

Transformation through Dialogue: Gadamer and the Phenomenology of Impaired Intersubjectivity in Depression

Constantin-Alexander Mehmel

Introduction

This chapter aims to sketch a phenomenological account of impaired intersubjectivity in depression. By focusing on the relationship between intersubjectivity and depression, specifically on how depression affects but also is affected by interpersonal relations, I intend to shed light on how alterations to our ordinary relations with other people and a presupposed shared background can affect and impair the way we experience the other. The question of if, and to what extent, we can experience the other and have epistemic access to their mind and mental states plays a central role in the current debate regarding the nature and structure of intersubjectivity. It has given rise to what we can broadly identify as the two predominant approaches to intersubjectivity, which in turn provide diverging ways to understand and explain alterations to interpersonal relations in such psychopathologies as depression, autism, or schizophrenia.¹

On the one side, we have “mentalistic” approaches to intersubjectivity that attribute mental states to the other person to understand their experience. Against the backdrop of what is commonly called the “Theory of Mind” debate, two principal mentalistic approaches have emerged, often referred to as simulationist and theory-theory

¹ The subsequent overview follows Fuchs (2015).

approaches.² Central to both is the assumption that the other's mind is somehow unreachable, which is why they emphasize the need to infer the other's mental states by observing their external behavior. In light of this, pathologies of intersubjectivity are often traced back to impairments in mind reading (e.g., Bosco et al. 2009; Sprong et al. 2007; for an overview, see Hutto 2013).

On the other side, we have “phenomenological” approaches to intersubjectivity that emphasize the affective, embodied, and situated nature of interpersonal understanding (e.g., Fuchs 2013; Gallagher 2012; Ratcliffe 2014a). Although they do not necessarily rule out the contributions of mentalistic approaches in certain cases of interpersonal understanding, their starting point is of an entirely different nature, focusing on the interaction process between two embodied agents. In contrast to an individualistic understanding of the mind, they conceive of the other, including their mental states, as nothing closed-off but, ordinarily, as always already pre-reflectively connected to other people and our environment. This in turn is said to enable an immediate, quasi-perceptual second person experience of the other and their experience, being intentionally directed toward their experience as something distinct and theirs, as the current debates on empathy in relation to intersubjectivity show (e.g., Ratcliffe 2014a; Zahavi 2011). It is on this basis that impaired forms of intersubjectivity in psychopathologies are construed as disturbances to our most basic ways of being with others (e.g., De Jaegher 2013; Fuchs 2013).

The concern of this chapter will not be to assess the ongoing debate between these two paradigmatic approaches to intersubjectivity, however. Rather, I want to turn to a tradition in philosophy and one philosopher's work in particular that has been hitherto neglected in the debate on the structure and nature of intersubjectivity and, as a result, also in the context of impaired forms of intersubjectivity in psychopathologies. In this chapter I intend to show that the insights and theoretical frameworks found in the work of the hermeneutician Hans-Georg Gadamer may be used to shed light on alterations to interpersonal relations in depression. It is interesting that one of Gadamer's principal

² For simulationist approaches, see, for example, Gordon (1986), Heal (1996), and Goldman (2006). For theory-theory approaches, see Carruthers and Smith (1996) and Stich and Nichols (2003).

concepts, which will also prove instrumental to the success of this chapter, namely, “fusion of horizon(s)” (*Horizontverschmelzung*) is regularly referred to for the purposes of advancing diagnostic and therapeutic approaches to psychopathologies (e.g., Fuchs 2010; Stanghellini 2013; Stern 1991; Varga 2015). However, Gadamer’s work and hermeneutics more generally has received hardly any attention when it comes to explaining intersubjectivity and pathologies thereof. One notable exception is Amanda Taylor-Aiken, who provides a Gadamerian approach to relatedness and alienation in interpersonal understanding, considering schizophrenia and depression (Taylor-Aiken 2011). While her analysis of depression focuses on alterations to the body, I will offer another potentially fruitful Gadamerian account: by drawing on the fusion of horizon(s), I aim to provide a more general framework for understanding alterations to interpersonal relations to depression that is then also applicable to alterations to the body. More specifically, it will help us to frame depression as a “dialogical” illness, insofar as it fundamentally alters how we ordinarily relate to other people and the presupposed shared background. I propose that such a framework, highlighting the co-constitution of each other and the space in which we find ourselves, is especially well suited for understanding and articulating different ways of relating to each other—particularly interpersonal relations in depression which I believe to raise both theoretical and practical concerns in the context of pathologies of intersubjectivity in a very illuminating manner.³

In what follows, I argue that depression comes with what I call an altered “experience of the other.” To understand exactly how depression alters the phenomenology of intersubjectivity, I draw on Gadamer’s phenomenology of understanding via the “fusion of horizon(s)” (*Horizontverschmelzung*) as advanced in *Wahrheit und Methode*⁴ and thus on his emphasis on transformation through dialogue. I

³ In advancing this Gadamerian hermeneutic approach to impaired intersubjectivity I also hope to begin in addressing the discrepancy between the role of hermeneutics in sketching an account of intersubjectivity, on the one hand, particularly in the context of psychopathologies of intersubjectivity, and diagnostic and therapeutic approaches to those psychopathologies, on the other hand.

