Empathy, Embodiment, and the Unity of Expression

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Abstract This paper presents an account of empathy as the form of experience directed at embodied unities of expressive movement. After outlining the key differences between simulation theory and the phenomenological approach to empathy, the paper argues that while the phenomenological approach is closer to respecting a necessary constitutional asymmetry between first-personal and second-personal senses of embodiment, it still presupposes a general concept of embodiment that ends up being problematic. A different account is proposed that is neutral on the explanatory role of the first-person sense of embodiment, which leads to an emphasis on the transformative nature of empathy and a broadening of the scope of possible targets of empathic awareness.

Keywords Empathy · Embodiment · Expression · Phenomenology · Simulation theory · Resonance

1 Introduction: The Problem of Direct Social Cognition

The concepts of empathy and embodiment intertwine to form the core of a conceptual framework for understanding social cognition. Within this framework, our ability to understand and navigate the social world is not mediated by a theoretical apparatus that yields inferential knowledge of the intentions and mental states of others. Rather, there is growing support for the idea that we possess a basic capacity to grasp the expressive behavior of others in a direct way, prior to engaging in more conceptually rich forms of theorizing and interpretation (Gallese 2001, 2003, 2005; Gallagher 2008; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008; Goldman and Gallese 1998; Overgaard 2005, 2007; Zahavi 2007, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). Simulation theory (ST) holds that we have a pre-theoretical understanding of the mindedness of others through physiological “mirroring” or “resonance” mechanisms that are responsive to the other’s bodily movement (Goldman and Gallese 1998). The simulation that underlies this form of understanding is an automatic, sub-personal, “off-line tokening” of the target’s intentional state. Phenomenological theories of social cognition are sympathetic to ST’s emphasis on the embodied and pre-theoretical nature of our understanding of other minds, but critical of the idea that our understanding of others takes the form of an isomorphism between the observer’s mental state and the target’s mental state (Zahavi and Overgaard 2012). Furthermore, it is unclear how simulation could provide one with an understanding of the other’s mental state without an additional act of projecting one’s own simulation onto the perceived behavioral data. The phenomenological proposal (PP) is the claim that our understanding of other subjects takes the form of direct social perception that does not rely on embodied simulation, let alone any sort of theorizing (Zahavi 2011a).

According to PP, empathy depends on embodiment, but in a way that is much less straightforward than for ST. Whereas ST accounts for social cognition in terms of simulation or “resonance” mechanisms, phenomenological approaches rely on the concept of expression in their explanations of how empathy and embodiment are related. How this concept of expression performs the explanatory work needed here, however, is unclear. Zahavi (2007,
2011a, 2011b) and Overgaard (2005) are the most explicit in their reliance on the concept of expression, therefore I will make frequent reference to their work in this paper. My aim is to build on their work while critically assessing their use of the concept of expression. I agree with the claim that empathy is a form of experience that targets expressive behavior. I am critical, however, of the idea that one can recognize the movement of the other as expressive in virtue of her first-person bodily awareness. Two interesting upshots of my analysis are that empathy is not easily classified as perceptual insofar as it has a transformative effect on the empathizer (cf. Thompson 2001), and that the class of entities with which we may empathize may be broader than we commonly think. The account of empathy presented here seeks to make sense of Zahavi’s claim, following Husserl, that empathy is a sui generis form of intentionality, with “its own kind of originality, its own kind of fulfillment and corroboration and its own criteria of success and failure” (Zahavi 2011b, 230). In other words, the nature of empathy is constituted by an awareness of a class of objects that elicit a response whose validity is dependent on a different set of principles than those underlying the validity of both perception and first-person givenness. A proper theory of empathy should provide such a set of principles while remaining faithful to the original phenomenological desiderata—i.e., that empathy depends on neither isomorphic simulation nor an act of projection. Perhaps it is intuitive that empathy has a unique proprietary phenomenal character, distinct from both self-awareness and object-awareness; but this unique phenomenal character is the datum of experience we seek to explain.

2 The Phenomenological Framework

At times, ST sounds very amenable to phenomenology (e.g., Gallese et al. 2004, 396). Both reject conceptually loaded theorizing and conscious interpreting as the primary means of understanding the mental lives of others. Both characterize our understanding of others as somehow “direct” or “quasi-perceptual” in nature. How, then, does phenomenology differ in approach?

The first thing to keep in mind here is that phenomenology seeks to preserve the first-personal nature of its explananda: different types of experience as experienced from the first-person perspective. This does not mean that phenomenology completely eschews analyses that break experience down into simpler components. In fact, Husserl was a master of such analyses. His accounts of perceptual objectivity, communicative action, and empathy all involve parsing structures, identifying necessary constituents and relations, and constructing conceptual strata via a foundational analysis. Where Husserl differs from—e.g., Descartes—is his insistence that the fine-grained results of his analyses are dependent parts or “moments” of a “precise [prägnant] whole” (Husserl 2001, Investigation III; cf. Smith 2007, 6).

The esplanade of phenomenological analysis are experiential wholes that can be conceptually understood in terms of the meanings through which we grasp the structure of our experiences. But this structure is ultimately derivative and must be understood as the product of an interpretive activity. Thus while the targets of phenomenological analysis may be broken down into parts and relations holding between those parts, the experiential unity or phenomenal character of that which we are analyzing remains logically prior.

