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Drawing on foundational works by Husserl and Stein, Throop and Zahavi present a somewhat counterintuitive understanding of empathy, one far removed from our everyday use of the term. If I interpret their argument correctly, the authors posit something like “basic empathy” as a fundamental prereflective aspect of human sociality and intersubjectivity (see Zahavi 2012). Unlike our common folk model of “positive empathy” (which emphasizes more or less accurate knowing of the inner emotional and dispositional orientation of another), this basic empathy does not rely on mind reading, projection, experiential fusion, mental simulation, vicarious introspection, or even accurate constructions of another’s dispositional state. Rather, it refers simply to the spontaneous perceptual awareness that others—like oneself—are subjects of experience, possessing a complex inner world of thought, feeling, and motivation. This seems to be a fundamental human psychological-perceptual competency; we recognize other people not only as other bodies but also as dispositionally complex embodied selves. These others are not experienced as like the self in terms of their specific qualia, but rather as other-consciousnesses—foreign minds—that remain relatable as subjects despite their manifest difference from the self. Moreover, we come to this understanding effortlessly, inferring psychological interiority from the perceptual givenness of animate bodies. The basic empathic attitude is thus a precursor to all other forms of human intersubjectivity, underpinning more elaborate forms of “complex empathy” in which approximations of the inner states and experiences of others are the focus (for a complementary analysis, see Jardine 2014 and Jardine and Szanto 2017).

While I am impressed by the historical and philosophical rigor that Throop and Zahavi bring to their foundational reading of Husserl and Stein, their analysis leaves unaddressed whether this is the most generative framework for a social scientific understanding of the complex phenomenon of empathy. In the space remaining, I briefly explore an alternative “experience-near” psychoanalytic framing of empathy based loosely on the work of Heinz Kohut (1959, 1971, 1981). Kohut’s conception of empathy as affectively attuned and resonant other-understanding seems to capture more of what we intuitively recognize as the empathic attitude, while also providing a precise delimitation of the concept that may prove more useful—both conceptually and practically—for work in the social sciences.

Kohut (1971) conceptualizes empathy as “a mode of cognition [based on observation and introspection] which is specifically attuned to the perception of [the] complex psychological configurations [of another person]” (300). Unlike the spontaneous empathy of phenomenology, psychoanalytic empathy is understood always as attempted empathy—a conscious process of often-plodding epistemological work directed toward cultivation of a cognitively accurate and emotionally attuned

“other understanding” that can serve as a bridge for interpersonal communication and recognition. From this perspective, empathy is necessarily based on a form of vicarious experiencing, achieved through a combination of long-term engagement with a very particular other, introspective immersion in the resulting complex internal representation of that other, informed by one’s own analogous experiences, memories, and feelings. This requires that the other be related to both as another subject (suggesting the relevance of sympathy), as well as an analytic object of perception and introspective reflection.

In contrast to the basic empathy of phenomenology (which explicitly precludes both imaginative simulation and analogizing inference), the psychoanalytic deployment of empathy as a core heterophenomenological technique suggests that something like “simulation theory” is a necessary component of more complex forms of empathic knowing. The empathic attitude requires a temporary disidentification with the self to create room for an equally temporary reception of, and sympathetic identification with, a foreign self-structure. This entails both a willingness and an ability to allow one’s own self to be “played” by another, coming into attunement with the acts, communications, and silences that the other presents to us, without identifying fully with these other-affects. It also requires an ability to “experience through” our inner cognitive-emotional representation of the other, feeling our way into their experience through trial identification with this represented internal other. Indeed, it is the careful management of trial identification—temporary subjective merger and identification, followed by reinstatement of self-other boundaries—that distinguishes psychoanalytic empathy from related intersubjective processes (such as merger, projection, and sympathy), all of which involve an undisciplined blurring of the subject-object boundary required for the correct deployment of empathy (see Greenson 1960). Through this experiential triangulation, an approximation of the complex inner world of another is arrived at by detour through the self, mediated by attention to transference-countertransference dynamics, the imaginative work of simulation, and temporary sympathetic identification.

Kohut stressed that empathy is both an epistemological act and an “informer of appropriate action.” Given that we can never be sure of the correctness of our heterophenomenological appraisals of another mind, empathic understanding is a precondition for the empathically informed actions through which these cognitive-emotional appraisals are brought to life and tested within the relational field. Only through action (interpretation, expression, gesture, silence, etc.) can the resonance or attunement of our empathic understandings be evaluated. Many analysts can relate stories of “correct” empathic interpretations that fell flat or generated only silence or rejection. However, through positive empathic experiences within this relational matrix, the analysand may come to feel “that another is aware of what he is aware of within himself” (Sandler 1992:583; cited in Schwaber 2010:172, 6n), or in contrast, he may come to feel known in a way that captures something of what he feels but does not yet know about himself. In other

words, in the act of empathy, the analyst's participation as an interpretively attuned other becomes a crucial part of both the intersubjective field and the experience of recognition on the side of the patient (see Honneth 2001).

The psychoanalytic understanding of "complex empathy" I have described is predicated on something like the "basic empathy" described by Throop and Zahavi, but it goes far beyond this pretheoretical orientation toward "others as other subjects." The problem at hand is not whether others are subjects, but rather what kind of subjects they are and how we might come to know them as such. The phenomenological approach to basic empathy seems too arid, intellectualized, and abstract to be useful as a method for grasping the complex work of intersubjectivity implied by the term "empathy." While a strict phenomenological conceptualization of empathy lays a necessary foundation for understanding others as generic subjects, it proves inadequate for understanding others as specific others—as unique constellations of thought, feeling, and motivation—that can be known with some degree of specificity. For that, something like a psychoanalytic conception of empathy—one marked by both cognitive accuracy and emotional resonance—is necessary.

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