

# The phenomenology of empathy: a Steinian emotional account

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**Abstract** This paper presents a phenomenological account of empathy inspired by the proposal put forward by Edith Stein in her book *On the Problem of Empathy*, published originally 1917. By way of explicating Stein's views, the paper aims to present a characterization of empathy that is in some aspects similar to, but yet essentially different from contemporary simulationist theories of empathy. An attempt is made to show that Stein's proposal articulates the essential ingredients and steps involved in empathy and that her proposal can be made even more comprehensive and elucidating by stressing the emotional aspect of the empathy process. Empathy, according to such a phenomenological proposal, is to be understood as a perceptual-imaginative feeling towards and with the other person's experiences made possible by affective bodily schemas and being enhanced by a personal concern for her. To experience empathy does not necessarily or only mean to experience the same type of feeling as the target does; it means feeling alongside the feeling of the target in imagining and explicating a rich understanding of the experiences of the very person one is facing.

**Keywords** Phenomenology · Empathy · Edith Stein · Peter Goldie · Dan Zahavi · Emotion · Simulation

## 1 Introduction

As Dan Zahavi has shown in a number of insightful pieces, the philosophical and psychological debate on empathy taking place in Germany about 100 years ago contains many valuable points and arguments for contemporary research in the field of social cognition (Zahavi 2001, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014). In this paper I want to make a contribution to the contemporary discussion about empathy by bringing forward some central additional aspects of the phenomenon that are not targeted by Zahavi, but which can nevertheless be made visible through readings of the

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phenomenological sources he is proceeding from. My goal in the paper is to present an account of empathy inspired by Edith Stein's book *On the Problem of Empathy* from 1917 (2010). In my reading of Stein I will make use of contemporary theories of empathy and emotion, notably the work of Peter Goldie (2000). My aim is not only to spell out what Stein thought empathy to be, but also to engage with findings and concerns about empathy brought forward by contemporary research and practice in disciplines such as philosophy, neuroscience, psychotherapy and medicine. Accordingly, the account of empathy offered in this paper shall contribute to the expanding, multidisciplinary field of empathy research, in making the *contours* of the phenomenon clearer, but also in allowing us to discern the *dynamics* underlying the process of empathy in a more thorough way.

My suggestion for how to envisage the phenomenon takes its starting point in the idea that empathy is a way of *feeling* oneself *into* the experiences of the other person, as the word “Einfühlung” used by Stein and her contemporaries in the German debate makes even more obvious than the English translation might do.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Stein, as I shall show in the following, takes empathy to be a three-step process in which the experiences of the other person (1.) emerge to me as meaningful in my perception of the target, I then (2.) fulfil an explication of these experiences by following them through in an imaginative account guided by the target, in order to (3.) return to a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the other (Stein 2010: 18–19). Yet, if empathy is a perception of the other person's experiences, an imagination of these experiences, and finally also an understanding of these experiences, as Stein seems to claim, in what ways are these steps in the empathy process also feelings? In which ways are the experiences of the other person *felt* by me in the empathy process and in what way is it important that what is felt by me is, in turn, another *feeling* had and expressed by the target of empathy? These are questions that I will explore in my reading of Stein, but in order to contextualize and substantialize this reading, I will first turn to some key issues in contemporary theories about feelings and empathy, respectively.

The goal of this preparing detour is to show how perceptions of and thoughts about phenomena in the world that surrounds us—including the expressive bodies of other persons—are always *attuned* in nature. Emotions are ways of seeing things in the world in and by which phenomena take on perceptual salience and meaning for us. Ways of *feeling towards* things in the world are not limited to cases of *perception*, but also importantly include situations in which we *imagine* things in the world to be in certain ways. We find such perceptual and imaginative theories of emotion in phenomenologists contemporary to Stein, notably in the works by Max Scheler (2009) and Martin Heidegger (1996), but also in contemporary philosophy of feelings (Goldie 2000), and in brain science, notably the work by Antonio Damasio (1999).<sup>2</sup> According to Damasio, the neural processing in the brain going on when we perceive, imagine or think of things in the world are always linked to maps of somatosensory signals representing states of the bodily organism, thus making

<sup>1</sup> The term “empathy” is a translation of the German word “Einfühlung”, literally meaning “feeling into”. It found its way into the English language via the translation of works in aesthetics and psychology in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Coplan and Goldie 2011).

<sup>2</sup> A good introduction to the many aspects of and problems in the philosophy of emotion is provided in de Sousa (2014: see especially part six about “Perceptual theories” of emotion). See also footnote 3 below.

the perceptions and thoughts *feel* to us in various ways (Damasio 1999: 149 ff.). In what follows I will discuss and try to make lucid, from a phenomenological point of view, how empathy as a form of emotion relies on such affective, bodily schemas that make us attend to the expressed feelings of others in automated ways that are then filled with conscious emotional content in perceptual and imaginative manners. I will first turn to theories about emotion and then discuss contemporary simulationist theories of empathy as well as the recent perceptual proposal of empathy developed by Zahavi. Having prepared the ground by exposing the merits and problems of these models, I will then attempt to show how Stein's theory accompanied by an emotional understanding of the three steps in the empathy process is able to deliver a more complete and elucidating alternative.