⁴ All in-text page citations in this chapter refer to *Gesammelte Werke* vol. 1 (2010), though I am quoting (unless otherwise noted) from the translation Gadamer (2004). Hereafter referenced as GW1. All the other in-text references to Gadamer's body of work will be given in the same fashion, referring to *Gesammelte Werke* vol. 2 (1993), hereafter

begin by sketching a Gadamerian perspective of an intact dialogue between two people. The rest of the chapter is then dedicated to understanding the deviating forms of dialogue that occur in depression. More specifically, I want to suggest that a Gadamerian approach helps to understand depression as a mode of radical Othering. This allows us to shed light on the specific, yet fundamental impairment in depression—namely, the at least partial, breakdown of the shared, intersubjective horizon in which we ordinarily find ourselves in. This leaves the structure of experiencing the other compromised.

Gadamer on dialogue

To portray an intact experience of the other, thus the phenomenology of intersubjectivity more generally, we need to set out how understanding, involving both cognitive and non-cognitive elements, ordinarily takes place between two people.⁵ I suggest that our experience of the other (here synonymous to “another person”) is inextricable from coming to understand the other and their claim regarding the mutual subject matter at hand. In other words, a failure in understanding can explain our diminished experience of the other, something key to depression as I will show in the second half of this chapter.

To establish such an intact dialogue, we can turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer and his phenomenology of understanding via the fusion of horizon(s) (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Such an approach has some limitations. Gadamer is adamant in pointing out that his

referenced as *GW2*, and vol. 10 (1995), hereafter referenced as *GW10*, though I am quoting (unless otherwise noted) from the following translations cited in the reference list: Gadamer 1976, 1989, 2000, and 2006.

⁵ The Gadamerian notion of understanding is a rather extended one that is more than the cognitive “faculty” and inclusive of non-cognitive elements such as certain non-conscious prejudices making up our pre-understanding of the world. This is why, as it will become clear throughout the chapter, that, for Gadamer, the event of understanding cannot solely be construed in epistemological terms, coming to know something and making an intellectual judgment, but rather as affecting how we find ourselves in the world more generally. As he puts it so poignantly, “understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were” (*GW1*: 384; italics added).

primary task is of a descriptive nature, setting out how understanding takes place (e.g., *GW2*: 438–439). And yet, precisely by inquiring into the conditions of the possibility of understanding, it soon becomes clear that Gadamer’s own phenomenology is normatively laden insofar as it explicates ontological but also epistemically favorable conditions that must be met for understanding to succeed (e.g., *GW1*: 307, 367; *GW2*: 438). In other words, the account of dialogue sketched in this section of the chapter leans on the normative dimension inherent in Gadamer’s own work. My proposed Gadamerian perspective of what I call an “intact dialogue” thus amounts to an idealized account of dialogical interaction and intersubjectivity more generally. My analysis is not only normative insofar it suggests how we should interact with one another in the process of coming to understanding each other, but also restrictive in that I am describing only certain domains and ways of social interaction. And yet, I want to suggest that the notion of intact dialogue I advance helps us, first, to bring into focus the deviating forms of dialogue that occur in depression in a contrasting way. Secondly, it allows us to tease out therapeutic implications by pointing toward an ideal dialogical interaction and thus how a therapeutic setting could and, arguably, should look like.

According to Gadamer, the starting point for any dialogue between two people is that each interlocutor enters the dialogue from within a unique horizon.⁶ Denoting “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular point” (*GW1*: 307; translation modified) a horizon structures one’s experience of the other. Being a finite historical being and thus always already situated within a tradition, I bring along certain “tacit expectations of meaning and truth” (Garrett 1978: 393), through which I perceive the other and their claim regarding the subject matter. It would be wrong, however, to understand a horizon as a necessarily restrictive force. Although it does limit our perception of possibilities, it simultaneously provides the conditions whereby we can experience the other in the first place (see *GW2*: 224). So we do not encounter the world at random, but it is already constrained, so to speak, by our prior understanding of what is possible for us, while at the same time this recognizes that such understanding is always

⁶ Shortly, this uniqueness is qualified by being understood against the backdrop of an underlying shared horizon. It should not be taken to indicate either a degree of isolation or relatedly the possibility of understanding in abstraction from interaction with others.

open to changes and deviations. A horizon is not closed off, but rather open toward new experiences. As Gadamer puts it, “[a] horizon is not a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites on to advance further” (*GW1*: 250). Whenever I experience something new, my horizon is expanding. This openness is indicative of a horizon’s essential dialectic, existing only by being superseded (*GW1*: 348). Cast in terms of the self and the other, this suggests that, for Gadamer, both horizons, that of myself and of the other, are inextricably related. Underlying such openness we can therefore identify the more far-reaching claim that my horizon does not exist independently from the other’s horizon, but rather that both belong to a more fundamental, shared horizon (*GW1*: 309).

