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A rumor of empathy: reconstructing Heidegger's contribution to empathy and empathic clinical practice

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Abstract Heidegger's 1927 call to provide "a special hermeneutic of empathy" is linked with his later commitment at the Zollikon Seminars to engage explicitly with issues in psychodynamic therapy with psychiatrists. The task of providing a special hermeneutic of empathy is one that Heidegger assigns in *Being and Time*, but on which he does not deliver. Inspired by the assignment, this article applies the distinctions of Heidegger's *Daseinanalysis* to human interrelations. This article generates a Heideggerian account of empathy as a multi-dimensional process that delimits and illuminates the field of possibilities of authentic human relationships. The multiple dimensions of empathy include affectedness (*Befindlichkeit*), understanding of possibility, interpretation, and speech, the latter including listening. The result is a reconstruction of a Heideggerian account of empathic human relations in the sense that it goes beyond what Heidegger explicitly says to what the Heideggerian method of inquiry can contribute to understanding and implementing the process of empathy. In particular, a two-by-two matrix is built and engaged in detail, cross referencing the four possibilities of authentic and inauthentic relationships with the individual and the other. A specifically Heideggerian analysis of the multi-dimensional process of empathy is the result. The clinical relevance of Heidegger's work is made explicit as empathy is positioned as the foundation of clinical practice as exemplified in psychodynamic psychotherapy.

Keywords Empathy · Hermeneutics · Special hermeneutic of empathy · Dynamic psychotherapy · Compassion fatigue · Burn out · Vicarious introspection · Understanding · *Befindlichkeit* · Communicability of affect · Psychotherapy · Talk therapy · Psychoanalysis

Daseinanalysis between thinking and practice

This account of Heidegger's special hermeneutic of empathy is a reconstruction in the sense that it goes beyond what Heidegger explicitly says to what the Heideggerian method of inquiry can contribute to understanding and implementing empathic human relations. In particular, the method includes distinguishing and applying affectedness, understanding, interpretation, and speech (including listening) all of which are described by Heidegger as being equally original in the sense of forming a coherent whole that does not privilege any one of them but allows them to be traversed sequentially. This set of related distinctions is the heart of Heidegger's *Daseinanalysis* [Heidegger 1927c: H134–165; 172–209 (*Being and Time*, Division I, Chapter V, Being-In As Such, Sections 29–34)].

The argument is as follows. The Heideggerian account of empathy takes basic distinctions from Heidegger's fundamental analysis of being in the world of human existence (*Dasein*). *Daseinanalysis* is the application of four related distinctions—affectedness, understanding, interpretation, and speech in the explication and analysis of a phenomenon such as human existence (*Dasein*), or, in this case, the application of these distinctions to the multi-dimensional process of empathy.

The argument applies these distinctions to human interrelations. It generates a Heideggerian account of empathy

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that illuminates the field of possibilities of authentic human relationships (including affectedness, vicarious introspection (and what that is), understanding, interpretation, and speech). The power of this reconstruction of empathy in practical terms is that it shows the way between such related but not identical phenomena as “compassion fatigue,” “burn out,” and/or “detached professional interest,” the latter being a euphemism for a professionally motivated lack of empathy. More on that shortly.

The idea of a contribution by Heidegger to the development of empathy is surprising. The reader may well be skeptical. The reader is wise to be so. The title is intentionally provocative and expresses “a rumor of empathy”. A “rumor” is a speech act. A rumor expresses a report containing information that is indeed debatable yet of high interest in that it might be the first disclosure of an emerging innovation, new trend, or significant event. Thus, in the Evangelist, Saint Matthew (24: 6), the report of “wars and a rumor of wars” is taken to portend the time of transition between one civilization and the next. In that spirit, a “rumor of empathy...” points to empathic processes where we might not have expected to find them or not find them when we expected to do so. With that in mind, we take a step back and put the issue in context.

The difficulty of Heidegger's language is notorious and raises the bar on engaging his thought from a practical, clinical point of view. Nevertheless, after Heidegger seemingly turned away from his most systematic work, *Being and Time* (1927b, c), he made an astonishing commitment. Heidegger engaged in a decade long series of conversations with a group of Swiss psychiatrists, many of whom had an appreciation for psychodynamic psychotherapy and psychoanalysis (see Heidegger 1959/69). This commitment to training psychodynamic therapists in the basics of his most systematic work must invite a second look by those of Heidegger's circle maintaining that he left the world of practical engagement behind. As a person, Heidegger was a deeply flawed individual, banned from teaching for 5 years after World War II by the de-nazification process; and no excuses—none—should ever be made for his lack of character and inexcusable involvement and behavior in relation to the Nazi crimes (e.g., Farías 1987; Safranski 1998). Still, the contribution of *Being and Time* as a standalone text is one that requires no rehabilitation in its astonishing innovation and disruptive originality. Likewise, Heidegger's interpretation of his own work is a matter in which he arguably has a privileged position in expressing what is the authentic contribution from his own perspective. Heidegger delivers a kind of “*Daseinanalysis* for beginners” to the colleagues of Medard Boss of the celebrated Burghölzi Sanatorium in Zurich, Switzerland, and at the Zollikon Seminars (Heidegger 1959/69). The conventional wisdom is that Heidegger shifted in the mid 1930s from the

analysis of human beings in the world (*Daseinanalysis*) to the ontologically more fundamental happening of Being (with a capital “B”), in which “ontology” refers to the possibility of the event of Being. It is less well known—and needs to be better appreciated—that, after having been in phenomenological suspension for so many years, Heidegger again resumed his conversation and engagement with practical, indeed clinical, considerations with the Zollikon colleagues. This must give pause—significant pause—to those of Heidegger's circle who say he surpassed and left behind *Being and Time* and the immediately following philosophical interpretations of Aristotle, Kant and Nietzsche. For example, Heidegger says:

...[I]t is therefore possible that the relationship between the one who does the *Daseinanalysis* and the one who is analyzed can be experienced as a relationship between one Dasein and another. This relationship can be questioned regarding how this specific being-with-one-another is characterized in a way appropriate to Dasein.... The decisive point is that the particular phenomena, arising in the relationship between the analysand and the analyst, and belonging to the respective, concrete patient, must be broached in their own phenomenological content and not simply be classified globally under *existentialia* (Heidegger 1959/69: H161–62; 124).