## 2 The phenomenology of emotion

Emotions are standardly defined in the philosophical literature as feelings that carry cognitive content; that is, the feelings we have that are *about* the world. If I love or hate a person this feeling (emotion) expresses certain beliefs about how the world is and also about how it ought to be (what I care about in the world). In contrast to emotions some other feelings appear to lack cognitive content. If I am feeling nausea this nausea is not about anything in the world, although the feeling might be said to contain a certain evaluation of my present state as being bad and to be changed. The boundary between feelings that are emotions and feelings that are not emotions is not always clear-cut. I can be tired in the sense of being sleepy (not an emotion) but I can also be tired about something in the world (tired of my job, for instance). To some extent such fuzzy borders may depend upon us using the same word in describing different types of feelings, but the fuzziness may also be taken as an indication that emotions may carry cognitive content in different degrees that is made more or less explicit by the feeling in question. This is an important lesson to integrate into theories about empathy, a lesson that is acknowledged and elucidated in the model articulated by Stein.

The cognitive content of emotions has motivated many philosophers from ancient times and onwards to separate them from bodily experiences (e.g., Nussbaum 2001). According to such theories, the bodily dimension of emotions is accidental, a perhaps typical but nevertheless unnecessary part of the emotion in question. That I can feel my heart pounding when being afraid of the angry dog is not necessary for having the belief that the dog is dangerous and the bodily feeling adds nothing to the belief in question. This is an influential view on the nature of emotion that the philosopher who I will now introduce, Peter Goldie, aims to overcome. Goldie wants to show in what way the bodily dimension forms a necessary part of having an emotional experience without losing track of the cognitive and normative aspects of the phenomenon.

Goldie's perspective in the study *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* is, in my understanding, phenomenological, even though he does not refer

much to the philosophers of the phenomenological tradition (2000).<sup>3</sup> In the phenomenological spirit, he opens his investigation by stating that in order to understand what emotions are we need to adopt “a personal perspective or point of view” (Goldie 2000: 1). This first-person perspective, as Goldie explains, is not subjective in contrast to the perspective of the other person; instead, it presupposes a multi-personal point of view in which I occupy one unique point of view on a common and shared world.<sup>4</sup> When I see you blush, my first thought will be that you are ashamed of something—and I may well already know what this is, since we share a situation in the world together—but it is also possible for me to adopt a third-person scientific perspective in which I explore the causal origins of your cheeks turning red—increased blood flow caused by neural events, etc. This distinction is important from the point of view of empathy, and the phenomenologist will point out that the first-person perspective precedes the third-person perspective in encounters with other persons. In other words, I do not first consider the appearance of the other person in a scientific way and then reach the conclusion by way of theories about her that she is minded and has certain feelings and thoughts; the other appears as another person from the very start in my *perception* of her (Zahavi 2011). I could be wrong, of course, particularly about what the other person is experiencing in more detail, but my ongoing experiences of her and my interactions with her will in most cases teach me and correct my mistakes. The second-person perspective is certainly different from the first-person perspective; only I can feel and know *my* perspective as my *own*, but this is a difference *within* the personal point of view, argues the phenomenologist.

Goldie views emotions as bodily experiences in the sense that it always *feels* a certain way to be, for example, afraid or ashamed. Emotions have a bodily dimension and they change my physiology in a way that is also, at least in the standard case, visible to others by way of my bodily expressions (facial expression, bodily posture and movements). When I undergo an emotional experience I feel it in my body, although in many cases I am not *focused* on the bodily sensations in question. This is no coincidence, since the emotional experience is directed towards something in the world that is made present to me in a vivid and attention-consuming way through the feeling in question—the thing I am afraid of or ashamed of or, to introduce a couple of other examples, happy or curious about. Goldie talks about emotions as ways of “feeling

<sup>3</sup> Goldie does make a few references to works of Jean-Paul Sartre (1962) and Max Scheler (2009), but their philosophies do not form any substantial part of his main arguments. A powerful phenomenological source for a philosophy of emotion (that Goldie neglects) is the work of Martin Heidegger (1996). Heidegger’s analysis of how feelings in the form of moods open up the world as a meaningful and significant place for us is in many ways parallel to Goldie’s ideas about “feeling towards” that I explore in what follows. As Goldie notes himself, the distinction between emotions and moods is not a sharp one; in both cases the important point is that they make things in the world appear to us with a meaning content (Goldie 2000: 143). Moods are in this regard less specific in targeting objects or states of the world than emotions are, but on the other hand they provide a meaningful horizon for more specific emotions to be formed in (Ratcliffe 2008: chapter 2). A number of valuable papers dealing with various aspects of the phenomenology of feelings are found in the collection edited by Slaby et al. (2011).