Gadamer thus appears to advance the phenomenologist Martin Heidegger’s notion that we are always already in relation with others, something that is crucial for our project of a phenomenology of intersubjectivity. Although both interlocutors have a unique horizon and thus experience the subject matter differently, they are nonetheless attuned to each other. This holds true regardless of whether or not the different perspectives lead to a disagreement regarding the subject matter. Two people might experience things differently—and in that sense “disagree”—and yet, such divergence is only possible against the backdrop of a presupposed shared background (Ratcliffe 2014a: 272–273). Any dialogue therefore occurs within what we might call a shared, intersubjective horizon in the sense that both parties are already united by it: “I may say ‘Thou’, and I may refer to myself as over against a Thou, but a common understanding always precedes these situations” (*GW2*: 223). Hence, Gadamer concludes, that the “formulation ‘I and Thou’ already betrays an enormous alienation,” since “there is neither the I nor the Thou as isolated, substantial realities” (*GW2*: 223). Put phenomenologically, we normally take it for granted that we do not experience a situation individually insofar as it would belong to either of us exclusively. Rather, we always already experience it as ours and shared, against the backdrop of which we can then have individual experiences.

We can therefore extract from Gadamer’s work the view that any two people conversing with each other do not exist as two isolated realities. Rather, they share in a mutually constituted interpersonal reality, which again is constitutive of their respective outlook onto the world. This wider interpersonal horizon can be understood as a “quasi-

transcendental condition”⁷ in that, without it, the acquisition of knowledge about the other would be made very difficult if not impossible, and would thus leave the structure of experiencing the other compromised. In other words, such a presupposed shared background makes it possible for the two people entering a dialogue to come to an understanding. Both of their horizons can fuse to what we might tentatively call a “third,” more encompassing one, the process of which Gadamer calls “fusion of horizon(s)” (*Horizontverschmelzung*).⁸

However, simply being attuned to each other is not sufficient for what we might call a “successful” fusion of horizons, appreciating the other and their experience as unique and thus theirs. Gadamer emphasizes a fundamental openness that needs to be present in a dialogue, without which “there is no genuine human bond” (*GW1*: 367). Such mutual openness involves a willingness to be transformed by the other and thus what Gadamer calls the “fore-conception of completeness” (*Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*), that both interlocutors suppose each other’s claim to be meaningful and true (*GW1*: 229). For, only if we deem the other as a possible dialogue partner do we give them enough space to articulate themselves, hence acknowledging them as a person with a unique horizon. Otherwise, we risk projecting ourselves onto the other, whereby we would reduce them to an object-like status and consequently dispense with themselves as a “moral phenomenon” (*GW1*: 364).

From a Gadamerian perspective, we can conclude that an intact dialogue aims at a

⁷ While Gadamer aligns himself with Kant’s transcendental project of exposing *a priori* structures of understanding (see Veith 2015: 12), here it makes more sense to frame it as a quasi-transcendental condition. For, if it is construed as a transcendental condition, it is the condition for the possibility of encountering whatever the other is at all, before we even get to propositional knowledge. However, it is certainly the case that I might be able to have an outer perception of the other’s bodily expressive behavior and thus understand that they are experiencing something, without being part of the same wider, intersubjective horizon. The latter only seems to be a requirement to gain more than a vague awareness of the other’s mental states. For a nuanced approach to intersubjectivity that accounts for different levels of empathic relating to the other, see Stein’s three-tiered account of empathy (Stein 2008).

⁸ The German “Horizontverschmelzung” is a somewhat ambiguous singular, which I decided to render as “fusion of horizon(s)” in English, thus alluding to the plural singularity as key to the process: fusing unique horizons against the backdrop of an underlying, unifying horizon.

fusion of horizon(s) with the other, allowing us to experience and thus recognize the other as a person. Intersubjectivity and the experience of the other is not something artificially constructed, “insisting that the Other can first be given only as a perceived thing, and not as a living, as given ‘in the flesh’” (*GW10*: 95.). The experience of the other cannot be an act of self-relatedness (*GW1*: 365.), emulating what it is like to be the other from the self’s viewpoint. For, this would assume a privileged access to the other’s mind (*GW1*: 365.), whereby, however, the experience of the other would be diminished and reduced to a projection of the self. Instead of being open toward the other and immediately recognizing their experience as something distinct and theirs, such an encounter of the other would supersede both the distinction between “my” and “your” experience, and thus between the self and the other.⁹

Key to the phenomenology of intersubjectivity, then, is the mutual recognition of each other as the bearers of unique experiences that can transform us, without which the fusion of horizon(s) will not succeed. In other words, a phenomenology of intersubjectivity, as we have construed it here, involves both the recognition of another person and the resultant fusion of horizon(s). This fusion changes the way both interlocutors relate to each other, as their knowledge of the subject matter but also of the other’s view on it has been enlarged. The way one experiences the other has been altered, as one’s horizon has been expanded, enabling an experience of the other that was impossible prior to the fusion.

