechanisms of social cognition, and the relation between empathy and affectivity.

Empathy and the Epistemology of Other Minds

Empathy has been summoned to deal with the philosophical problem of other minds. This problem arises from the question “How do we know that other people have minds like ours?” That others *do* have minds like ours seems fairly certain. Yet one might think that we cannot see other minds or experience them via some other perceptual modality. The only mind we can directly experience is our own. Given this lack of experiential access to any mind but our own, how is knowledge of other minds possible?

This is an epistemological puzzle: the question of how we are justified in believing that others have minds like ours. One answer is that we rely on inference from analogy. This inference explains how we attribute minds to others. It begins with a Cartesian assumption: We enjoy direct, infallible access to our own mind; in contrast, our access to other minds is indirect and fallible. Moreover, we know that when we experience certain mental states (anger, sadness, etc.), those states characteristically cause certain patterns of behavior (frowning and fist shaking, weeping, etc.). Accordingly, when we observe this behavior in others, we infer the existence of the relevant mental state causally responsible for that type of behavior. We assume the other to be psychologically similar to us and infer that his behavior is animated by the same type of mental state(s) animating our own behavior.

Many have not found this answer satisfactory. Lipps is one such philosopher. In his 1907 article “Das Wissen von fremden Ichen” (The knowledge of other “I”s), Lipps argues that analogy cannot account for our basic openness to others. It is unclear, Lipps argues, how analogical inference can simultaneously allow us to think about another’s mental states as both similar to our own and yet radically different, that is, as *that person’s* mental states. Lipps argues that empathy can better explain this openness. For Lipps, this “instinct of empathy” consists of my imitating the gestures or expressions I see in others. When I see another’s expression of anger,

say, I reproduce this anger—I experience the feeling of anger myself—but I then project this feeling onto the person who first evoked it. Empathy is therefore a process of simulation and projection. It is, Lipps argues, at the root of interpersonal understanding.

Phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, and Edith Stein offer an alternative picture. They agree that analogical inference is not the way to understand our basic experience of other minds. Yet, although they differ in the details, they reject Lipps's "simulation plus projection" alternative. Instead, they argue that empathy is what Stein terms an "experiential act sui generis": a primitive, irreducible form of intentionality that, prior to inference or simulation, presents other human beings to me *as* "minded" *in* my experience of them. Empathy is a form of direct perception, not simulation. From the start, I perceive others differently than I do rocks, tables, or trees. I see them as a locus of unique thoughts, feelings, and intentions: a psycho-physical "expressive unity," as Scheler puts it. This is because the actions, gestures, and facial expressions of others present me with the experience of a concretely embodied mind. The phenomenological model of empathy thus rejects the Cartesian assumption that minds are entirely in the head, hidden from others. In perceiving expressive behavior, I see the mental life of others play out *in* that behavior. Perception of others in their concrete expressiveness is thus sufficient to justify our belief that others are likewise minded.

Empathy and the Psychology of Other Minds

There remains another puzzle. We might term this the psychological problem of other minds: the question concerning the mechanisms ultimately responsible for interpersonal understanding. Here, empathy is often framed as a kind of "mind reading," or the ability to detect and respond to the mental life of others and to interpret and predict their behavior.

This is an empirical question. It is distinct from the epistemological question of other minds. Independently of whether or not we are justified in believing in other minds, there remains the question of how we come to know what another person is thinking, feeling, or intending, or how to interpret his or her behavior. This issue is the focus of most current empathy research in the cognitive and social sciences. However, there is little agreement on the proposed candidate mechanisms enabling empathy. There is even disagreement over the nature of empathy itself.

We have already encountered some of the mechanisms said to be responsible for empathy: inference, simulation, and perception. *Theory Theorists* argue that we use our lay theories about how minds work ("folk psychology") to infer the existence of mental states in others and to interpret their emotional expressions and behavior. These lay theories are the basic mechanisms of empathy. They are sometimes said to emerge from innate 'mind reading' modules in the brain; others claim that they develop as we age and gain social experience. When we deploy our lay theories, we use inference from perceived behavior (including utterances) to hidden internal states. This theory-driven knowledge of another's internal state(s) is sometimes called "cognitive empathy" or "empathic accuracy."

Simulation theorists, on the other hand, argue that we use our own emotional and imaginative resources to put ourselves in others' mental shoes and read their internal states through observing their behavior. We use imagination as well as the knowledge of how we would feel in their situation to take their perspective and come to understand what they are thinking and feeling. This is sometimes called "projective empathy" or "perspective taking."

Other simulation theorists argue that a different sort of simulation is responsible for empathy: *mimicry*. I mimic another person's posture or expression—think of two friends speaking closely while leaning on a bar or a newborn imitating the facial expressions of her caregiver—and come to understand what this other person is thinking and feeling. This is an example of behavioral mimicry. It has been called "facial empathy," "imitation," or more commonly "motor mimicry." Other simulation theorists argue that the relevant mimicry occurs at the neural level. Brain studies indicate that when we observe someone perform an intentional action, such as swinging a baseball bat or reaching for a cup of coffee, the same neurons in our own brain are activated as if we had performed the action. These "mirror neurons" allow us to interpret the actions of others; we read their minds by (neurally) mimicking their actions and discerning their intentions. This is sometimes called a "perception–action" model of empathy because perception and action—perceiving another's action and performing the action ourselves—rely on similar neural circuits.