The meaning? The meaning of *Daseinanalysis* shifts from an inquiry into the distinctions fundamental to the way of being that human beings exist in the world to the practical encounter between the psychotherapist and the patient. The encounter of one human being (*Dasein*) with another—e.g., patient and therapist—cannot be adequately captured by an existing categorical classification, even one that is specific to Dasein. Further inquiry into the relationship between one Dasein and another in a practical clinical context is required.

However, before we turn to that further inquiry, let us engage with a potentially telling objection to this Heideggerian approach to empathy in its entirety. The objector might argue: “Medical doctors, nurses, and psychotherapists meet dozens of suffering individuals everyday and throughout the year. Can they experience anything of the suffering? Even if they can and do, should they? If they do not suffer, then is the approach in this article dishonoring their efforts in implying that these caring persons are unempathic? Rather the preferred approach is to bracket the feeling dimension in favor of cognitive understanding. What is translated as Heidegger's affectedness (*Be-findlichkeit*) is too emotionally laden—too open to affect to be effective in practical terms. It is cognitive understanding that provides the basis for solidarity with suffering individuals and suffering humanity.”

What then is the response to this objection? When deployed in the full, rich sense of empathy used here and including receptivity, understanding, and the related dimensions of interpretation and speech discussed below (which, however, are not critical path for this objection), empathy is a powerful resource against suffering, burnout, or compassion fatigue. This is because empathy takes a *sample* of the suffering of the other without merging or over-identifying with the suffering. If the other is suffering, the empathizer suffers also, *but not too much*. Empathy uses a *vicarious* experience of the other's experience akin to the vicarious experience that one gets in the theatre or movies or reading a novel. That is not to under-estimate the capacity of a vicarious experience to shake one to one's depths. Nevertheless, echoing Heinz Kohut's use of "vicarious introspection" (1959: 459; cf., 1971, 1984), there is a significant difference between a vicarious experience, which is a representation, and the experience itself in life. However difficult the situation may be, empathy can be a source of integrity in the face of suffering. This is the resourceful use of empathy without being a defense or resistance in the narrow sense of the word.

In short, if one is overwhelmed by the other's trauma and re-traumatized, experiencing "burn out" as in the above-cited objection, then one is not using one's empathy properly. Simply stated, one is doing it wrong. This must be emphasized—and empathized with. The vicarious experience in which the other is initially presented undergoes further processing through understanding, interpretation, and language, which are deployed in their empathic dimensions. If "burn out" is occurring, then one needs to tune down, attenuate, and moderate one's empathic receptivity. One is over-identifying with the suffering of the patient. In contrast, if one is experiencing disconnection from the patient, an affective remoteness akin to not "getting" what is going on with the patient, then one's empathic receptivity is blocked, for example, by over-intellectualization, cultural differences, or other contingencies and obstacles. This is where "top down," cognitive empathic understanding can be mobilized to make a difference in activating the attunement with the other where that attunement is otherwise missing. Optimally, in empathic receptivity one experiences a trace, a sample, a vicarious representation, of the other's experience of suffering, joy, or indifference, so that one "gets it" experientially and emotionally as well as cognitively. The boundary between self and other is firmly maintained, but the boundary is a permeable one, able to be traversed by the communicability of affect, sensation, and/or experience. In a wider context, empathy is the capacity that enables the one person to humanize the other individual by recognizing and acknowledging the possibilities for growth, transformation, healing, and recovery in the other.

Without empathic understanding, one experiences "burn out," "compassion fatigue," emotional flooding, or affective overwhelm (as in the above-cited objection). In contrast, without empathic receptivity, one loses touch with the other person, devolving into detached professional concern, a euphemism for the careful application of diagnostic categories, in which one is at risk of drawing the wrong conclusion about what the other is really experiencing. The person becomes a mere bundle of neurons, a potentially interesting case, or an association of symptoms, instead of a struggling human being worthy of respect. This is not to say that humans are not bundles of neurons. We are. However, these neurons generate meaning, possibility, and conscious experiences; and these latter are what arouse, invite, and call forth the process of empathy as a method of data gathering, not further reducible without the loss of humanity that is of interest to this inquiry. In short, the surgeon with a helpless, bleeding patient in front of him on the table does not need to reflect on struggling humanity. He needs to clamp off the bleeding. However, the empathic surgeon discusses the surgical plan with the patient beforehand in such a way that questions are welcomed and addressed in detail, and he follows up afterwards with the appropriate level of affective attunement.

Likewise, the psychotherapist is well-advised never to forget the challenge of being in tune with—getting inside—the world of the patient, a challenge in which empathic receptivity further processed by empathic understanding, empathic interpretation, and an empathic use of language (i.e., listening) are on the critical path to success. Nor should the power of an empathic relationship be under-estimated even in cases when such practices as surgery or emergency room medicine are front and center. Medical doctors and helping professionals that maintain a listening relationship with patients—sensitive handling and clear communications—components of empathy—tend to avoid legal entanglements over liability and issues (Vincent et al. 1994; cf., Halpern 2001; Hojat 2007; Hojat et al. 2009; Thomas et al. 2007; Gleichgerecht and Decety 2012; Gallese 2007; Farrow and Woodruff 2007).