⁹ The more general difference between approaches open toward the other and emulating the other can also be cast in non-Gadamerian terms as one between phenomenological and simulationist approaches to empathy, broadly echoing the distinction between phenomenological approaches and mentalistic approaches to intersubjectivity. For an overview and analysis of the extent to which those overlap, see Ratcliffe (2012, 2014a), or Zahavi (2011). As will become clear, however, particularly in our context, the here presented Gadamerian approach toward the other, and to intersubjectivity more generally, diverges from the phenomenological approach to empathy in at least one crucial respect: it does not suffice to be intentionally directed toward the other and their experience. For, to truly recognize the other as a bearer of unique experiences, we need to be aware of the possibility that we might not be sharing a mutual, intersubjective horizon, which is to say that their experience might be rather different from ours and beyond our own everyday way of being in the world. In a sense, this chapter points toward what we might call a hermeneutic approach to empathy in relation to intersubjectivity, highlighting the co-constitution of oneself and the space we find ourselves in.

However, this fusion should not just be understood in terms of two individual horizons expanding. For, the prime focus is not on each of the interlocutors and their newly extended horizons, but on the event of the fusion itself. Being mutually open toward each other, they are united by their common aim of understanding the subject matter and thus experiencing the respective other. This event structure can be linked to what Gadamer captures elsewhere with his concept of “play,” a concept often all too neglected in the Gadamer scholarship in this context:

The primacy of the game over the players engaged in it is experienced by the players themselves in a special way, where it is a question of human subjectivity that adopts an attitude of play ... the game itself is a *risk* for the player: one can only play with serious possibilities. ... The attraction of the game, which it exercises on the player, lies in this risk. (GW1: 111–112; italics added)¹⁰

Applied to the fusion of horizon(s), both dialogue partners are guided by the dialogue itself, yielding to an intersubjective dynamic. This is why the fused, “third” horizon constitutes a shared, intersubjective horizon belonging to both rather than either of them exclusively. However, without the willingness to be challenged, thus putting ourselves “into *play* ... through being at *risk*” (GW1: 304; italics added), we cannot fuse horizons and experience the other. Sketching a Gadamerian perspective of an intact dialogue, we can thus infer that it entails both mutual openness and trust toward the other, without which we cannot appreciate the other and their experience as theirs.

Dialogue in depression

¹⁰ In Gadamer scholarship, “play” is often reduced to its role for our experience of art, whereas Gadamer’s notion of “fusion of horizon(s)” is used to make sense of Gadamer’s model of understanding more generally. Ignoring the subtleties of Gadamer’s position, such a reading preserves the focus on the unfortunate metaphor of fusing horizon(s), which has been the prime target of critique see Mehmel (2016). For an exception, see, for example, Vilhauer (2009, 2010). To avoid such a danger, this chapter employs the concept of “play” in relation to and thus as a corrective of the concept of fusion of horizon(s).

Drawing on Gadamer’s phenomenology of understanding via the fusion of horizon(s) has allowed us to sketch a phenomenology of intersubjectivity. We have established how understanding takes place in the context of an ordinary dyadic relationship, that is, between two people, and have thus provided an account of an intact dialogue more generally. Even though our Gadamerian account is of a very preliminary nature, I shall now apply these findings to the phenomenology of depression, elucidating the deviating forms of dialogue that occur in depression and hinting at the transformative potential inherent in the Gadamerian model of dialogue.¹¹

It is certainly the case that “depression” is used as an umbrella term for a number of diagnoses with a variety of symptoms. Henceforth, however, I shall employ the term to refer to a phenomenological change in the experience of the other as often to be found in a major depressive disorder, as categorized by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (APA 2013). In fact, this phenomenological change can be identified in many autobiographical accounts and testimonies of psychiatric clients, all describing an impaired form of intersubjectivity. For instance, consider the following statements:

Life is about connection. There is nothing else. Depression is the opposite; it is an illness defined by alienation. (Brampton 2008)