Other researchers return to phenomenological characterizations of empathy and argue that *perception* is the primary mechanism for empathy. They

argue that our interactions with others are simply too fast, automatic, and flexible to involve the conscious use of either lay theories or imaginative simulations. There is no phenomenological evidence that we deliberately employ either of these mechanisms to understand others, except in unusual circumstances. Rather, we directly see mental phenomena in ongoing patterns of expressive behavior and respond accordingly. This behavior, as well as an appreciation of the different situations that contextualize it, provides sufficiently rich information to discern others' thoughts, emotions, and intentions. Even if mirror neuron activity is part of this story, it is not the exclusive locus of empathy; rather, it is an aspect of a more complex, temporally extended pattern of social perception. This approach, with its emphasis on face-to-face encounters, is sometimes called a "direct perception," "enactive," or "interactionist" approach to empathy.

Empathy and Affectivity

Another area of disagreement concerns the relation between empathy and affectivity. When we see another's facial expressions and behavior, we often *feel* something in response. A remaining issue concerns the extent to which empathy involves feeling—specifically, feeling *what* another person is going through or minimally feeling a response *to* what he or she is going through. There are two questions here. The first is the extent to which affectivity is necessary for empathy. The second is the question of what compels us to consider and respond with care to the suffering of others. Although the second question deals with important issues concerning motivation and moral psychology, these issues are beyond the scope of this entry.

With respect to the first question, some theorists mark a distinction between empathy and *sympathy*. The former is our basic ability to detect and interpret another's emotions and behavior; the latter is our ability to feel with another person, to either replicate her or his emotion or feel something similar. Empathy—whatever its mechanistic basis—thus proceeds independently of other-oriented affectivity. For example, I can attain knowledge of my friend's suffering via her facial expressions, behavior, utterances, and so on, as well as understand the source of her suffering and how it will guide her behavior, while failing to feel congruent suffering myself. Indeed, becoming highly emotionally aroused can

actually impede one's ability to read another's behavior and respond appropriately. So it's not clear that other-directed feeling is necessary for empathy.

Nevertheless, affectivity might be an important part of empathy's ontogenesis. Evidence from developmental psychology suggests that emotional intimacy in early infant-caregiver interactions may provide the developmental context for basic social-cognitive abilities. From birth, the emotional character of these interactions has a motivational effect on infants, compelling them to engage with others. It also guides the infant's attention toward socially salient phenomena such as facial expressions and gestures. *Affect attunement*—the ability to coordinate one's affective states with those of another—thus appears to be the basis from which various individualistic capacities (e.g., self-consciousness, language, self-regulation, self-representation) arise. Since an individualized sense of self and subjectivity is necessary for empathy—that is, to appreciate another's experience *as another's*—affectivity in social relations might be thought of as the ground of empathy, even if affectivity need not be present for empathy to occur.

Judging from the state of current research, the term *empathy* serves as an umbrella term for a relatively heterogeneous group of structures and processes that facilitates different facets of sociality and interpersonal understanding. As such, it is not clear that any single paradigm or disciplinary perspective will adequately capture all of its aspects.

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See also Embodied Cognition; Folk Psychology; Mirror Neurons and Motor Cognition in Action Explanation; Simulation Theory; Social Cognition; Social Neuroscience; Social Perception; Theory Theory

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EMPIRICISM

The term *empiricism* is often taken to be a vague term for a cluster of doctrines held by the classic modern empiricist philosophers John Locke (1632–1704), George Berkeley (1685–1753), and David Hume (1711–1776), in opposition to the “rationalist” tradition of René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and G. W. Leibniz. This takes the terms to be similar to labels for certain tendencies with no clear issue to distinguish them. The result is that many philosophers think these terms are best avoided in serious discussion. But this is premature. There are two clear issues that separate empiricists from rationalists: (1) whether there are innate ideas and (2) whether any propositions can be rationally justified independently of experience. *Conceptual empiricism* is the doctrine that there are no innate ideas but all concepts are acquired through experience, either by introspection or by sense experience, while *justificatory empiricism* holds that all knowledge that something exists independently of experience must be justified on the basis of experience, that is, it must have an empirical justification. The first is a psychological claim about the origin of ideas, while the second is a thesis about evidence and is thus an epistemological claim. The negations of them are conceptual and justificatory rationalism, respectively.

This entry focuses on the British empiricists, in relation to these two issues, innateness and justification. Concept innateness, or *nativism* as it is now

called, has come back as one of the central issues debated in contemporary philosophy of mind (this issue is discussed in another entry but indicated here in some items in the Further Readings).

The Two Issues

Concepts

The psychological issue arises in the work of René Descartes (1595–1650). He holds that certain basic concepts such as those of God, infinity, extension, and the mathematical entities cannot be derived from experience and so must be innate. The concept of a line, for instance, cannot come from sense experience, since the lines we experience are only imperfect copies of the lines studied by geometry. Seeing lines on a piece of paper triggers our innate ability to form the concept of the ideal line of geometry, but it does not give us the *idea*. It is an idea of reason or intellect distinct from an image or any idea we can acquire by perception. John Locke, however, denied this and held that the concept derives from experience by abstraction, where experience includes reflection and sense perception, or “inner” and “outer” sense as he calls it. We see lines and leave out their particular characteristics, and by abstraction, we form the notion of a line as an extended series of points with no width. Philosophers discussed this question in the 19th century, but interest in it waned in the early 20th century, when psychology became experimental. The work of the linguist Noam Chomsky reawakened interest in the issue in the later part of the century. Before turning to this, let us look at the question raised by the second issue, that of justification.

Justification

Since Plato, it has seemed clear that knowledge cannot be reduced to true belief. As Socrates argues in Plato’s dialogue *Meno*, one might have a true belief about the road to Larissa but be right by accident. He says that beliefs are like the statues of Daedalus, which are so real that they move around. Like them, beliefs need to be “tied down” so they do not “roam about,” and the way to do this is to support them with a *logos* or “account.” Without this, they cannot qualify as knowledge even if they are true. The modern term for this third element is that the believer must have some reason for thinking that the belief is true, that is, it must be “justified.”