What is the point? The continuum between empathic receptivity and empathic understanding allows for significant interpretive flexibility in the application and articulation of empathy as a multi-dimensional process. Echoing a celebrated statement by the philosopher Immanuel Kant, empathic receptivity without understanding is blind; and empathic understanding without receptivity is empty. Both are required to have empathy in the full, complete sense.

In engaging in long term relationships with patients and clients over weekly or daily meetings, sustained empathy comes to the fore. It should be noted that more than just receptivity and understanding are on the critical path to a Heideggerian account (since empathic interpretation and

empathic speech are also engaged). However, the objection was formulated in terms of just receptivity and understanding, so the response needs only to deploy those. The others will be marshaled shortly to fill out the account.

This continuum between aspects of the process of empathy—an affective and an understanding one—is a common place in the clinical literature in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. For example, Greenson (1960) writes of an oscillation in empathy between the two poles of participation and observation; Fliess (1942) of the transient back-and-forth identification of empathy in the metapsychology of the analyst; Basch (1982) of a reciprocity between the emotional aspect, heretofore not well defined in analysis, and understanding; Goldberg (Goldberg 2011) of sustained empathy that identifies patterns of meaning and behavior across time and narrative; and Kohut (1959; cf., 1971, 1977, 1984) of empathy as the process of data gathering in psychoanalysis through vicarious introspection that relates to the other but in a way that preserves the difference between self and other. What is new here is the appreciation of just how well the two dimensions map to Heidegger's distinction between affectedness and understanding of possibility, and, even more, how a Heideggerian approach enables the inquiry to advance further in gathering interpretation and speech into empathy as a multi-dimensional process.

At this point, the author of the above-cited objection may well follow the example of the individual, who, having first dismissed the proposal of a Heideggerian approach to empathy as inaccurate, false, and a failure for so many reasons, now finds that the proposal was obvious all along, and so is equally worthy of dismissal. However, "hidden in plain view" is different than "obvious"; and hidden in plain view is also the fate of the theories of today that become the special cases of tomorrow. So too with empathy.

With that in mind, this article now engages in an inquiry that uses some "special cases" and the "fundamental analysis of Dasein" (Heidegger 1927c: H41; 67) to define, articulate, and reconstruct the authentic encounter of one Dasein with another in the context of therapy. This interpretation of the Dasein-to-Dasein encounter connects the dots (so to speak) between an authentic way of being with one another amongst human beings in the world and Heidegger's assignment to provide a "special hermeneutic of empathy". This is a task that Heidegger assigned, but he did not deliver the result. This article delivers it, albeit in an abbreviated form that fits the modest format of a journal article. Authentic human relatedness of Dasein-to-Dasein is engaged in terms of the key *Daseinanalytic* distinctions of affectedness, understanding, interpretation, and speech ("discourse"), and, consequently, this inquiry delivers a Heideggerian approach to empathy.

Authenticity and individuality

Heidegger calls for a special hermeneutic of empathy (Heidegger 1927c: H125; 163) to explicate the contribution of the other person to authentic human interrelations and then does not give one. In spite of the apparent complexities of the *Daseinanalysis*, the possibilities are remarkably simple and straightforward when presented visually. Figure 1 does this. The two-by-two matrix connects and cross-references ways of being authentic or inauthentic with the individual alone or in relationship. Four possibilities result. Two of the possibilities are marked with an "X" and are detailed by Heidegger in chapter-length engagements.

First, on the bottom right, "inauthentic being with one another" is the most common, generally unempathic way in which human beings relate to one another in terms of the so-called inauthentic, distracted "they self" [1927c: H113–129; 149–69 (*Being and Time*, Division I, Chapter IV, The 'They', Sections 25–27)]. Second, on the top left, "authentic but alone," recovering authentic being in the face of death occurs as a "wake up call" to the lone individual, unrelated to others and confronting finite existence [1927c: H113–129; 149–69 (*Being and Time*, Division II, Chapter I, Dasein's Possibility of Being-a-Whole, and Being-Towards-Death, especially Sections 52–53)]. The lower left includes inauthentic being alone, which is a caricature of existentialism, such as one might find in a stereotype of a beatnik poet, indulging in a form of hip narcissism, or a self-isolating anti-establishment drop-out. Heidegger does not discuss this option in *Being in Time*, but made critical remarks elsewhere about Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946) in his (Heidegger's) "Letter on Humanism" (1947). Inauthentic being alone,

		Individual human being Being together with others	
Authentic	X	[authentic but alone] Ownmost Possibility Commitment: Being toward Death	Special Hermeneutic Of Empathy
			X
Inauthentic		Caricature Of Existentialism	[inauthentic being with one another] Das Man (the One) The "They Self"

Fig. 1 Possibility of Heidegger's special hermeneutic of empathy

even if someone tries to live that way, is an “idle wheel,” moving no other part of the debate, and is not considered further in this article. Finally, there is the explicit call for a “special hermeneutic of empathy” (1927c: H125; 163), which, however, is left undeveloped by Heidegger. This development effort fills in the upper right quadrant of Fig. 1, including authentic being with one another.