¹¹ In this context, I understand dialogue as broad as encompassing any communicative interaction between two people. In contrast to Gadamer who ultimately conceives of dialogue in purely linguistic terms and neglects the bodily dimension more generally (for exceptions, see, for example, *GW2*: 208, 335–336), such a definition can account for the fact that in a dialogue two embodied agents interact. While it is beyond the scope of the chapter, a comprehensive discussion of impaired intersubjectivity in depression would have to acknowledge the alterations to how the depressed person experiences their body as well as that of the other (see, for example, Fuchs 2013). In lieu with the chapter’s operating metaphor of the fusion of horizon(s), we could frame it as the seeming impossibility of a bodily dialogue, thus of fusing the bodily horizons of the depressed and non-depressed person (see Taylor-Aiken 2011). In fact, the fusion of horizon(s) could be understood in different terms—e.g., cognitive, bodily, affective—the distinction of which would allow for a more sophisticated understanding of depression and its various manifestations.

When I am depressed I feel like my relationships are less stable and I trust others a lot less. I try to avoid people, as they seem angry and irritated at me. ... I feel like a burden. (Ratcliffe 2014a: 274)

I find other people irritating when depressed, especially those that have never suffered with depression, and find the “advice” often given by these is unempathetic and ridiculous. (Ratcliffe 2014a: 274)

I believe depression is—a disease of isolation that tells you to withdraw, stay away, don’t be a social person. Stay away from the people who are going to make you better. (Karp 1996: 35)

In these accounts, which I take to be representative of the aforementioned phenomenological change, we can identify the two principal themes of isolation and lack of trust. Interpersonal relations seem, at least most of the time, bereft of any positive, warm dimension. Instead, the depressed experiences the other as a threat and alienating force, with whom they cannot enter a genuine bond. One way of construing this change in experiencing the other, I propose, is in terms of the fusion of horizon(s) between two people, and thus how understanding in an intact dialogue occurs. Whereas a mutual openness lies at the heart of an intact dialogue, a depressed person is lacking such openness in virtue of not trusting the other. As a result, they seem incapable of putting themselves “into play” and “at risk.”¹² Not yielding to the intersubjective dynamic of

¹² This seeming incapability of putting oneself “into play” could be further substantiated by drawing on Gadamer’s account of language as advanced in the third and final part of *Wahrheit und Method*. This would include recognizing the inability to communicate one’s depression as a core and painful aspect of the depressed person’s experience. For Gadamer, understanding always already takes place in language, which constitutes the foundational horizon for our hermeneutic experience as such: “Our first point is that the language in which something comes to speak is not a possession at the disposal of one or the other of the interlocutors. Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language” (*GW1*: 384). In the dialogue between the depressed and non-depressed person, however, this common language can no longer be necessarily presupposed. Struggling to engage in seamless linguistic play, we can infer, the

completely letting go in the process of the dialogue, the depressed person prevents themselves from fusing horizon(s) with the other, thus from appreciating the other as a person. Instead, the other is reduced to a projection of the depressed, constituting a threat (see also Ratcliffe 2014b; Styron 1990). We can thus distinguish between two different phenomena: the depressed person is not only reducing the other to a projection of themselves, but also and inextricably relatedly, they are incapable of really interacting with the other.

The lack of trust furthermore explains why other people's advice is deemed "unempathetic and ridiculous." Key to the experience of the other in an intact dialogue is the "fore-conception of completeness," as I have outlined in the first section of this chapter, namely, that both interlocutors suppose each other's claim to be meaningful and true. The depressed person, however, does not seem to be in a position to suppose the other's claim to be meaningful and true, since they have reduced the other to an object-like status of embodying (almost) nothing but threat. The possibility of interacting with the other in a way that could change and transform the depressed person's horizon is diminished. Hence, they do not feel understood by the other, which in turn makes them feel even more isolated and like a "burden."¹³ Even if the depressed person wanted to be understood, "[yearning] for connection," a fusion of horizon(s) could not take place, as they "[are] rendered incapable of being with others in a conformable way" (Karp 1996: 14).¹⁴

depressed person is prevented from creating a common language with their interlocutor and thus becomes even further isolated. Whereas in an intact dialogue language can function as "a medium where I and the world meet, or, rather, manifest their original belonging together" (*GWI*: 478), the depressed person feels detached from the world. Gadamer's conception of the fundamental status of language for our experience of and in the world thus allows emphasizing something like a linguistic separation between the two interlocutors as opposed to the linguistic unity at work in an intact dialogue.

¹³ Whether or not the feeling of isolation precedes the feeling of not being understood, in my view, does not have any bearing on the here presented Gadamerian reading. In fact, I would rather want to point to the relation between both phenomena, insofar as it seems that the feeling of not being understood cannot be untangled from the depressed person's own negative feelings.