Considering the differences and similarities between Husserl and Descartes helps throw the ST-PP debate into historical relief. Similar to Descartes, Husserl sought to account for empathy in some law-like fashion, rather than simply assert that first-person experience does not admit of analysis. Husserl, however, does not share Descartes’ mechanistic framework.2 Descartes’ analyses of emotion, for example, start with first-person experience and then seek to explain how such experiences are built up through a series of mental operations.3 In the Cartesian framework, we need not deny that upon encountering a bear in the woods we see it as frightening. What is going on in one’s mind here, however, is actually a rapid sequence of sensation (seeing the bear), judgment (that this thing before me is threatening), and emotional response (feelings of fear to prepare the body for fight or flight). Descartes was committed to a framework in which the experiential unity of these mental acts is constituted by a fixed mind–body union operating according to mechanistic laws.4 Thus, when Descartes looked out his window at the crowds of people walking below, all that he really saw was a bunch of coats and hats. Only through the work of judgment are these sensations transformed into perceptions of people.

This detour through early modern philosophy helps identify the explanandum at hand (empathy) and its peculiarity amidst our mental economy. Descartes recognized that the phenomenal character of many experiences implies a blend of sensation and judgment. Empathy seems related

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1 On perceptual objectivity, see Husserl (2001, vol. 2) Investigation VI (viz. §10); on communicative action, see Husserl (2001, vol. 1) Investigation I (viz. §7); on empathy, see Husserl (1989) §§56ff.

2 For example, see Descartes’ analysis of perception in the Sixth Replies (1984, vol 2, 294–296).


4 See Descartes (1989), §§35–36. There is a lively debate regarding the reach of judgment in perceptual life in Descartes. See Hatfield (2007) for an account of why Descartes must be understood as keeping judgment and sensation distinct from one another. See Shapiro for a compelling reading of Descartes along more phenomenological lines.
to perception, but it also seems related to judgment. Empathy is perception-like in that the body of the other is given directly to us, just as other physical objects taking up space. And yet, we must admit that the way others are given to us is quite different than the way inanimate objects appear. While the bodies of others are directly available to our gaze, something about the other remains essentially hidden. To use phenomenological language, the other always transcends our gaze. The transcendence of the other permits an in eliminable possibility of skepticism regarding other minds. Thus, it also seems plausible that empathy involves a kind of judgment, since many aspects of the other are not obviously determined by perception.

Thus, on the common sense picture that emerges, the perceptual correlate of empathy is the other’s physical body and the judgment-based or “predicative” correlate of empathy is the other’s mental state. Indeed, the other appears as minded, but our common sense analysis tells us that this “as” structure is a product of discrete mental acts that combine in a certain sequence. We see other bodies and judge of their mental nature. We do this very fast, and we probably do this by habit, but the steps seem necessary given our competing intuitions about the explanandum.

As I implied above, Husserl would appreciate Descartes’ zeal for parsing the building blocks of experience. The phenomenological framework that Husserl instituted, however, differs drastically from Descartes’ mechanistic one. Whereas Descartes took the results of his analysis to reveal the literal building blocks of the mind, Husserl insisted that such analyses were abstractions from what is actually given in first-person experience. Thus, in the phenomenological framework, when one is seeking to understand a certain mental state or experience, one may reconstruct it via an atomistic building-block structure, but one must be aware that the nature of the resulting combination is akin to a chemical reaction and not a Lego-block assemblage. The parts combine and form something wholly different in kind. A mechanistic analysis such as Descartes’ may give us a nice interpretation of how a certain sensory/bodily apparatus works, but it does not give us the phenomenon that we set out to explain in its first-person givenness. Within the phenomenological framework, the building blocks of experience constitute a lived through unity with a unique phenomenal character, distinct from the phenomenal characters of the individual dependent parts.

In order to emphasize this lived through experiential unity, Husserl appropriated the concept of apperception from Wilhelm Wundt in order to characterize how the acts of consciousness are “overlaid with various additional characters” (Hua XIX/1, 566; cited in Dwyer 2007, 95) that make them different in kind from the purely sensory contents that constitute those acts in the stream of consciousness. Every intentional act of consciousness, for Husserl, includes an apperceptive surplus that carries more significance than the concatenation of sensory parts that make up the act (Husserl 2001 vol. 2, Investigation VI, §14b). A phenomenological theory of empathy, thus, is a specific occasion for working out the nature of the apperceptive surplus unique to those acts of consciousness that present us with others qua minded subjects. Recall that our Cartesian inspired common sense picture of empathy was aware of this surplus of content, and accounted for it by appealing to the faculty of judgment. On this view there is a perceptual given (the other’s body), followed by a judgment aimed at what is not given (the other’s mind). The concept of apperception accounts for the surplus in a radically different way. For Husserl, “what we have here is not a surplus which would be posited on top of the physical,” (1989, 251). The mindedness of the other is not a surplus that is “tacked on,” in a partes extra partes fashion, to a purely sensory awareness of the other’s physical body. The physical and mental aspects of the other are discernible parts of empathic experience upon reflection; however, they are not included as parts in “the way one physical thing is a part of another” (ibid.). Hence the need to heed the importance of Husserl’s distinction between the naturalistic and person-alistic attitudes (Husserl 1989, 183ff.). We cannot seek to understand that which we experience as motivated and expressive with the notion of causality we employ when investigating natural phenomena.