It must be acknowledged that *if* Heidegger's account of affectedness (*Befindlichkeit*), understanding, authenticity, the one (“they self”), are invalid, *then* the conclusions of my argument would also be “taken down” as invalid, too. This article does not separately argue in favor of these distinctions—that is the purpose of Heidegger's *Daseinanalysis*, given that it is basically successful and useful. If such a separate argument is required, then the reader may usefully engage with an exposition of *Being and Time* as provided by Dreyfus (1985, 2007), Hatab (2000), Polt (1999), Schürmann and Critchley (2008), or Agosta (2010, 2012). The present article is a Heideggerian account of empathy that uses the framework and mechanism of Heidegger's *Daseinanalysis*. Relying on the maxim that “meaning is use,” this work does not separately or additionally demonstrate the validity or usefulness of such distinctions as authenticity, *Befindlichkeit*, or understanding, etc.; it *uses* them. The remainder of this article works towards connecting the dots as it were between the basic distinctions of the *Daseinanalysis* (affectedness, understanding, and so on) and delivering the special hermeneutic of empathy.

Let us work now through the quadrants in Fig. 1 in turn, acknowledging that the caricature of existentialism as humanism is “not applicable”.

On the lower right of Fig. 1, authenticity is conspicuous by its absence in everyday life the main approach to which is inauthentically going through the motions on “automatic pilot,” doing what “one does”. The short definition of “authenticity” (1927c: H42–43, H52; 68,78) is that human existence (*Dasein*) is “mine” in that it is personally owned by oneself and that it is the source of possibility. The philosophical way of saying “the source of possibility” for Heidegger is “existence precedes essence” (H42; 67). Human beings are not fundamentally any particular essence such as (in admitted over-simplification) a sex drive (Freud); the will to power (Nietzsche); an instinct of aggression (Konrad Lorenz); productivity through labor (Marx); or God's children (Saint Matthew). Human beings are the possibility of all these possibilities and more. Human beings are fundamentally the possibility of possibility (1927c: H145; 185). In authentic possibility, human beings are engaged in a way that creates possibilities for human flourishing and well being through decisive human engagement with the matters that are important such as relationships, family, productivity, well-being, education,

and contribution to community. The self is the source of initiative and engagement—the source of what Saint Augustine called the possibility of beginning something new. However, for the most part human beings function as if on “automatic pilot”. We conform. We do “what one is supposed to do.”

Continuing on the lower right of Fig. 1, human beings are creatures of habit. We behave according to patterns of speaking and doing that are habitual and that further our survival on a day-to-day basis. There is nothing wrong with survival. Yet survival is not flourishing or accomplishing anything extraordinary or amazing, even by one's own standards of personal best. A life of going through the motions of doing what one needs to do to survive is empty of meaning and satisfaction. It is the life of the lonely crowd; and the modern mass of persons living lives of quiet desperation. Yet Heidegger, under this interpretation, has no aspiration to be a social critic. He is not proposing to reform society based on a critique of conformity, so that, for example, people are supposed to spend more time living authentically. This pervasive inauthenticity is the way things are—get over it. The possibility of expanded authenticity—or expanded empathy—is a definite possibility for humans, yet it is not a predicted or recommended outcome of Heidegger's *Daseinanalysis* and everyday being in the world. For the most part, the way we humans are with others (at least for Heidegger) is that we are inauthentic [1927c: H113–129; 149–69 (*Being and Time*, Division I, Chapter IV, The ‘They’, Sections 25–27)]. We are going through the motions in diverse role-playing paradigms. Strictly speaking, people are not themselves in their day-to-day surviving of life's petty challenges and vicissitudes. Who then are we? We are a container for conforming to social norms and conventions that specify what “one does”. For example, “One does not discuss religion or politics in the office.” In general, this is good advice. However, such a commitment does not create spirituality or advance a politically compelling cause. To do that, something more is needed than conformity and an attitude of “doing what one does” (the “they self”). That “more” is the next quadrant.

On the upper left of Fig. 1, for Heidegger, human beings are awakened from this form of conformity and unawareness by the confrontation with the inevitable necessity of death: “...Dasein cannot outstrip the possibility of death” (H250; 294). No one gets out alive. Everyone has to die. The confrontation with the inevitability of death as a relationship to death brings Dasein back from inauthenticity to an authentic awareness that life is not a dress rehearsal. In contrast to the dress rehearsal in the theatre, this is the event itself. This inspires a certain freedom (H266; 311) from the inauthenticity of living life on

“automatic pilot,” but at a cost and impact that requires further analysis.

Continuing on the upper left of Fig. 1, such an awakening leaves the individual alone in the face of death. Yes, I am authentic. But I am alone. Once again, there is nothing wrong with that as such. This is indeed an accurate description of the phenomenon of finite human life. Death individualizes human existence. Dasein faces death alone. “The non-relational character of death... individualizes Dasein down to itself” (H263; 308). But what then is the role of the other Dasein? Where is the other individual in all this? This is addressed in the concluding quadrant.

The other individual shows up in the upper right of Fig. 1, in which we have the possibility of authentic being with one another. To his credit, Heidegger allows for the possibility of an authentic way of being with others, yet he leaves this possibility undeveloped (1927c: H122; 158). This is the celebrated but otherwise isolated and undeveloped passage in which the one Dasein can “leap ahead” of the other in order to give the other her authentic possibility (of life, well being, and the person’s authentic commitments) rather than “leap in” and take it away from her (1927c: H122; 158). However, this option remains a mere logical possibility. The further development of this possibility is the special hermeneutic of empathy (1927c: H125; 163).