¹⁴ This raises an interesting question: To what extent does the feeling of not being understood correspond to the other person's inability to understand? For, insofar as the feeling of not being understood and the feeling of isolation are inextricably related (see

It is plausible to infer that depression involves a diminished experience of the other, more generally an impaired form of intersubjectivity. The account sketched so far reveals the inability to connect and thus experience the other in a horizon-changing way. Without being in a dialogue with the other, however, the depressed person lacks the possibility “of immersion in a dynamic world that incorporates the potential for meaningful change” (Ratcliffe 2014a: 277). Instead, we find the depressed completely shut off from the world:

On our side of that severed connection, it was hell, a life lived behind glass.
(Thompson 1996: 200)

I feel like I am watching the world around me and have no way of participating.
(Ratcliffe 2014a: 277)

An intact dialogue always occurs within a shared, intersubjective horizon that unites both interlocutors. This is why we concluded in the first section of this chapter that the formulation of “I and Thou” does not do justice to our phenomenology of intersubjectivity, as both do not constitute two completely separate realities. The above quotes, however, seem to depart from such an account. Rather than being mutually attuned to each other, I suggest, the depressed person appears to fall out of such a mutual framework. What has been viewed as a quasi-transcendental condition in an intact dialogue; that is, the interpersonal horizon that makes possible the unfolding of the event of interpersonal understanding is missing, which again leaves the structure of experiencing the other compromised, to the effect of affecting how the depression individual experiences themselves in relation to the other.

What this change involves can best be understood, I propose, when broadly conceptualizing the depressed person as what I shall call a “radical Other.”¹⁵ As

previous footnote), the former might possibly be the result of the latter or at least exacerbated thereby, regardless of whether or not an at least partial understanding might have been achieved.

¹⁵ This notion and its implications are inspired by Emmanuel Lévinas’s radical alterity (e.g., Lévinas 1969: 194) and Sara Ahmed’s “affect aliens” (Ahmed 2010).

sketched in the first section, in an intact dialogue two people experience things differently in virtue of each having a unique horizon, and yet both belong to a shared, intersubjective horizon. In a dialogue between the depressed and non-depressed person, however, the two perspectives at work differ more fundamentally. For the former does not seem to be part of the same framework as the latter, as we have established before. This is why the depressed person does not feel understood but isolated, feeling completely detached from everyone else without any possibility of taking part in the world, even if physically close. It thus seems that the impossibility of entering a dialogue cannot be reduced to a purely conscious act on behalf of the depressed person. It certainly is the case that in virtue of the feeling of isolation that the depressed person feels conscious of the impossibility of future engagement, which in turn affects the range of their horizon and thus their future decisions of abstaining from any interaction. Yet, at the same time, such a reading runs the risk of reducing the concept of horizon to purely epistemic terms. A horizon should not be understood as necessarily conscious to either or both interlocutors, but rather in terms of framing the individual's possibilities of engagement with the respective other. It thus becomes clear that because of the, at least partial, breakdown of the shared, intersubjective horizon the depressed person feels the impossibility of being understood.¹⁶

The lack of a mutually shared backdrop does equally affect the non-depressed person in that they struggle to relate to the depressed person:

When I start to get depressed, I only filter through the negative messages from friends and family ... As a result, they soon learn to step on egg shells around me, they become less affectionate because I'm less receptive. ... It's a very hard thing to do to be able to step back and realize that someone who is depressed is projecting their own thoughts onto others. (Ratcliffe 2014a: 279)

¹⁶ Here, I am not so much concerned with introducing a temporal order of what comes first. Rather, it is important to distinguish between an ontological and epistemological fusion of horizon(s). Only if we make this distinction and stress the ontological dimension of the shared, intersubjective horizon, do we realize that horizons are not purely epistemic.

The seeming impossibility for the depressed person to fuse horizon(s) thus affects the non-depressed person. Being exposed to sheer negativity, the depressed person is likely reduced to an object-like status, being “unreachable.”¹⁷ Such a reduction, however, appears problematic in that the depressed person becomes even more out of reach, if actually being avoided. As Karp states, “the need to withdraw from others overrides the realisation that self-isolation will only deepen one’s anguish” (Karp 1996: 35). In other words, through such a reduction and the resultant alienation, we run the risk of dispensing with the depressed person as a moral phenomenon, as another person with unique experiences. This risk is revealing with respect to the phenomenological account of impaired intersubjectivity in depression. Central to the experience of the other is “an appreciation of his potential to reshape one’s world” (Ratcliffe 2014b: 236), the potentiality of which the depressed person seems to be lacking in virtue of being “unreachable.” Even though the fusion of horizon(s) thus cannot take place, we should nonetheless attempt to “realize that someone who is depressed is projecting their own thoughts onto others” and avoid reducing the depressed completely. For, “[much] of depression’s pain arises out of the recognition that what makes me feel better—human connection—seems impossible in the midst of a paralyzing episode of depression” (Karp 1996: 16). Hence, instead of dispensing with the depressed person as a moral phenomenon, our phenomenological analysis points to the paradoxical situation of the depressed person feeling like a radical Other themselves, and yet ultimately not wanting to be reduced to such. For, on the one hand, it is certainly the case that the depressed person has a diminished sense of agency, feeling isolated and lacking any (or most) interpersonal possibilities, which again gives rise to an impaired form of intersubjectivity.