In contemporary terms, accounting for what Husserl called the unique apperceptive surplus characteristic of empathic experience is an exercise in working out the scope of proprietary phenomenal character. The phenomenal character of an experience is what it is like to live through it from the first person perspective. At any given moment one’s experiential state is constituted by a complex concatenation of a myriad of phenomenal characters. My current experiential state includes the visual phenomenal character constituting what it is like to see the colors and shapes of the computer on the desk before me; the tactile phenomenal character that constitutes the feel of the keys on my hands, the pressure of the chair on my body, and the feeling of my feet on the floor; the auditory phenomenal character of the noise out in the hallway and the humming of the ventilation system, and so on. Phenomenal character is proprietary if it cannot be reduced to other more basic phenomenal characters. Thus, in my current experiential state, we could say, loosely, that there is

5 See Dwyer (2007) for an excellent account of the role of apperception in Husserl’s philosophy and his appropriation of it from the apperceptive psychology of Wundt.

something that it is like to be writing an essay on a laptop. But the phenomenal character of laptop-essay-writing is not properly and precisely because it admits of further analysis into the visual, tactile, and auditory (and no doubt several more subtle) phenomenal characters constituting my current experience. The various sensory modalities are the most obvious examples of distinct proprietary phenomenal character. What it is like to see red differs from what it is like to see blue, thus qua unique colors, there is a proprietary red phenomenal character and a proprietary blue phenomenal character. However, qua visual experience, what it is like to see red and what it is like to see blue have something in common insofar as both fall under the scope of proprietary visual phenomenal character. What it is like to taste cinnamon is simply different in kind from what it is like to see red, and this is due to the fact that there is a proprietary gustatory phenomenal character.

Does empathy, as a conscious act-type, have a proprietary phenomenal character? Or can it be reduced into a concatenation of simpler phenomenal characters? The difference between ST and the phenomenological approach is now clear: phenomenologists, following Husserl, argue for empathy as a sui generis intentional act-type with a proprietary phenomenal character. The problem with ST is that it runs the same risk as the Cartesian framework, albeit in a different way. When seeking to understand empathy, ST does not preserve the explanandum. The results of its analysis are shaped by prior commitments to a certain framework informed by cognitive neuroscience such that we end up with something different from the phenomenon we started with. For sure, cognitive neuroscience can provide important, interesting, and insightful leading clues for phenomenology. It may provide clues for us to refine our phenomenological descriptions. If research on recognition of conspecifics shows that very specific brain regions respond in law-like ways to, e.g., goal-directed action and faces, then we ought to seriously consider these two domains as targets of phenomenological analysis. The phenomenologist ought not presuppose that we are transparent to ourselves, and that some sort of basic introspection will easily reveal the nature of the phenomena to be explained. When wondering about the nature of empathy, we should not simply ask ourselves, “What is it like to see another person?” This question may be too general and not very useful for guiding our introspective gaze. Phenomenology is interpretive in that it must have a basic sense of what it is looking for before it begins looking. Thus, we may realize that empathy necessarily presupposes both visual and proprioceptive phenomenology, and that without these aspects we would no longer be explaining what we sought to explain. But we may also validly conclude that the resultant phenomenology does not easily separate into a neat visual and proprioceptive category scheme. Otherwise we end up with very forced explanations like Descartes’, where we are told to believe that we come across a bear in the woods we would make a judgment as of its danger.

3 Two Concepts of Embodiment

Claiming that our understanding of others as minded subjects like ourselves is achieved through empathy is not an explanation of this understanding, Zahavi rightly points out this out; empathy is an achievement and a theory of empathy seeks to explain how this achievement is possible (2011b, 234–235). ST unpacks the achievement of empathy by interpreting the mirror neuron system as a “resonance” mechanism. Empirical studies have shown that a network of neurons in the premotor cortex is active when one executes goal directed actions, as well as when one observes others performing similar actions (Gallese 2001, 35). Thus, in the presence of other bodies like one’s own, and more specifically the gestures of those bodies, one’s own body “resonates” with the other in a direct, measurable, physiological way. When one performs an action, say, grasping a coffee mug, a certain motor representation in the cortex is “online”. When one observes coffee mug grasping, the same motor representation is tokened, but is “offline”.

The problem with this account, as Zahavi points out, is that if we think of empathy in terms of the “offline” or “dim” tokening of a (neurally encoded) representation, we are left with the conclusion that we must be a little bit angry every time we recognize an angry expression, or somehow feel ourselves grabbing every time we observe grabbing behavior (2011a, 2011b). This is improbable. Therefore, the ST position seems to lead to a notion of empathy that is hard to discern from a kind of contagion. In order to avoid this path, ST needs to posit an additional act of projection or attribution of the resonating mental state to the empathic target. But now it seems that we are back in the mechanistic framework of Descartes, whereby we must posit a sequence of discreet mental acts in order to preserve the difference between self-awareness and other-awareness.

However, ST seems to have something right. Following Husserl, Zahavi explains how the appeal to embodiment captures something about our experiential grasp of others as minded subjects (2011b). Upon encountering others we are somehow in touch with their mental states through our direct perception of their bodies. The metaphors of “resonance” and “mirroring” may prove accurate for some forms of social cognition—consider the feelings of

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discomfort that arise when watching a big needle about to puncture someone’s eyeball—but it seems that the scope of empathy is broader than this. Unless we limit our concept of empathy to the resonance response and the similarity principle underlying it, then “the plausibility of the mirror neuron hypothesis increases in reverse proportion to its alleged explanatory scope” (2011b, 247). Thus, the way empathy depends on embodiment must be different than the way resonance depends on embodiment. Zahavi and others working within the phenomenological framework have unpacked this peculiar intertwining of empathy and embodiment through the concept of expression (Zahavi 2007, 2011b; Overgaard 2005).

For the phenomenologist, the concept of expression provides a connection between mind and body that is stronger than causal contingency but weaker than logical entailment (Overgaard 2005, 256). The body of the other does not necessarily reveal what is on her mind, but the other’s bodily behavior is more than an accidental co-occurrence alongside her mental state. Citing Gurwitsch, Zahavi claims that the expressive field of the other’s body is the target domain of empathic awareness (2011b, 223; see also Zahavi 2007). Gurwitsch originally characterized the notion of a “field” of consciousness as the “totality of co-present data” through his field theory of consciousness, which sought to investigate “the articulation of the total field of consciousness and to bring out the patterns and forms in which co-present data are organized with respect to each other” (Gurwitsch 1964, 2; cf. Depraz 2004).