Without the other individual, Dasein is left apathetic, lethargic, lifeless, lacking in vitality—in short, bereft of his or her humanity. The other humanizes Dasein. Yes, death is formidable and not to be avoided; and, yet, what is also overwhelming is that the other is lost along with oneself. The loss of the other is so devastating as it is the loss of one’s own humanness (being human), the loss of emotional vitality, the loss of the advantages and disadvantages of human interrelatedness with the other. If one is still alive physically, then one is a mere shell of oneself. Empty. Nothing happens anymore (e.g., Lear 2008). From that perspective, the loss of the other is equally original [“*gleichursprünglich*” as Heidegger writes (e.g., H142; 182)] with the inevitable possibility of death; and it does not make sense to try to say which is more basic. From the perspective of individualization, death has priority; from the perspective of humanization, the other does. According to this approach, empathy is not merely a cognitive function of knowing what is going on with the other (although it is that too); it is a foundational way of being in the world with the other. This is worth repeating—empathy is fundamental to being with others, and its withdrawal or absence is a crisis that calls into question one’s relatedness to other individuals that renders individuals and communities vulnerable to breakdowns that are dreaded as much (and sometimes more) than death itself.

Now that we have argued in detail for the possibility of a special hermeneutic of empathy (1927c: H125; 163) as a

form of authentic being with the other (and one another), and have found a logical space for it within the matrix of Heidegger’s inquiry, the task is to provide it. This is accomplished by applying the Heideggerian distinctions affectedness (*Befindlichkeit*), understanding, interpretation, and speech in an inquiry into empathy. We now turn to this task.

Empathic receptivity in affectedness

All of Heidegger’s distinctions—affectedness (*Befindlichkeit*), understanding (*Verstehen*), interpretation (*Auslegung*), speech (*Rede*)—are equally original [*gleichursprünglich* (e.g., H142; 182)]. However, the distinctions will be engaged sequentially, because that is the way that human language processing works. “*Befindlichkeit*” is often translated as “affectedness,” for example, elation or ill humor or being affectively burdened by a mood (e.g., H134; 172). Basically it is a form of receptivity. It is a way of being open to the situation or environment, including the other human being in the situation. Literally, Heidegger’s distinction “*Befindlichkeit*” actually means “how one finds oneself.” “*Wie befinden Sie sich?*” also translates as “How are you?” This implies how an individual is affected by the situation in which the individual finds her- or himself. This implies openness to the situation that is characteristic of human beings in community. We say, “His displeasure could be felt.” This extends to sensations, too, as when we wince at the sight of someone taking a nasty fall or are literally moved to tears at the sight of another’s tearful distress. All the examples of emotional contagion belong here as when panic or enthusiasm or aggression sweeps through a crowd. Make no mistake, *Befindlichkeit* is not reducible to emotion. The paradigm examples of *Befindlichkeit* include such moods as anxiety, elation, and boredom (H134; 173). But all kinds of experiences, including sensations, emotions, and affects, have to be considered in so far as they disclose the individual’s openness to a situation. In short, it is a fundamental misunderstanding to say that *Befindlichkeit* is exclusively emotional. *Befindlichkeit* is equally original (*gleichursprünglich*) with understanding, interpretation, and speech. But to discard the affective dimension would be to throw out the baby with the bath water. That is why the process of applying these basic distinctions in sequence to empathy will eventually traverse all of these distinctions and come back around to include the complete process in the form of the hermeneutic circle (Fig. 2).

In short, empathy is not reducible to affectedness (*Befindlichkeit*), but affectedness is input to the same process that eventually develops, explicates, and elaborates affectedness and produces full-blown adult, mature empathy. Affectedness (*Befindlichkeit*) is a significant distinction

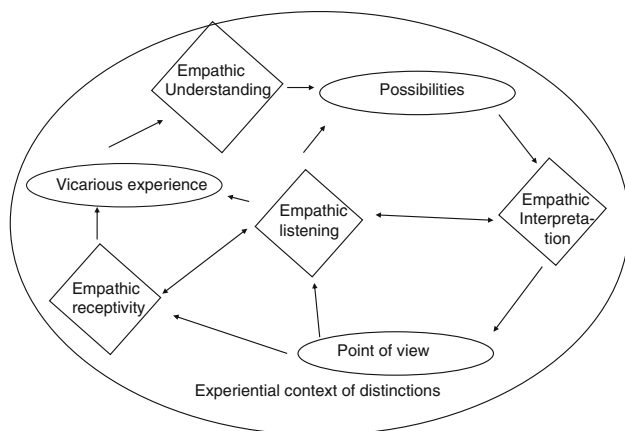


Fig. 2 The hermeneutic circle of empathy

upon which empathic understanding, interpretation, and speech perform further explicative processing and work.

Vicarious experiences are exemplified as the feelings aroused in an authentically engaged encounter with literature, narrative, theatrical performances, film, or listening to story telling of real world human relations and the emotions, desires, beliefs aroused in the engagement. The word “vicarious” relates etymologically to “vicar,” whose fundamental meaning is that of “representative”. No analyst or therapist can hope to experience the complete depth and breath of human experiences, nor would anyone want directly to experience all possible forms of pain and suffering. However, vicarious experience gives individuals the opportunity to sample experiences that would not otherwise be available and to experience a “trace affect” or “signal” without an overwhelming loss of individuality in submersion or merger. Exposure to the diversity of human experience as depicted in the process of sustained empathic listening is arguably what is missing in professional training programs for medical doctors and mental health professionals that neglect the humanities and experience-rich, “thick” social sciences in favor of distinguishing categories of diagnostic data [useful though the latter may be in other contexts (Halpern 2001; Gendlin 1962; Hacking 1999)]. Overlooking vicarious experience in the hermeneutic circle of empathy results in a misunderstanding that grasps only the cognitive dimension and reduces the process of empathy to an over-intellectualized “putting oneself in the other’s shoes.” While there is nothing wrong with “jump starting” empathy by imagining the pinches and discomforts of walking in the other’s shoes, there is something missing—namely, receptivity and the dimension of affectedness, corresponding to *Befindlichkeit*. A Heideggerian approach does not reduce empathy to mere emotional contagion. Far from it. *Befindlichkeit* includes openness to experiences of the other person of diverse

kinds such as sensations, pains, moods, affects, and emotions in the narrower sense of the term.