<sup>4</sup> The most well-known example of this is Heidegger’s analysis of the meaning structure of the world in terms of what he calls “tools” (Heidegger 1996: 66 ff.); but similar reflections can be found in many phenomenologists stressing various aspects of the primordial “sharedness” of the everyday world (Zahavi 2001).

towards” states of the world in a kind of “imaginative perception”, which he characterizes as a “thinking of with bodily feeling”.<sup>5</sup> Emotions are intentional in the phenomenological sense, they present a state of the world to me, and they are also normative, since they include evaluations of how I feel about this judgement.

A key issue here, which Goldie does not explore in sufficient detail in his book, is how the bodily dimension contributes to the intentionality of the emotions. Summing up some aspects of the phenomenology of affective intentionality found in the work of Thomas Fuchs, I would say that the bodily element of emotions does so by way of (1.) Focusing our attention on what is valuable and relevant in the environment for us; (2.) Resonating with bodily patterns that we perceive in other persons (or in other creatures or features of our environment that resemble human bodies); and (3.) Responding to features of our environment, including the expressions of other persons, which should make us take action (Fuchs 2013). These elements are the corner stones in what the phenomenologist could name “affective schemas”, which provide the basic drive and direction for the emotions when they take on meaning as being about the world in “feeling towards” different things, as Goldie puts it.<sup>6</sup>

Affective schemas are an important source of the normative element in emotions, since they provide a basic evaluation of how we find the state of the world to be (good or bad) and what needs to be done in a situation to change the predicament of ourselves and/or others. The work performed by affective schemas are influenced by many things pertaining to the history and context of the situation in which they are at work—the personal history and developed characteristics of the person having the emotion, for instance—and they do not predict in detail how a particular emotion had by a particular person in a particular situation will develop. Nevertheless, the schemas provide *typical* preconscious ways in which we feel and judge key situations in life that demand our attention. Affective schemas are likely present from birth in rudimentary forms that are then diversified and made immensely more complex during the first years of human life.<sup>7</sup>

The phenomenology of affective schemas can be elucidated, but not ultimately explained or replaced, by knowledge about how the brain processes stimuli from the surrounding world and the attached bodily organism (compare my discussion of Damasio’s theory above and my discussion of mirror neurons and other empathy mechanisms of the human brain below). Affective schemas are related to what in the phenomenological tradition is known as “body schemas”: systems of sensory-motor processes that constantly regulate our posture and movements, processes that function without reflective awareness which make the world appear to us as bearing significance in movement and action (Gallagher 2005).

<sup>5</sup> This analysis mainly takes place in chapters 2 and 3 of Goldie’s book (2000). For a valuable exploration of the phenomenology of feelings, including an interpretation of Goldie’s position, see Ratcliffe (2008: particularly chapter 1).

<sup>6</sup> My choice of the term “schema” to talk about the more or less automated, bodily aspects of our emotional life obviously resonates all the way back to Kant and his transcendental philosophy. This is deliberate to the extent that affective schemas provide the necessary prerequisites for feelings to take on a cognitive and evaluative content and thus qualify as emotions. However, the extent to which the use of a concept such as “affective schema” will obligate a transcendental point of view and philosophy within the phenomenological perspective is a question on which I will not take stand in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> On this issue, see the contributions to two special issues of *Journal of Consciousness Studies*: Thompson (2001) and Colombetti and Thompson (2005); as well as Decety and Michalska (2012) and Light and Zahn-Waxler (2012).

Goldie makes a distinction between having an emotion and going through an emotional experience: that is, feeling towards with the bodily intentionality I have discussed above. He does this to handle the objection that a person (A) can, for example, love or hate another person (B) despite B not being present in the perceptions or thoughts of A. I love my wife also during the periods of my life when I am busy doing other things occupying the focus of my attention, such as teaching, reading, having dinner with my friends, etc. I may even intensely like or dislike another person without fully realizing and being aware of this, because my emotion is blocked from consciousness by competing thoughts or feelings that make it hard or even impossible for me to accept the like or dislike in question. Goldie defines having an emotion—such as love or hate—as being *disposed* to act in certain ways and to having *episodes* of feeling towards the object of the emotion if confronted with the object (state of the world) in some way (Goldie 2000: 69). In the case of my wife, these experiences will typically be produced by seeing her or thinking about her. The feeling towards that I am disposed to by way of the love, however, is much more complex and multifaceted than just feeling a kind of positive warmth towards my wife when she comes to my mind in one way or another. The emotion also includes being disposed to feel in certain ways about what she feels and thinks (does she love me or not?) or about things that could happen to her (and to me and her) or about other things in the world that could happen because they might be *important* to her.<sup>8</sup>