But in virtue of what do we recognize certain spatially extended objects in motion as expressive phenomena? Here is where embodiment takes an explanatory role in PP: it is in virtue of one’s own bodily awareness that one is able to recognize other bodies as lived bodies like one’s own, expressive of various thoughts, intentions, emotions, etc. The problem with this account, however, is that by claiming that it is through an acquaintance with our own body that we are able to recognize other bodies as expressive, PP runs into a conceptual problem. As I shall now detail, there are two concepts of embodiment at work in this explanation; thus, the possibility of recognizing the movement of the other as expressive must be explained while maintaining the crucial distinction between these two concepts.

3.1 The Double Life of the Concept of Embodiment

Both the analytic and phenomenological traditions have analyzed what I here refer to as the “double life” of the concept of embodiment. This double life is revealed through analyses of self-consciousness or self-awareness. Wittgenstein (1958), for example, distinguished “I-as-object” from “I-as-subject” in order to contrast radically different forms of self-reference. Perry (1993) and Cas-taneda (1966) have stressed the essential indexicality of the pronoun “I” in order to argue that there is a sense of self that cannot be exhausted by a definite description. In the phenomenological tradition, Husserl, Stein, Merleau-Ponty and several contemporary interpreters have all emphasized the difference between reflective or “thetic” self-consciousness and pre-reflective or “non-thetic” self-consciousness. In the case of reflective or thetic self-consciousness, one is conscious of oneself in a manner akin to one’s consciousness of objects in the world. In this mode of awareness, one’s self is the intentional object of experience. In pre-reflective or non-thetic awareness one is aware of herself as an experiencing subject, and not as an object of experience.

This can be made more precise by focusing specifically on self-consciousness qua embodiment. Both forms of self-awareness are packed into every (non-pathological) experience of one’s own body. When I look down at my arms and legs, or when I grab my left arm with my right hand, my body is the intentional object of my experience. And yet, simultaneously I experience my body as the organ of my will, as the sensing subject of the very same experiences that are visually or tactically regarding my own body qua object. In such auto-affective experiences, one’s body is simultaneously what is experienced and that which experiences. If I run my fingers over one of my arms, I can shift my attention back and forth between the sensation of being touched and the sensations of touching. Zahavi, following Husserl, characterizes this as the “remarkable interplay between ipseity and alterity” originating in bodily self-consciousness (2011b, 239).

Thus we may distinguish between the concept of embodiment that designates the bodily unity that we encounter as an object of experience, and the concept of embodiment that designates the bodily modality through which we experience the world. For convenience, call the former the “external body image” and the latter the “internal body image”. The external body image is constituted by experiences directed at bodies, whether one’s own or an other’s. The external body image is thus primarily comprised of visual and tactile meaning—i.e., how bodies look and feel. The internal body image is constituted by complex system of proprioceptive and kinesthetic sensation that one has of one’s own body, which typically is not the focus of one’s attention. At any given moment of, e.g., visual experience, one’s attention is directed at the

8 At this point I want to make clear that “expression” should be understood as expressive bodily movement and not linguistic expression. Unpacking the relation between these two senses of expression is a task for another day.

9 See Gallagher and Zahavi (2008).
object before him while remaining only peripherally aware
of his internal body image. One can always shift attention
and make his current proprioceptive or kinesthetic states
the object of consciousness, but we typically do not do this.

We remain immersed in the world.  

The picture is complicated when another body is the
intentional object of our awareness—i.e., when we address
empathic awareness. Empathic awareness occurs in the
context of our own first person embodiment—characterized
above as our internal body image—and the object of
empathic awareness is another embodied context. In the
case of auto-affection, my internal body image interacts
with my external body image, and a system or order of
functional dependencies is established. In the case of
empathy, however, my internal body image is not corre-
lated with the external body image that is presented to me.

In other words, in non-pathological first-person experience,
when I see my right hand running along my left arm the
visual information correlates in a regular way with the
kinesthetic and proprioceptive information that constitutes
my feeling of moving and controlling my right hand. In
empathic experience, the visual information that presents
the moving body of another person does not correlate in the
same way with my internal body image since my current
kinesthetic-proprioceptive state is one of, e.g., standing still
and turning my head to watch the other.

Thus, the question becomes: in virtue of what do I
recognize other bodies as other lived bodies, with their own
internal body image? ST answers this question through the
concept of resonance. The visual data I gain from the
external body image before me “triggers” or “resonates”
with my own internal body image in such a way that I
“simulate” or “mirror” the internal state of the other. But
as we have already seen, this is a problematic view of
empathy because it seems to entail that I must somehow
“dimly” or “faintly” token the experiences of others if I
am to recognize them at all as foreign experiences. In short,
ST seems to blur the distinction between our two concepts
of embodiment by claiming that certain external body
images always systematically correlate with certain inter-
nal body images. This allows ST a general concept of
embodiment that explains how one’s own embodiment is
connected to foreign embodiment. Furthermore, it is hard
to see how PP fares any better. It is not clear how shifting
the discussion to “expression” solves the problem, since
expression is then cashed out in terms of recognizing other
lived bodies in virtue of acquaintance with one’s own body.

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10FL01 Cf. Legrand (2006)’s discussion of the “body image” and “body
10FL02 schema”. Legrand cites Gallagher (1995) in distinguishing the “body
10FL03 image”, which is a phenomenally conscious representation of one’s
10FL04 body, from the “body schema”, which is an organizing principle of
10FL05 the sub-personal body and is not phenomenally conscious. Here my
10FL06 focus is on the body image, not the body schema.