Although the language of the celebrated psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut’s is completely different than Heidegger’s, the two make converging and complementary, if unconventional, allies. The point is that, for Kohut as for Heidegger, empathy provides the ontological foundation of the human being’s authentic relatedness with the other individual. It is not only empirical; it is constitutive of the psychological life of the human being. Thus Kohut:

Empathy is not just a useful way by which we have access to the inner life of man—the idea itself of an inner life of man, and thus of a psychology of complex mental states, is unthinkable without our ability to know via vicarious introspection – my explanation of empathy...what the inner life of man is, what we ourselves and what others think and feel (1977: 306).

Coming toward the end of Kohut’s *The Restoration of the Self* (1977), this statement might mistakenly be taken as simply rhetorical or inspirational (although it is these also). This statement, however, should be taken at face value. When it is taken in this way, it is astonishing. It is an assertion that the very idea of the mental life of the human being—what we ourselves and others think and feel—is “unthinkable” without the ability to access (and know) others by means of empathy. Empathy is constitutive of the mental life of human beings, what we ourselves and what other think and feel. Of course, vicarious experience requires additional processing by the understanding, interpretation, and speech to become “empathy” in the full sense of the word.

The fundamental clinical paradigm with affectedness is vicarious experience. Kohut defines empathy as “vicarious introspection,” meaning that one individual has an experience that provides access to the experience of the other (Kohut 1959). However, this experience is not direct or a quantitative merger—it is *vicarious*, providing a representation of the other’s experience that is numerically different but qualitatively of a kind that the other is experiencing. Temporarily and transiently identifying with the protagonist in a theatrical play, novel, or film is a vicarious experience. Of course, vicarious experience is not complete empathy in itself, but a fundamental input to the empathic process. We now turn to empathic understanding.

Empathic understanding as possibility

According to Heidegger, understanding as human beings live understanding is not primarily a form of cognition such as thinking or intellectual intuition (H147; 187). Understanding includes cognition, but is not primarily cognition.

Understanding is characterized as pressing forward into possibilities supported by a network of meaningful plans, patterns, and insights (H145; 185). The cognitive aspect is derivative, coming later. Instrumentally, Heideggerian understanding is a Swiss Army knife for managing how to get things done in the practical world of instrumental relationships. It is practical understanding in the manner of Aristotle's *phronesis*. It is "know how" in the sense of making friends and influencing people, putting a new patient or client at ease with one's attuned listening, or turning a skeptical opponent into a friend or at least a neutral individual. Here "know" has little or nothing to do with "epistemology." Rather it has to do with individuals who are highly competent in dealing with other people. This extends from relationships such as psychotherapy, counseling, life guidance, problem solving, executive coaching, platoon leadership in the armed forces, all the way to sales and marketing, public relations, community building and action—think of Saul Alinsky's community organizing or Pablo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968)—as well as an M.D.'s "bedside manner," a teacher's didactic approach, and a car mechanic's respectful explanation of a clogged fuel injector to a client who lacks mechanical know how.

How is this possible as possibility? The short answer: understanding is the source of possibility, the possibility of possibilities:

As long as it is, human being [*Dasein*] always has understood itself and will understand itself in terms of possibilities.... As projecting, understanding is the mode of being of human being [*Dasein*] in which it is its possibilities as possibilities (Heidegger/Stambaugh 1927b: H145; 136).

Now the task is to use understanding to implement—one might say "schematize" or "process"—empathy. "Schematize" means to process the distinction "understanding" through a particular domain of experience unfolding in time. That is, take empathy and apply it to human interrelatedness as it occurs in the back-and-forth of a conversation in context using the distinction "understanding".

For example, practically, the psychotherapist uses empathy to understand the experiences of the patient in the latter's isolation, loneliness, and distress; meta-psychologically, the patient creates the condition of possibility of empathic receptivity and understanding on the part of the therapist by the patient's being ready for a generous and gracious empathic listening that contributes to and recovers the patient's being human. Therapy takes the form of a joint inquiry into how we humans take the past—whether as relations of power, sexuality, narcissism, etc.—and put those possibilities into the future, continually reenacting instead of recalling and transforming them. The patient, by his very

being, gives the therapist her humanity—making the therapist a fellow inquirer into being human—so that the therapist can give it (being human) back to the patient in a hundred-and-one contingent circumstances requiring empathy.

The individual who is empathizing takes a stand for the other person so, for example, the other's blind spot is recognized, identified, and becomes visible (to the other) for insight and working through. The possibility of possibility (H145) becomes the clearing. Empathy provides a clearing for the possibility of breaking through—engaging and resolving—the obstacles confronted by the individual in thrown contingency, the past standing in the way of possibility as such.