¹⁷ We might wonder to what extent the seeming impossibility to fuse horizon(s) with the depressed person has not only to do with being exposed to sheer negativity. Ordinarily, we take the shared, intersubjective horizon we find ourselves in for granted and are thus less likely to become aware of it. Such an awareness, however, I think, seems to be required if we are trying to understand the depressed person’s radical change of finding themselves in the world, precisely because for them this wider horizon has changed. Only if we become aware of this primordial horizon but also of the possibility of its at least partial breakdown, I propose, a non-depressed person might start to understand the experiences of the depressed person, or “radical Other,” that significantly diverge from their own, or at least understand how significantly different the depressed person’s experiences might be.

On the other hand, however, it does not take much from here to yield to a reductionist experience of the depressed person, perceiving them as nothing more than an object. This again could amount to a loss of the possibility of helping the depressed person, who is however dependent on our willingness to engage with them in a transformative manner. Unlike what the at least partial breakdown of a shared, intersubjective horizon may suggest, the open and dynamic nature of everyone's unique horizon entails, or at least I propose that it entails, the very possibility of re-entering this mutual framework. Instead of reducing the depressed person to an object-like status, the non-depressed person should continue to practice openness and trust.

Although I cannot conclusively argue for this thesis in this chapter, I believe that any form of therapeutic encounter between the depressed and non-depressed person would immensely profit from a Gadamerian approach to dialogue and intersubjectivity more generally. A willingness to engage with the depressed person and to allow oneself to be put at risk by the depressed person, thus being potentially challenged in one's own assumptions (*Vorurteile*), would likely generate an environment in which mutual openness and trust once again become possible. A Gadamerian approach suggests that understanding the other and thus empathizing with them is a mutual, interactive and co-constituted process, a to- and-fro movement between two people. The other empathized-with is nothing static but someone "that moves with one and invites one to advance further" (*GW1*: 250), insofar as the self's experience of them is continuously changing and being changed in the never-ending, never-final fusion of horizon(s). A long-term willingness to engage with the depressed person would thus likely help to transform the depressed person's experience of themselves and of the other, more generally generate an environment in which transformation could occur.¹⁸

¹⁸ Although the here presented hermeneutic approach to empathy in relation to intersubjectivity does emphasize the dialogical nature of understanding the other and their experience, this should not be understood as proposing that there is no longer any difference between the first person and second person point of view on one's own experience. This point is crucial. For, although the depressed person is influenced by their interactions with the therapist, they might nonetheless experience themselves and the other in a certain way, allowing the possibility to misinterpret the other but also themselves (Ratcliffe 2017). The only possible way to counter this misinterpretation is, I believe, to emphasize what I would call the hermeneutic virtues of good will toward the

Conclusion

Our aim in this chapter has been to sketch a phenomenological account of impaired intersubjectivity in depression. Our claim has been that drawing on Gadamer's phenomenology of understanding via the fusion of horizon(s) helps elucidate how depression affects the phenomenology of intersubjectivity. Against the backdrop of an intact dialogue between two people, we have construed the deviating forms of dialogue that occur in depression in terms of the seeming impossibility of fusing horizon(s). Even if the account given here does not fully apply to all cases of depression and furthermore might not be applicable to other kinds of psychiatric illnesses, I hope that the reader will nonetheless realize that such a hermeneutically inspired phenomenological sketch enables an understanding of depression as a mode of radical Othering that might otherwise not be possible. Overall, I hope to have advanced a way to conceptualize experiences of depression that is of help for philosophers and non-philosophers alike.

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at Durham University, Cardiff University, the University of Warwick (Coventry), Central European University (Budapest), and Vita-Salute San Raffaele University (Milan). I am grateful to participants of all events for their comments, in particular Anna Bortolan, Ian James Kidd, and Jonathan Webber. I also wish to thank Harry Lewendon-Evans and Johannes Roessler for their insightful remarks and Louise Champion, Jack Kellam, and Thomas Stephen for their careful reading and editing. Finally, I want to thank Matthew Ratcliffe for introducing me to the phenomenological approach to the understanding and treatment of psychopathologies.

other and epistemic humility toward oneself, both of which are likely to be established and fostered throughout a long- term interaction. For an account of the possibility of hermeneutic conversation and ethics, see Mehmel (2016).