Zahavi (2011b) provides the most detailed discussion of
this issue. He is careful to point out that Husserl seems to
vaccilate on this issue. On the one hand, there are several
places throughout Husserl’s corpus where he claims that
the ability to recognize the body of the other as expressive
is based on a subject’s primordial acquaintance with her
own phenomenal body (ibid., 237–238, 240). On the other
hand, Husserl also insists that empathic awareness does not
function through an act of projecting one’s first-personal
bodily acquaintance onto the expressive movement of the
other on the basis of a perceived similarity (Zahavi 2011b,
238). Zahavi attempts to reconcile these competing Hus-
serlian insights in the following manner:

Another possibility, however, is to see the self-
experience in question as a necessary contrast foil on
the basis of which others can be experienced as
others. To put it differently, the other might be a self
in his/her own right, but the other can only appear as
another for me in relation to and contrast to my own
self-experience. But in this case, my self-experience
doesn’t constitute the model; rather it is that against
which the other’s difference can reveal itself (Zahavi
2011b, 240).

I am not sure, however, to what extent this subtle attempt
really does overcome the difficulty. On what basis would
self-experience serve as the “foil” or basis of comparison
for other-experience? In virtue of what do I situate my
experience of the other in relation to self-experience?
Zahavi’s answer seems to be Husserl’s (and Merleau-
Ponty’s) claim that there is an “intersubjectivity of the
body” (239) that is the precondition for sociality. It is the
interplay between ipseity and alterity that characterizes
one’s awareness of her own body, and this is the
precondition for recognizing other bodies as expressive.

But as I explained above, the interplay between ipseity and
alterity in auto-affection establishes an order of functional
correlations between one’s own internal body image and
external body image. In the case of empathy, however, this
order of correlations would not be operant, otherwise we
are back in the realm of resonance or simulation. In other
words, even though there may be a two-sided form of first-
personal awareness of one’s own body, this still does not
explain why or how the appearance of the other’s body
would be automatically integrated into this system.

3.2 Constitutional Asymmetry

We need distinct concepts of embodiment in order to make
sense of empathy. But rather than view this as a short-
coming or puzzle to be solved, those working within the
phenomenological tradition claim that this is as it should
be. After all, if the concept of embodiment through which

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we recognize others were the same concept through which we are aware of our own bodily states, then self-awareness and other-awareness would run together. But clearly there is a difference between the way I am aware of my own body and the way I am aware of other bodies. Proponents of PP favorably quote Wittgenstein to drive the point home:

“But you can’t recognize pain with certainty just from externals.”—The only way of recognizing it is by externals, and the uncertainty is constitutional. It is not a shortcoming. (Wittgenstein 1980, §657; cf. 1980a, §141; as quoted in Overgaard 2005).

Views that assume that the criterion for the knowability of other minds is the form of first-person access one has to her own mind confuses “a crucial distinction between degree of certainty, evidence, etc. and kind of access” (Overgaard 2005, 267). Husserl makes the point succinctly:

…if what belongs to the other’s own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same (Husserl 1973, 109).

The constitutional asymmetry between the internal body image and the external body image is thus a necessary condition for preserving what we set out to explain: empathy understood as the direct awareness of the other’s experience.

3.3 Summing Up the Problem

Where does this leave us? Recall that both ST and PP rely on the concept of embodiment to explain the direct, non-inferential, quasi-perceptual form of access we have to the experiential lives of others. For ST, we recognize other bodies as unities of expressive behavior in virtue of resonance with the first-person acquaintance we have of our own expressive behavior. For PP, this explanation violates a key principle of our notion of empathy by cancelling out the constitutional asymmetry between first-person and second-person forms of access. PP recognizes the role of the concept of embodiment in explaining empathy by positing the expressive field of the other’s body as the target of empathic awareness. But at this crucial juncture PP seems to come up short. By relying on the interplay between ipseity and alterity in first-person experience, it is still unclear how proponents of PP can account for the external body image of the other to appear as expressive. My awareness of the other’s body as expressive must be based on something other than the order of functional correlations between my own internal and external body images, otherwise PP begins to sound like a theory of “triggering” or “resonance”. The question thus becomes: how does the concept of embodiment function in a theory of our ability to recognize foreign embodiment as a field of expressive behavior without violating the necessary constitutional asymmetry?

Phenomenology may be correct to criticize ST’s failure to distinguish the two senses of embodiment, but it needs a positive account of how there could be a general or singular concept of embodiment that allows us to recognize foreign bodily movement as expressive at all. Otherwise, it needs to account for our ability to recognize expressive behavior without resorting to such a singular concept. Davidson captures the difficulty clearly:

If the mental states of others are known only through their behavioral and other outward manifestation, while this is not true of our own mental states, why should we think our own mental states are anything like those of others? (Davidson 2001, 207).

In other words, when it comes to recognizing the expressive behavior of others, just as the concept of embodiment lives a double life—as both the context of empathic awareness and the target of empathic awareness—so do all of our other psychological predicates. If the constitutional asymmetry is to be maintained, it seems that we would end up with two distinct sets of mental state concepts, one set for those mental states I am acquainted with in first-person experience, and another set for those mental states I grasp in the expressive behavior of others. If I am motivated to take the embodied expressivity of others as expressive in virtue of my own sense of embodiment, then one must explain how this works without violating the constitutional asymmetry. Otherwise, one might seek an independent account of how the bodily movement of the other appears as expressive—an account that explains the appearance of embodied unities of expressivity without reference to first-person bodily awareness.