### 3 Empathy as imagination and simulation

Goldie does not regard empathy as an emotion, since it is not an enduring state of a person's (embodied) mind in the same way that being sad, happy or angry about a certain condition in the world is. He does, however, regard *sympathy* as an emotion, since the latter consists in a longer lasting disposition to care about the wellbeing of another person. I can have sympathy for another person without feeling anything about her at the moment, but the sympathy makes me disposed to have episodes of sympathetic feelings towards the person and also to act on his behalf should certain situations arise (Goldie 2000: 213 ff.). Goldie is right that empathy is not a disposition to feel, but rather an experience of feeling towards the other person that is carried out during a limited time span (a feeling episode). Empathy is not an emotion in Goldie's sense, but I would still argue (in contrast to Goldie) that empathy is an *emotional experience*: an experience of feeling towards the other person in a certain way, "thinking about her with feeling", to use Goldie's expressions (Goldie 2000: 19). Goldie, however, and this is where I will part from him, does not characterize empathy as an emotional experience; he regards it, rather, as "a process or procedure by which a person *centrally imagines the narrative* (the thoughts, feeling and emotions) of another person" (Goldie 2000: 195).

<sup>8</sup> A fascinating and complex example that Goldie discusses in the final chapter of his book is the emotion of jealousy (2000: chapter 8). Goldie's introduction of the notion of disposition in his theory of emotion could be read as a behaviouristic move, but I prefer to view the dispositions of the person to having experiences and performing actions as a kind of tacit bodily intentionality underlying our understanding of the world. In any case, nothing in my argument about empathy as an emotional experience à la Stein hinges on the question if Goldie is ultimately a phenomenologist or not.



Goldie's characterization of empathy is problematic for at least two reasons. Firstly, it disregards the perceptual feeling towards the other person in the face-to-face encounter that is, if not necessary, then at least typical and in many ways essential for the empathic process (more about this later). Secondly, it presents the task of the empathizer in a way that is far too demanding. Empathy, according to Goldie, is not only about imagining being in the other person's shoes (what it would be like for me to be in his position), it is about imagining what it would be like being *him*, and this may, actually, turn out to be an impossible project if we are not very similar to the persons we are to empathize with or, alternatively, if the situation and possibilities we are to consider are not very straightforward and noncomplex (he looks very hungry and probably yearns for the tasty hamburger he is casting longing gazes at).

Goldie acknowledges these difficulties himself in one of his last papers entitled "Anti-Empathy" (Goldie 2011). However, settling for "in-his-shoes empathy" has other problems, since imagining what it would be like for me to be in his situation may be very far from finding out what it is like for him to be so, which is, really, what we aim to accomplish in empathy (Coplan 2011). I will argue that imagination-empathy accounts remain incomplete if we do not acknowledge the way imagination is guided by a *feeling* towards and with the person who is the target of empathy. Lacking this emotional pull, nobody will *guide* us in the emotional exploration (see my analysis of Stein below).

Goldie's imaginative account of empathy belongs to a family of theories that have become increasingly influential and dominant the last 20 years in empathy research. Various "simulation theories of other minds" have existed at least since the days of David Hume (Stueber 2006: 29), but they have received a powerful revival lately encouraged by the finding of so-called "mirror neurons" in the early 1990s (Goldman 2011). That we simulate the experiences of other persons in the empathic process can mean many different things that are not always kept distinct in theories about empathy. It is helpful to conceptually distinguish these different meanings of simulation employed by empathy researchers if we are to better understand the full process.

First, simulation may mean that we *involuntarily* mimic the emotional expressions of the other in an automated response preceding the conscious experience of her (Gallese 2003; Iacoboni 2008). Mirror neurons probably do part of this job, which can shortcut the bodily loop of actually changing my physical state and bodily expression to resemble the other (Damasio 1999). However, as researchers have shown, the neurology of empathy is complex, and although affective resonance appears to play an important role, many other functions of the brain are involved in creating and shaping empathic responses. The affective response patterns are not only inborn but shaped and changed through life in complex ways (see, for instance: Decety et al. 2012; Decety and Michalska 2010; De Vignemont and Singer 2006; Engen and Singer 2012).

According to simulationists, to start with, the empathizer must comprehend that the emotional expression of the other person is the *origin* of her own affective experience in order for the experience in question to count as empathy in contrast to emotional contagion, in which the source of the feeling is not acknowledged. Further, the automated affective response patterns are richer than just providing a mirror of the

expressions of the other person; some emotions—anger, for instance—will rather give rise to automated responses of other feelings—fear, for instance.<sup>9</sup> Further, the activation and effect of automated responses are controlled and influenced by the way a person judges a situation and by other emotional experiences she is currently having (I can choose not to engage myself in the suffering of a person I encounter in the street, and if I am stressed or scared of getting involved this will also influence my tendency to empathize negatively). Finally, the automated brain responses are only the starting point of the empathy process, which will become increasingly complex and activate a large number of additional neural circuits as soon as we perceive and engage in understanding the empathy target by various forms of conscious efforts.