In a blind spot, distractedness in the superficiality of everyday life prevents the other's seeing without the one who is empathizing being able explicitly to show him the matter needing seeing. This is so since to tell another about his blind spot does *not* make it visible—the blind spot is cognitively impenetrable. The blind spot is kept in place by hidden and undeclared commitments. This is where, as an empathizer, one's listening can provide a clearing for the other's self discovery in the ongoing context of interaction and reenactment with the other, using analogies and simulations from experience to plant a seed that grows into an "Ah ha" experience—an insight—by the other person. "The sight [*Sicht*] which is related to Dasein we call transparency [*Durchsichtigkeit*]" (H146; 186). A pattern switch occurs, a new possibility emerges, and what seemed inevitable—for example, the patient's father doesn't *really* love her—gets distinguished from what actually happened—he moved out of the house and she made up something—invented an understanding about the depth and direction of his affection, an understanding of what was possible and what the possibility meant. What was previously cognitively impenetrable is penetrated and broken up by empathy. The empathy provides the ontological possibility of the pattern switch, in this case, from "love is not possible with this person" to "granted the behavior was an issue, on that occasion, he had a different way of showing his love."

Empathic interpretation as social referencing

For Heidegger, interpretation is a form of understanding (H148; 188). We live implicitly in an understanding of possibility. Interpretation makes explicit the possibility in which we already live so that it can be talked about or acted on. Thus, interpretation is a derivative form of understanding; and interpretation is based in understanding (H148; 188). Let us consider a paradigm case of interpretation that is relevant to empathy, namely, social referencing.

The identification of social referencing (Baron-Cohen 1995; Hobson 2002, 2005; Zahavi 2005) provides a stern

warning to those philosophers who regard the experience of pain as the paradigm of incorrigibility—an experience of something = x about which the first person (“I”) cannot be mistaken and corrected by the future course of experience or by the second person (“you”). We do indeed check with one another about what we are experiencing and allow other individuals to guide and even correct us in a way mediated by vicarious experience.

Consider the child of tender age who has fallen down and turns around and looks back over her shoulder at her father (or caretaker) to see if he has a worried expression on his face. If he does look worried, then she breaks out (authentically) into tears. In contrast, if he looks happy like this is all good fun, then she laughs along too or at least continues in a spirit of play. The child’s experience is processed as a pain by her if the father does indeed have a worried look. It is processed as fun that is part of the game if he looks happy and laughs. What is happening here? The child is literally looking for guidance in identifying, understanding, and interpreting what she is experiencing—if the care-taker looks worried, then her experience is identified as “pain”; if not, then it is identified as a positively nuanced excitement or even what fun feels like. The care-taker’s empathic receptivity immediately expresses on his face the severity of the fall—an implicit empathic interpretation—and the child’s own receptivity resonates with it.

This is a crisp example of the child’s referencing the other to check how potentially injurious and therefore painful the other considers the fall prior to expressing completely any emotion in the matter. In short, the child is checking with the care-taker to “see”—to understand and interpret—how she should feel. The child’s feeling is evidently still an unexpressed something = x where the care-taker has a critical role in deciding whether to bind the “ x ” to fear (“hurt”) or bind the “ x ” to happiness (“having fun”) and crying or laughing, respectively. In a marvelous example of emergent empathy, the empathic care-taker expresses the emotion on behalf of the child, which emotion is then, in turn, taken up and further processed and expressed by the child in reciprocal affectedness and attunement with the care-taker’s response, completing the circle (and the expression of emotion). While this example focuses on the child where the behavior is most visible, adults apply social referencing, too, checking with one another more than is customarily acknowledged about what one is supposed to feel or does in fact feel.

Empathic speech as listening

Paradoxically, the optimal form of speech in which empathy is articulated is as empathic listening. “Keeping

silent authentically is possible only in genuine speaking” (H165; 208; translation modified with “*Rede*” translated as “speaking,” not “discoursing”). Listening gives way to that for which one listens. In the above-cited example where the child who has fallen turns around to check with the parent, the care-taker’s affect is adequately expressed in her or his facial expression. The child gets the message—fun versus danger. Common sense applies here, too, and the listening is to provide a clearing for the other to be self-expressed and heard. This is distinct from a silence that withholds a response out of desire to control or dominate, resistance to communication, or fear of shame or humiliation.

It is worth pointing out here that the process of empathy comes full circle. Listening is a form of speech—a privative form—and it is also a form of receptivity. The multiple dimensions of empathic receptivity, empathic understanding, empathic interpretation, and now finally empathic speech, are connected with one another such that one can engage with one of them and invoke the others as part of a coherent, whole empathic process.

Empathic listening is a form of one’s authentic possibilities that Heidegger calls out as “conscience,” making use of the close association of “conscience” with “conscious”. Here conscience is transformed in its meaning by Heidegger, but with a specific goal of getting us to listen anew to the resonances implicit in language that have previously escaped serious consideration. Conscience is *not* authentically a function of praising or blaming; but that is the way consciousness initially shows up in the everyday devaluing judgments that people think to themselves but do not express out of politeness and awareness that the judgment itself is questionable. The message is not an explicit exclamation such as “Bad!” or “Wrong!” However, if one listens, just being present with the other, the result is to quiet the idle talk, the devaluing judgments, and superficial evaluations. The result is to silence this “voice over” running on in one’s head. Those who do not believe in a “voice over” may want to listen to whatever it is that is asking them, “What voice over? There is no such thing!” This quiescing of the on-going idle chatter (*Gerede*)—both between individuals and within the individual’s own verbal thinking—is such as to occasion and reinforce empathy. In order to listen, human beings must fall silent:

We characterized silence [*Schweigen*] as an essential possibility of speech [*Rede*]. [...] Thus this calling [*Ruf*] is a falling silent. The speech of conscience never rings out loudly. Conscience only calls silently, that is, the call [*der Ruf*]... calls [*rufi*] being human thus called back to the stillness of itself, and calls it to become still... [C]onscience thus understands this silent discourse appropriately only in falling silent

[*Verschweigenheit*]. It takes the words away from the commonsense idle chatter of the one [*das Man*] (Heidegger/Stambaugh 1927b: 273; H296; translation modified).