4 The Unity of Expression

Can we account for our experiential grasp of embodied unities of expressivity without violating the necessary constitutional asymmetry? In order to answer this question I will explain the organizational principles that underlie the appearance of expressive movement in the other, and then consider whether these principles could be based on our own sense of embodiment. Rather than assume from the outset that we recognize other bodies as expressive on the basis of our own sense of embodiment, we must remain neutral and see if our account leads to such a conclusion. Consider some examples of recognizing expressive movement that make the isomorphism condition implied by ST seem implausible:
Citing Heider and Simmel (1944) and Michotte (1963), Gallagher and Miyahara (2012) point out that we “tend to see intentionality even in geometric figures if they make particular kinds of movements” (Gallagher and Miyahara 2012, 125).

As Edith Stein originally pointed out, empathy seems to be a scalar notion. “The type “human physical body” does not define the limits of the range of my empathic objects” (Stein 1989, 59). The “fulfillment” of empathic experience is “very extensive” when the target of the experience is of the type “human physical body”, yet we are also able to recognize basic levels of expressivity in those whose bodies are unlike our own, including animals. Thus, while the chimp’s smiling face appears to us as mocking, even the movement of a scurrying ant can appear to us as intentional.

Moving further afield, one may recognize the behavior of collectives as unified expressive states. From a spectator’s vantage point, a school of fish may be seen as a single instance of fleeing. Witnessing the behavior of crowds, one may recognize approval or disapproval.

These examples are meant to indicate a basic form of social cognition whereby we recognize embodied unities of expressivity. Some may balk at designating this form of experience as empathy, but I believe the designation is appropriate. Recall that which we set out to explain: our basic capacity to grasp the expressive behavior of others. Some might argue that the ST-inspired notions of resonance and/or mirroring get us the basic form of experience in question, with empathy designating a more sophisticated level of understanding the thoughts, motives, and intentions of others. Of course, people may define terms however they like, but the problem with this picture is that we have already seen that the notions of resonance or mirroring do not respect the constitutional asymmetry that is necessary for preserving the explanandum. What we seek is something akin to resonance insofar as it is basic—i.e., a form of experience that directly grasps expressive behavior without inferential or theoretical baggage. Thus, we may understand empathy as this basic form of experience while keeping it distinct from resonance.

Furthermore, understanding empathy as this basic form of expression recognition is compatible with some of the more traditional notions of empathy, which treat it as a deeper form of understanding what it is currently like for the other. On the view presented here, empathy is the form of experience that affectively motivates taking the intentional stance (Dennett 1987). Dennett introduced this idea in the context of a eliminativist theory of intentionality. We can remain neutral on that here while recognizing the intuitive appeal of the idea: there are contexts in which we are motivated to understand what stands before us in experience as intentional behavior rather than mechanical movement. I say “affectively” here to emphasize that this form of experience does not involve choosing or deciding to interpret certain movements as expressive, but rather that one is affected by it in such a way to treat it as expressive. The examples above were meant not only to explode the isomorphism condition, but also to show that empathy can be understood as having a variety of targets. On this account, empathy is the phenominal taking of movement as expressive. The phenominal character indicated here can be motivated through examples and pointed at through contrast cases, but this still does not get us a theory of empathy. Now the question becomes: what principles govern this intentional-stance-motivating form of experience?

If empathy so defined targets the expressive movement of the other, then we must determine the principles that differentiate expressive movement from other kinds of movement. Keep in mind that at this point we are no longer discussing the phenominal character of empathy. We take that as datum of experience to be accounted for. Now we seek the organizational principles of the target of empathic experience, as opposed to what is phenomenally conscious within such experience. To put it differently, the question has become: what is the essence of expressive movement as it appears to an observer?

Within the phenomenological tradition, a classic way to differentiate forms of experience at the conceptual level is by articulating differing intentional horizons. The intentional horizon of an experience is the range of expectations motivated by one’s current perspective or view of the world. Importantly, the horizon of an experience is not a set of possibilities that one consciously entertains as he regards something. As I look at the table whose legs are occluded from my view, I experience it as a table rather than a flat surface hovering above the floor. I do not consciously think “There must be four legs to that table”. Rather, horizon expectations “correspond to a kind of counter-factual or dispositional relationship between possible actions, perceptions, and degrees of fulfillment or frustration…All my tacit expectation amounts to is a relationship between what happens and the degree to which I am surprised or not” (Yoshimi 2009, 124–125).

Applying this structure to empathy yields the first obvious distinction between empathy and other forms of experience. There is a quantitative difference between the horizon of possibility delineated by my expectations regarding the other and that of perceptual experience of inanimate objects. In the case of empathy, so many more anticipations are “live” or “open” in relation to the occurrent expressive movement of the target. We recognize others as embodied expressive unities insofar as our understanding of their gestures and movements is situated in a very broad horizon of possibilities for the continuation and variability of those movements. This horizon is necessarily broader than our horizon of expectations for the
Empathy, Embodiment, and the Unity of Expression

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continuation and variability of the movement of inanimate objects. Simply put, the range of expectations that characterizes my awareness of a bag blowing around in the wind or a rock rolling down a hill is much narrower than it is when I see a person walking down the street or a student sitting at desk. Granted, there are certainly some very central sedimented expectations here; I expect the pedestrian to walk along, I expect the student to go about reading or writing, and so on. But I am not surprised in the least when the student suddenly ceases walking and begins to stretch her arms, nor am I surprised when the pedestrian changes direction abruptly and stops at a newsstand. I would, however, be quite shocked to see a tumbling rock suddenly cease tumbling, or a blowing bag suddenly begin jerking about at right angles. Were I to see such strange behavior, I would be instantly motivated to understand it as expressive ("Is someone remotely controlling that rock?" "Is that plastic bag alive!?"