This brings us to a second and different understanding of what simulation may mean in the empathy process. It can mean *consciously* attempting to simulate the feeling (experience) of the target in addition and in contrast to automatically undergoing such an experience (De Vignemont and Jacob 2012; Goldman 2006). Goldie's theory of empathy also relies on such a process of simulative imagination doing the job in the empathy process (Goldie 2000). Simulation theorists of empathy tend to emphasize either "basic", automated or conscious, deliberate "re-enactive" processes of simulation as necessary for empathic understanding of the other person to occur (Stueber 2006: 20–21). They may also emphasize empathy as either a feeling or a cognitive understanding of the experience of the other. The strength and importance of Goldie's account of what it means to have an emotional experience, which I surveyed above, is that we do not have to view the relation between feeling and cognition as a strict either–or choice. To feel towards the other is to understand her predicament in at least some rudimentary way; it is a "thinking with feeling" about the other in which I understand that she is, for instance, sad and maybe also why this is so. In the same way I would like to suggest with Stein in what follows that we do not have to view empathy as either direct and perceptual or indirect and imaginative in nature. Automated responses shaping our emotional perception of the other and imaginative forms of feeling towards her can interact and reinforce each other in the empathy process. Stein's proposal acknowledges both aspects and is an attempt to comprehend how they are related to each other in empathy.

#### 4 The phenomenology of empathy

In his criticism of simulationist (and theory-based) accounts of the empathy process Dan Zahavi has pointed out that the perception of the other person as undergoing an emotional experience appears to be unmediated in nature (Zahavi 2008). Zahavi's criticism has primarily been directed towards re-enactive (also called "higher level") empathy theories and a main inspiration for him has been Max Scheler's analysis of

<sup>9</sup> Using the language of affective schemas introduced above we could say that some perceived bodily expressions in addition to (or perhaps even instead of) making us feel something similar to what the other person is feeling also prepare us for taking action in order to deal with the feeling of the other through another type of feeling (e.g. feeling fear when witnessing anger or frustration when witnessing sadness).



social perception found in *The Nature of Sympathy*, published in its first edition as early as 1913 (2009).<sup>10</sup> Zahavi, in accordance with theories found in Edmund Husserl, understands empathy to be a direct perceptual experience of the other person in the everyday face-to-face encounter that does not include any attempts to simulate the target's condition (Zahavi 2012).

Zahavi in his criticism of simulationist accounts of empathy specifically discusses what is most often called the “isomorphism”, or “interpersonal similarity relation”, criterion (Zahavi 2011). A simulation theory of empathy appears to require that the empathizer has a feeling (experience) *similar* to the target's when empathizing, but, as Zahavi argues, do I not often understand the feeling of the other without having the same type of feeling myself? Maybe, for instance, I become afraid in seeing that the other person is angry, rather than becoming angry myself, but this does not mean that I do not *understand* what the target is feeling. Monika Dullstein has recently pointed out that Zahavi's critique of at least one of the simulationist theories (De Vignemont 2010; De Vignemont and Jacob 2012; Jacob 2011) appears to rest on a confusion of what the different parties mean by empathy (Dullstein 2013). Whereas Zahavi takes empathy to be a direct perception of the other, which accomplishes a rudimentary understanding of the experience he is having, De Vignemont and Jacob regard this perception merely as a first step in the empathy process, making a simulation of the emotional experience of the target by the empathizer possible in a second step, argues Dullstein.<sup>11</sup>

In my view, Zahavi appears to be right in pointing out that my empathic, perceptual understanding of the other does not rely in every case on developing the same type of feeling as the target is having (see my discussions above on affective schemas and simulationist theories of empathy), but it is, nevertheless, unclear to me to which extent Zahavi's phenomenological account in distancing itself from the isomorphism criterion acknowledges that empathy is an *emotional* experience. Is it possible for me to empathically understand that the other person is afraid without having *any* specific feelings about his predicament? Many simulationist theories rely on an “affectivity condition” to be fulfilled in order for the interpersonal understanding in question to count as empathy (e.g., De Vignemont and Jacob 2012); and I think this feeling aspect should stay central in spelling out the phenomenology of empathy. I will return briefly to the issue of how my phenomenological understanding of empathy as an emotional experience relates empathy to sympathy after having discussed Stein's three-step model in more detail.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the basic, automated brain processes serving as a material substrate for conscious experiences in empathy, Zahavi has pointed out how phenomenologists (his main source has been Husserl) have addressed this embodied “passive synthesis” in various ways and that an analysis of such sub-personal processes cannot replace the analysis of higher-level conscious processes (Zahavi 2012; see also Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009; Lotz 2007). On the basis of his critique of the metaphorical use of terms such as “simulating”, “mimicking”, “mirroring” and “projecting” (the brain is not an agent in the way a self or a person is), Zahavi argues that phenomenology and neuroscience can be fruitfully combined via more stringent conceptual work (Gallagher and Zahavi 2012). Also, importantly, empathy, according to Zahavi's interpretation, is complemented by many other forms of interpersonal understanding (including attempts to imagine what it may be like to be in the situation of the other) and interaction (having a dialogue with and/or doing things together with the other) that need to be stressed and studied in a comprehensive phenomenological account of intersubjectivity supplementing analyses of empathy (Zahavi 2001, 2010, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Dullstein makes use of Stein's analysis in *On the Problem of Empathy* (2010) in her argument and my analysis of empathy in this paper is in many ways parallel to her important reading.