Heidegger's text is rich with paradoxes about calling silently, authentic speech expressing itself as listening, and conscience having something to say but expressing itself in stillness—all of which are ways humans are called back from distractedness in the world of gossip and idle chatter. What does this text really want to accomplish?

The suggestion is that Heidegger is *doing* something in this text—doing something other than asserting, arguing, describing, or telling. The matter engaging Heidegger (and the reader) is the possibility of stilling [i.e., making quiet (quiescing)] the idle chatter running on-and-on in one's head by invoking the equivalent of a Zen Koan. The latter is, of course, a paradoxical statement that opens an inquiry into what one does not even know that one does not know—one's blind spot(s). The expression “in one's head” is fraught with overtones, even if it is figurative, and is descriptively captured phenomenologically as a faint echo in one's awareness and listening as a discourse—verbal thinking—that is contingently only mine. Once again, what's the idea here?

Having critiqued the subject-object relationship and subjectivity, Heidegger cannot suddenly launch into a discussion of introspection, meditation, listening to oneself, in completing his analysis of human existence. In general, Heidegger is not interested in introspection and consciousness (as distinct from subjectivity) and does not even mention “consciousness” until the very last page of *Being and Time* (H437; 487).

Thus, if Heidegger were to start on an account of introspection, it would have “a positive structure” [as Heidegger puts it (H437; 487)] in a listening for the silent call of conscience. Such a listening has to quiesce the idle chatter of the inauthentic relations with others as well as the idle chatter that is owned as “mine” by us humans and loosely described in everyday speech as “a voice over” streaming off within one's head, commenting—often in a devaluing way—on everyone and everything that goes by. Quiescing the idle chatter is what Heidegger is doing here by presenting paradoxes. Without exactly saying how one causes such a quiescing, once the quiescing is engaged and occurs, however transiently, the individual is ready to listen, ready to empathize. A parallel result can be approximated by reflecting deeply on the paradoxes as if they were Zen Koans, by engaging in other rigorous spiritual disciplines such as meditation, certain forms of physical exercise, free association from the psychoanalytic couch, psychodynamic psychotherapy, and related practices.

Putting all the pieces together now—empathic receptivity (“affectedness”), empathic understanding, empathic

interpretation, and empathic speech (“listening”), we complete the hermeneutic circle of empathy. We can begin with empathic receptivity, in which case the need for understanding and interpretation will be evoked by the otherwise mute receptive manifold of affectedness in a vicarious experience. Or we can begin with understanding, in which case the need for receptivity will be evoked by an otherwise unfulfilled interpretation of possibility. Or we can begin by listening, which arouses receptivity, understanding and interpretation in turn. In any case, the process comes full circle—the Hermeneutic Circle of Empathy in Fig. 2.

An ontological bridge over troubled waters: empathy

Human suffering is vast and deep. The motivation for another analysis of empathy is the intention of relieving suffering. For all the limitations of Heidegger's *Dasein-analysis*—neglecting the possibility of authentic being with one another (empathy), simultaneously founding existentialism and debunking it, demonstrating a grasp of technology consistent with the sophistication of an individual stemming from Bavarian peasant stock, and the limitations of its all-too-human author, who like Goethe's Faust makes a deal with the devil—the possibilities are unmistakable. Granted that, according to Heidegger, the modern understanding of being and of being human, i.e., history, wandered from the way of truth of the pre-Socratic philosophers at about the time that Plato tried to write down the teachings of Socrates and develop a theory of ideas with presence at its core; granted that everyone who touches metaphysics, including Heidegger, seems to be ensnared by it; is there any point in pursuing the possibility of relieving suffering? Life is tough and then one dies; get over it. Is that the only consolation of philosophy? Is this back sliding into existentialism (as humanism)?

These are all “big ideas,” and invite an equally grand scale response; yet none is available initially. Instead the invitation is to a special hermeneutic of empathy—“special” because, as an inquiry, it is an example of itself. Humans inquire into what it means to be human, and the inquiry itself humanizes. Thus, a special hermeneutic of empathy in the spirit of Heidegger is not humanism, it is a clearing for the possibility of being human; it is not existentialism, it is the clearing for the possibility of human possibility; it is not ethics, it is a clearing for respect, integrity, altruism, and a recognition of who is one's neighbor that expands one's humanness; it is not psychotherapy in the narrow sense, it is a clearing for human interrelatedness in the context of an inquiry into being human that unmask inauthentic behavior and relieves emotional distress; it is not aesthetics, it is a clearing for the communicability of affect; it is not rhetoric, it

is a clearing for being effective through language; it is not parenting, teaching, or leadership, it is a clearing for a commitment to community, making a difference, and improving the quality of life. Make no small plans. A research program on empathy is envisioned. Meanwhile, this hermeneutic of empathy is an attempt to light a single candle in the form of empathy against the darkness of human suffering. This does not require a regression into pity or fear or even an idealization into a sentimental utopia. What it does require is an appreciation of the challenges of the human condition—often called “difficulty”—in the face of which empathy is more than a method and an ontic tool to lift ourselves up by our bootstraps, not like a treadmill of infinite progress, but rather like generating a possibility that was not visible before and as a concrete way of being with one another as a particular possibility to be implemented, a challenge to be engaged empathically.

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