Consider Husserl’s famous example of seeing a wax figure and momentarily taking it to be a person (Husserl 2001, vol. 2, Investigation V, §27). What changes when one undergoes the interpretative switch and suddenly realizes it’s not alive? In the quantitative characterization of the horizon structure sketched above, what accounts for the shift is the sudden closing off of anticipations. One’s expectations regarding the figure are suddenly downsized considerably, and the correlated feeling of this interpretive switch points at the phenomenal character of empathy by way of contrast. There must be more, however, to the difference between expressive and non-expressive movement. In addition to the quantitative difference in horizon expectational differences just discussed, there is a qualitative difference as well. It is not simply the fact that the set of if–then conditionals that constitute my horizon of expectations is much bigger for expressive phenomena than it is for non-expressive ones. This would only account for a difference in degree and not in kind. We may simply assert that the qualitative difference is a datum of experience and end our account there, but perhaps we may account for the qualitative difference through further analysis of the organizational principles of the appearance of expressive movement.

Overgaard (2005) accounts for the qualitative difference between the experience of expressive and non-expressive movement with the help of Wittgenstein and Levinas:

When the other person expresses herself, she attends her own manifestation. An object does nothing of the kind. There is no one there to attend its manifestation; it lies passively open to view. But precisely because the other person, through expressing herself, is personally present at her own manifestation, as the dynamic source of that manifestation, the whole range of indicators of an essential inaccessibility presents itself to me (268).

The emphasis here on the other “attending” her own manifestation and being “personally present” as the “dynamic” source is provocative, albeit slightly vague. I believe that Overgaard’s emphasis on the “dynamic” nature of expression is important. Expression “unfolds in a certain dynamic that does not have me as its source” (Overgaard 2005, 262). I think this point can be further clarified and understood as a continuation of the task laid out in this section, clarifying the organizational principles of the appearance of expressive movement.

We may understand the “certain dynamic” that Overgaard speaks of with some help from Merleau-Ponty. In a striking analogy, Merleau-Ponty claims that the unity of the body is akin to the unity of the work of art (2002, 174–175). The idea is that like a work of art, the unity of the expressive body cannot be captured by a general law in the way that, e.g., geometric figures can be:

A novel, poem, picture or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning, accessible only through direct contact, being radiated with no change of their temporal and spatial situation. It is in this sense that our body is comparable to a work of art. It is a nexus of living meanings, not the law for a certain number of covariant terms (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 175).

This comparison can help us understand Overgaard’s account of expressive movement as a “dynamic unfolding”. Like a work of art, the parts or “moments” of expressive movement are uniquely interdependent. Slightly altering the slant of one’s eyebrows, for example, may effect an entirely new facial expression even if the other parts of the face remain fixed. More important, however, is the fact that the rest of one’s face would change along with the tilt of the eyebrows in the dynamic unfolding of an expression. We can recognize an even more dynamic interdependence by considering examples of expressive movement that are more noticeably temporally extended. One misses something essential if she only hears a certain temporal phase of a song or if she starts reading a poem two-thirds of the way through. Likewise, the temporal parts that constitute the dynamic unfolding of expressive movement all depend on one another in such a way that the meaning or significance of the movement would be altered if any of the parts were rearranged or removed.11 The expressive movement of the other is experienced as a precise whole, to use Husserl’s term. This does not preclude the possibility of experiencing

11 Perhaps this is why it is usually very obvious to the TV viewer when soccer or basketball players “flip” or “dive” in an attempt to have a foul called. Their movement appears intentional whereas the movement of the body of one who is actually fouled appears as externally caused (from being pushed, tripped, etc.).
the expressive movement of the other as a part of a larger whole. One may see the other waving her arms and momentarily wonder if she is greeting someone or waving for help. Nonetheless, the arm waving has its own unity even if its inclusion in a more encompassing unity sheds new meaning on it. One is prompted to wonder what this expressive unity indicates or belongs to. One takes the arm waving as an instance of something, even if one is not sure what that something is. Recall that the account of empathy being given here does not necessitate personal understanding—i.e., understanding the reasons or motives behind the other’s actions. This basic form of empathy does not get us what the other is up to. It just gets us the other. Empathy so defined is the experiential ground that motivates taking the intentional stance.

To summarize, empathy is the form of experience that takes expressive movement as its target. I have identified two organizational principles that differentiate the appearance of expressive movement from non-expressive movement: the horizon of expectations associated with the appearance of expressive movement is necessarily more vast than that associated with non-expressive movement; furthermore, the spatiotemporally extended parts of an instance of the appearance of expressive movement are uniquely interdependent such that an alteration of any of them would result in an alteration of the meaning or significance of the movement. These principles provide a way to delineate a class of intentional objects of experience that elicit a common response—recognizing movement as expressive—rather than accounting for empathy in terms of the other’s embodiment and my own embodiment being related in a certain way. That is, these principles identify the target of empathic experience without equivocating on the concept of embodiment.

At this point one might object by asking, “I see that you have formulated some organizational principles underlying the appearance of expressive movement that remain independent of a concept of embodiment, but why would the appearance of this sort of movement be seen as expressive, as mental, at all? If such a class of movements is recognized “as expressive”, then it appears that they must do so in virtue of some form of self-acquaintance, and thus this fares no better than ST or PP”. It may be the case that I have identified some interesting ways to categorize the appearance of various kinds of movement, but it seems that Davidson’s challenge remains forceful. Why should this class of movement count as expressive?12

In response to this objection I would say that, in short, Davidson’s challenge remains so long as it is formulated as a conceptual problem of other minds. My account of the principles underlying expressive movement sought to account for the uniqueness of that movement without reference to a concept of first-personal awareness or embodiment. Thus, my account does not get us mindedness or expressiveness at the foundational level of the class of movement in question. However, I do not see this as a problem. In fact, it could be a virtue of the account. It could provide a way to account for intersubjectivity which avoids the conceptual problem of other minds by focusing instead on the pragmatic problem of other minds. Rather than seeking a way to get expressivity or mindedness built into the organizational principles of a certain class of movement, this account offers a minimal set of criteria for differentiating kinds of movement in general. These kinds of movement may then come to be understood as expressive in virtue of a continuous, complex, and rich history of interaction with one’s environment. Throughout this developmental process, one would come to understand the appearance of this class of movement as affording various forms of interaction. This process would be facilitated by constant dynamic feedback in the form of further articulations of movement and further opportunities for interaction, and so on. On such an account, the problem of other minds is solved via a set of organizational principles that make a certain class of movement show up in some unique way (though not “essentially” expressive) combined with a developmental process whereby one continuously acquires a vast and complex array of ways to cope with such movements.