I will now proceed to the theory of empathy that we find in Edith Stein's book *On the Problem of Empathy* published in 1917 (Stein 2010).<sup>12</sup> Stein's account of empathy goes beyond the perceptual level stressed by Zahavi into realms and processes of imagination typically included in simulationist accounts.<sup>13</sup> Stein views empathy as a form of experience—"intentional act"—in its own right that is similar to both perception and imagination, but identical to neither (Stein 2010: 20). The idea of intentional acts (acts of consciousness) in phenomenology should not be mixed up with the idea of a person having an intention in the sense of wishing and aiming to bring something about. Intentionality in phenomenology is a much broader concept, simply indicating that the experience (act) in question has a meaning content, is about something in the world. Empathy, according to Stein, is similar to perception in presenting something—the experiencing other person—in an unmediated way, but dissimilar to perception and similar to other forms of experiences, such as imagination, in that the substance (meaning content) of the experience is not given directly to the empathizer.<sup>14</sup> In order to give proper due to her enlightening and complex account, Stein needs to be quoted here at length:

Now to empathy itself. Here, too [as in memory, expectation or imagination, *my addition*], we are dealing with an act that is primordial in the sense of being a present experience but non-primordial as regards its substance (when we regard the empathic act in its own right and do not take into consideration the "going with" the act that is the object of empathy, *Stein's addition in her personal copy*). And this substance is an experience that can, again, come in many different forms, as memory, expectation or imagination. When it suddenly appears before me it faces me as an object (for instance, the sadness I "read" in the other's face). But when I inquire into its implied tendencies (when I try to bring the other's mood to clear givenness to myself), the experience is no longer an object for me, but has pulled myself into it. I am now no longer turned towards the experience, but instead I am turned towards the object of the experience. I am at the subject of the original experience, at the subject's place, and only after having fulfilled a clarification of the experience does it appear to me as an object again.

<sup>12</sup> This new German edition of the book contains additions to the text made by Stein in her personal copy, as well as a valuable introduction by the editor Maria Antonia Sondermann dealing with the genesis of the work (Stein 2010: xi–xxvi). Stein's book is a shortened version of her doctoral dissertation, which she wrote under the supervision of Husserl and presented in Freiburg in 1916. During 1913–15 she studied philosophy in Göttingen and listened to the lectures not only of Husserl (whom she followed to Freiburg in 1916, when he was appointed professor there) but also of Scheler, whose influence is very visible in her text.

<sup>13</sup> Although it is not the main topic of his phenomenological proposal for empathy, it should be mentioned that Zahavi does investigate the possibilities of a multi-layered approach to empathy à la Stein (and Husserl) in Zahavi (2014).

<sup>14</sup> The terms Stein uses to get hold of this distinction is that something appears to consciousness in an "original" or "non-original" way (Stein 2010: 15). Regarding the substance—"Gehalt"—of an act being given in an original, as opposed to a non-original, way, the term Stein (and Husserl) often uses to stress the first form is "leibhaft gegenwärtig", or "leibhaft gegeben", that is: "given in bodily presence" (e.g. Stein 2010: 16, 31). Interestingly, in discussing the theme of the lived body ("Leib") in her book, Stein uses a third term to bridge the gap between original and non-original givenness of an experience in empathy, namely "con-originality" ("Kon-originalität"), which is what is experienced when one living body encounters another (in contrast to encountering a non-living thing) (Stein 2010: 75).

Consequently we have in all considered cases when experiences [of other persons, *my addition*] are appearing to us three levels or modalities of accomplishment, even though in each concrete case not all of the three levels are accomplished, but we often settle with level one or two: 1. the emergence of the experience, 2. the fulfilling explication, and 3. the comprehensive objectification of the explicated experience. (Stein 2010: 18–19)<sup>15</sup>

In the second step of Stein's model we view the transformation of something merely perception-like into something that is also imagination-like, proceeding through the third step to something that is perception-with-imagination-like. The key to understanding this dynamics of the empathy process is, I believe, to underline the emotional aspects of all three steps as they typically lead into and reinforce each other. Stein writes that steps two and three do not always occur in the empathic process, but I think the most fair and enlightening interpretation of her position is that other thoughts and feelings we are having and/or aspects of the situation we find ourselves in may voluntarily or involuntarily *stop* us from proceeding from step one to steps two and three.<sup>16</sup> In Stein's view, experiences of experiences of other persons which because of such blocks do not lead to any fulfilling explications may still count as empathy because the perception-like qualities at the first stage are already rich enough to give us at least a basic understanding of the experiences the other person is having (Zahavi's version of empathy).