References

- Ahmed, S. (2010), *The Promise of Happiness*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- American Psychiatric Association (2013), *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Bosco, F. M., Colle, L., De Fazio, S., Bono, A., Ruberti, S., and Tirassi, M. (2009), Th.o.m.a.s.: An Exploratory Assessment of Theory of Mind in Schizophrenic Subjects, *Consciousness and Cognition*, 18:306–319.
- Brampton, S. (2008), *Shoot the Damn Dog: A Memoir of Depression*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Carruthers, P. and Smith, P. K., eds. (1996), *Theories of Theories of Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Jaegher, H. (2013), Embodiment and Sense-Making in Autism, *Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience*, 7:15.
- Fuchs, T. (2010), Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in Psychiatric Diagnosis, *Psychopathology*, 43:268–274.
- Fuchs, T. (2013), Depression, Intercorporeality, and Interaffectivity, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 20:219–238.
- Fuchs, T. (2015), Pathologies of Intersubjectivity in Autism and Schizophrenia, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 22:191–214.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1976), *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, D. E. Linge, trans. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1989), *Text and Interpretation*, pp. 21–51. In *Dialogue & Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*. D. Michelfelder and R. E. Palmer, eds. D. J. Schmidt and R. E. Palmer, trans. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G., *Gesammelte Werke*, 7th edition. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck (GW). Bd. 1: *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 2010. Bd. 2: *Hermeneutik II: Wahrheit und Methode. Ergänzungen, Register*, 1993. Bd. 10: *Hermeneutik im Rückblick*, 1995.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2000), Subjectivity and intersubjectivity, subject and person, trans.

- Peter Adamson and David Vessey, *Continental Philosophy Review*, 33: 275–287.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2004), *Truth and Method*, 2nd edition. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, trans. London: Continuum.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2006), The Incapacity for Conversation, D. Vessey and C. Blauwkamp, trans. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 39:351–359.
- Gallagher, S. (2012), In Defense of Phenomenological Approaches to Social Cognition: Interacting with the Critics, *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 3:187–212.
- Garrett, J. E. (1978), Hans-Georg Gadamer on “Fusion of Horizons,” *Man and World*, 11:392–400.
- Goldman, A. I. (2006), *Simulating Minds*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gordon, R. M. (1986), Folk Psychology as Simulation, *Mind and Language*, 1:158–171.
- Heal, J. (1996), Simulation and Cognitive Penetrability, *Mind and Language*, 11:44–67.
- Hutto, D. D. (2013), Interpersonal Relating, pp. 240–257. In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*. K. W. M. Fulford, M. Davies, R. Gipps, G. Graham, J. Sadler, G. Stanghellini, and T. Thornton, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Karp, D. A. (1996), *Speaking of Sadness: Depression, Disconnection, and the Meanings of Illness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lévinas, E. (1969), *Totality and Infinity*, A. Lingis, trans. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Mehmel, C. A. (2016), Possibility of Hermeneutic Conversation and Ethics, *Theoria and Praxis*, 4. <https://theoriandpraxis.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/theoriandpraxis/article/view/39749>.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2012), Phenomenology as a Form of Empathy, *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 55:473–495.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2014a), The Phenomenology of Depression and the Nature of Empathy, *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 17:269–280.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2014b), The Structure of Interpersonal Experience, pp. 221–238. In *Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity*. D. Moran and R. T. Jensen, eds. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2017), Empathy and Psychiatric Illness, pp. 190–200. In *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*. H. Maiborn, ed. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Sprong, M., Schothorst, P., Vos, E., Hox, J., and Van Engeland, H. (2007), Theory of Mind in Schizophrenia: Meta-Analysis, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 191:5–13.
- Stanghellini, G. (2013), Philosophical Resources for the Psychiatric Interview, pp. 321–358. In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*. K. W. M. Fulford, M. Davies, R. Gipps, G. Graham, J. Sadler, G. Stanghellini, and T. Thornton, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stein, E. (2008), *Gesamtausgabe—Bd. 5: Zum Problem der Einführung*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder.
- Stern, D. (1991), A Philosophy for the Embedded Analyst, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 27:51–80.
- Stich, S. and Nichols, S. (2003), *Mindreading*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Styron, W. (1990), *Darkness Visible*, London: Vintage.
- Taylor-Aiken, A. (2011), Relatedness and Alienation in Interpersonal Understanding: A Phenomenological Account, PhD thesis, Durham University.
- Thompson, T. (1996), *The Beast: A Journey through Depression*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Varga, S. (2015), *Naturalism, Interpretation and Mental Disorder*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Veith, J. (2015), *Gadamer and the Transmission of History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Vilhauer, M. (2009), Beyond the “Fusion of Horizons”: Gadamer’s Notion of Understanding as “Play”, *Philosophy Today*, 53:359–364.
- Vilhauer, M. (2010), *Gadamer’s Ethics of Play*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Zahavi, D. (2011), Empathy and Direct Social Perception: A Phenomenological Proposal, *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 2:541–558.