Construed in this way, empathy is a matter of coming to understand movements as expressive, where “expressive” means “affording various forms of interaction”. One understands the other in virtue of having a more or less robust sense of how one may interact with him, and not in virtue of figuring out what is going on in his mind. I believe much work remains to be done to fully flesh out these ideas, however for the time being I am content to provide an account that lets us differentiate the appearance of expressive movement from non-expressive movement without relying on a private sense of one’s inner life.

Furthermore, one might still wonder how this account differs from previous phenomenological accounts. As I have said above, Zahavi’s careful treatment of Husserl shows that Husserl vacillated on the issue of whether empathy depends on a first-personal grasp of embodiment. Thus, while I am an overall sympathetic reader of Husserl, I believe the account provided here helps us avoid some of the confusion that can be born of reading only certain texts in Husserl. Ideas II, for instance, Husserl begins his discussion of empathy in a way that could easily lead one to think of him as a simulation or resonance theorist: “the

12 Cf. Schutz (1967) for further phenomenological analyses distinguishing the basic recognition of expressive behavior from the fuller understanding that comes with grasping the other’s motives.

13 I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for pushing me on this point.
other’s touching hand, which I see, appercepts to me his
solipsistic view of this hand and then also everything that
must belong to it in presented co-presence” (Husserl
1989, 174). As Zahavi points out, Husserl hedges on such
categorizations in other places, and insists that his
account is not one of “introjection”. Nonetheless, by
focusing on the organizational principles of expressive
movement, my account aims to describe empathy without
resorting to any talk of “appresenting” the inner life of the
other.

I take my account to be a continuation of Merleau-
Ponty’s ideas, which, however, can also be unfortunately
vague at times. For instance, sometimes Merleau-Ponty
seems to speak of something like resonance: “it is precisely
my body which perceives the body of another, and dis-

covers in that other body a...familiar way of dealing with
the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 412). Yet in other places
his imagery is not so much of resonance or mirroring, but
of complementarity: “as the parts of my body together
compromise a system, so my body and the other’s are one
whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon” (ibid.,
412). Gallagher and Miyahara (2012) have suggested that
Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “intercorporeity” involves an
understanding of empathic awareness in terms similar to
those I outlined above: the embodied expressive unity of
the other’s movement solicits interaction rather than rep-

resentation (Gallagher and Miyahara 2012, 134). The
additional value of the account offered here is a precise
focus on the organizational principles underlying the
appearance of the class of movement that we may subsequ-
ently discuss in terms of “social affordances”.

5 Conclusion: Empathy’s Transformative Power
and Broad Scope

Recall the question at hand: for PP, how do we recognize

movement as expressive in virtue of our own bodily

awareness while simultaneously respecting the necessary

constitutional asymmetry between the internal and external

body images? The previous section characterized the

unique nature of how expressive movement appears to us

by considering both its vast horizon structure and the

unique form of interdependence amongst its spatiotemporal

parts. Thus, at this point it seems that the organizational

principles that differentiate the appearance of expressive

movement from the appearance of non-expressive move-

ment can remain independent of the principles that define

our own sense of embodiment. Therefore, perhaps both ST

and PP have been too quick to assume that empathy
depends on a “making the other like me” structure. That

is, simply overlaying my own internal body image onto

some visual input does not constitute empathic awareness.

Perhaps what has been overlooked by both approaches is

the affective and transformative power of empathy, based

in a “making me like the other” structure. In other words,

my understanding of my own sense of selfhood and

embodiment is transformed and enriched throughout my

history of encountering the embodied expressive unity of

the other. Among his prodigious work on empathy

and self-awareness, Husserl noted that “the grasping of one’s

own psyche in the subjective level would remain quite

rudimentary without the grasping of the alien one” (Hus-

serl 1980, 98). I take the implications of this to be that we
can not treat “embodiment” as a primitive term in our

explanations of empathy, or of interpersonal understanding

in general. A singular or general concept of embodiment

only becomes possible on the basis of empathic experi-
ence—i.e., a univocal concept of embodiment is achieved,

not innate.

Furthermore, as has been hinted at above, the account

of empathy given here does not preclude non-humans from

being the objects of empathic experience. By recognizing

that a univocal concept of embodiment has a genesis that

includes empathic awareness, we may admit a wider

variety of forms of embodied expressive unity into the
class of empathic targets. Collectivities can be seen as

embodying single instances of Φ-ing, where Φ stands for a

psychological predicate. This opens interesting possibil-


14 This process, no doubt, would be most affective and transforma-
tional during one’s early developmental years.

15 See Margaret Gilbert’s canonical (1989) account of plural

subjects, which she characterizes in terms of group members being

“jointly committed to Φ as a body” (433).

16 See Mathiassen (2005), who argues that collective consciousness is

achieved through the individual’s simulation of the group’s collective

mental state.

17 I would like to thank David Woodruff Smith, Martin Schwab, Dan

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