If we want to preserve the everyday meaning and use of the word empathy it appears enlightening to name such cases of other-directed intentional acts empathy only when they are in some way attempting to investigate the experiences of other persons in their own right. It seems strange to name them cases of empathy if, instead of bringing myself to proceed with the experience of the other (step two), they are immediately followed by a turning away from the person in question, not taking any interest in her predicament.<sup>17</sup> How deep the investigative, explicating experience has to be to count as empathy is a complicated question. In many cases when we interact with other persons we "read"

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, Waltraut Stein's translation of this key passage in *On the Problem of Empathy* is far from ideal, constantly mixing up references to "Gehalt" and "Erlebnis" and using "explanation" instead of "explication" in the last sentence (Stein 1989: 10).

<sup>16</sup> In support of such a view regarding contextual factors that preclude or enhance empathy, see De Vignemont and Singer (2006); regarding a similar interpretation of Stein's position on the issue of empathy and the three levels, see Dullstein (2013) and Toombs (2001).

<sup>17</sup> It should be pointed out that some phenomenologists, notably Husserl, use the term "empathy" in the broader sense of including encounters with other persons in which we do not take any special interest in the experiences they are having (Zahavi 2012). According to some philosophical traditions (often inspired by the work of Wittgenstein) everyday-language use is what we ultimately have to fall back on in doing conceptual analysis. From the phenomenological perspective, everyday-language use will provide some valuable starting points for conceptual analysis of lived experience (in contrast to a terminology that is more obviously theoretically infused), but it is not the case that everyday-language would form any kind of final guideline for the analysis. The phenomenological analysis will to a greater or lesser extent always lead to the introduction of a new terminology that may include redefinitions of terms that already have an established everyday meaning. In the case of empathy, however, I think the contemporary phenomenologist wanting to use the term empathy in a novel way would have to be careful in pointing out that he is using the term in a way that does not cover the cases many other empathy theorists view as paradigmatic for empathy and/or in a way that covers cases many other empathy theorists would not count as examples of empathy.

them in quite complex and often also communicative ways (not necessarily involving language). Are we as a rule engaging empathically with the other person when we run away from her in fear or hug her in love or when we are making dinner with her in mutual coordination and concentration? Rather than taking empathy to be a basic, obligatory ingredient in all such everyday encounters, which can be combined with more complex forms of social interaction, it is in my view more enlightening to comprehend empathy in terms of the three-step model presented by Stein. This phenomenological understanding of empathy will stress that step-one empathy is a basic form of the phenomenon which does not count as empathy anymore if it is superseded by experiences in which the other person is cut off from our attention or engaged with in other ways than empathically (in the sense of step-two and step-three empathy).

## 5 An emotional interpretation of Stein's three-stage model of empathy

I will now turn to developing a more systematic account of Stein's steps and the way they are emotional forms of "feeling towards" the other, as Goldie puts it.

*Step one:* Stein refuses to speculate about the subconscious processes that make empathy possible; instead she wants to develop a correct and comprehensive phenomenological description of empathy that she claims is necessary to guide the empirical researchers in what type of phenomenon to explore in the first place (Stein 2010: 14, 21, 34–35). I think Stein is a bit too pessimistic regarding what empirical research (experimental psychology in her time complemented by brain science in our time) can contribute to the field of phenomenology (for the idea that the elucidation could travel both ways, see Gallagher and Zahavi 2012). In any case, it seems perfectly consistent with Stein's position to assume the existence of affective schemas (see my discussion above) that select features of our environment before we are conscious of them as outstanding objects of attention (including the expressive bodies of other persons) (see, also, Goldie 2000: 106).

If one goes into the details of Stein's text it becomes obvious that she does, indeed, nourish an interest in empirical science and say some important things about how the other person's experience comes to appear as the centre of my attention in empathy. She develops the way the living body of the other person appears to me in a "con-original" way, which is not subject to any kind of conscious associations or inferences (Stein 2010: 74–77).<sup>18</sup> She writes that we perceive feelings as coming *from* the lived body (Stein 2010: 65), and that feelings are directly expressed and perceived in the meeting between living

<sup>18</sup> Stein's analyses are Husserlian in flavour on this point, although she had not read or listened to most of the details found in the latter's ideas of a "pairing between bodies" when she wrote her dissertation in 1916. See the introduction to Stein (2010) by Maria Antonia Sondermann. For an evaluation of Husserl's theories of intersubjectivity in relation to contemporary researchers attempting to cash in neurological findings, such as the finding of mirror neurons, for empathy research, see Zahavi (2012).

bodies (Stein 2010: 68–72).<sup>19</sup> In these meetings she talks about a “fusion between outer and inner bodily perception” in a way that makes one think of phenomenological approaches to perception and intersubjectivity found in the late Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theories about the “flesh” of the world (1968) (Stein 2010: 76). According to Stein, empathic acts can be initiated (step one) and even, to a certain extent, followed through in step-two and step-three empathy in the encounter with the living body of animals that do not look like and move exactly as we do and even in the perception of plants (Stein 2010: 86).

*Step two:* In the quote from Stein I gave above she talks about the sadness of a face “having pulled” the empathizer into the experience (Stein 2010: 19, see also 26 ff.). As I have pointed out, this “pull” (“Zug”) of the other person’s bodily expressions, shaped by what I have called affective schemas (not Stein’s terminology), is a recurring theme of Stein’s analysis of the lived body and the feelings “pouring out” of it (Stein 2010: 65–72). The emotional pull of the other person’s body is also the reason why the empathizer is taken into step two of the process in “being led” by the target’s experience and successively following it through (Stein 2010: 20). At this stage of Stein’s analysis it is crucial to demarcate in what ways her understanding of empathy is similar and yet dissimilar to contemporary simulationist accounts. As a matter of fact, the most important discussant in Stein’s text, besides Husserl and Scheler, is Theodor Lipps, who developed the first systematic simulationist theory of empathy, and who is an important source of reference for some contemporary simulationists (Stueber 2006).

Stein is both appreciative and critical of Lipps’s theories of empathy and she makes use of them in discussions to characterize her own position. Firstly, she accuses Lipps of mixing up a description of what happens in empathy with attempts to explain why the empathic experience occurs (Stein 2010: 21). According to Lipps, empathy rests on “inner imitations” we make of the bodily expressions of other persons when encountering them.<sup>20</sup> These inner imitations, which are associated with affective states, for instance by inner mimicking of facial expression, are then projected onto the target that we thereby understand to be going through certain types of experiences. According to Stein, it is not clear if Lipps takes these “inner imitations” to be preconscious, involuntary processes or conscious efforts carried out by the empathizer (compare my discussion of contemporary simulationist theories above). A second main point of criticism concerns not only step one but also step two in Stein’s analysis. According to Stein, Lipps does not make clear that the empathic going along with the target’s experience, in a fulfilling explication of it, remains *distinct* from the target’s experience also when being led by her. Step two is not a case

<sup>19</sup> Stein’s account of the perception of the expressive body of the other person is very similar to the often-referred-to position found in Scheler: I see the anger in the clenched fist, the joy in the smile, etc. (Scheler 2009: 260). Scheler even spread the rumour that Stein had simply stolen thoughts and arguments found in his unpublished lectures (that Stein had attended) without giving proper references. Stein, however, vehemently denied this in a letter sent to Scheler after she had encountered the rumours of plagiarism (Stein 2010: xx).

<sup>20</sup> For my account of Lipps’s theory, see Stueber (2006: 7–9).

of “feeling at oneness”—“Einsföhlung”—with the target as Lipps, according to Stein, takes it to be.<sup>21</sup>

As I have tried to show, Stein’s phenomenology of empathy is compatible with assuming affective schemata, including resonance patterns, involved in shaping the perception of the other person and her experiences on a basic level. As I pointed out above, the idea of affective schemas can account for the emotional pull that Stein finds at work in the empathy process. Affective schemas do not simply provide mirror images of the other, and the term simulation is misleading when we regard preconscious processes, but knowledge about how the brain works could nevertheless be important for understanding how empathy is made possible, as contemporary simulationists tend to point out (Iaconi 2008).

What about the process occurring when the empathizer follows the experience of the target in a fulfilling explication of the substance of the target’s experience? Is this a case of simulation? Does it demand that the empathizer comes to feel the same type of feeling (experience) as the target does (De Vignemont and Jacob 2012)? Not necessarily, I contend. In many cases the feelings “pouring out” of the lived body of the other will lead the empathizer to form a similar feeling when following through the experience—encountering another person who is suffering in a visible way is probably the best example of this. Stein sometimes indicates that the empathizer is, indeed, sucked into the same kind of feeling as the target is having (Stein 2010: 23). But it remains a bit unclear what exactly “similar” or “same kind” will mean in this context, and it is perfectly possible to imagine ways of following the other in her experience without having the same type of feeling or experience that she is having. As Stein points out, empathy is not a case of feeling at one with the other person, and although it is a case of feeling with her, it is a special form of doing so which should not be confused with sharing an experience in the more common sense of, for instance, feeling joyful together for a mutual reason (Stein 2010: 25).

A better term than simulation in the context of the second and third steps of Stein’s model would be imagination. At this point in my analysis of Stein I would like to return to Goldie and his account of empathy, which I think can guide us here provided we make the type of adjustments I have suggested above. When in step-two empathy I follow the experience of the other person, brought to her side by the emotional pull of step-one empathy, I strive to understand how things are like from her perspective by letting my feeling towards her take on an imaginary substance in following her (for example, referring to the quote from Stein above: Why is she sad?, What has happened to her?) . The experience I am transformed into will be an experience that attempts to follow in the footsteps of the other, not in the sense of merging with her, but in the sense of appreciating what it *could* be like for her, and also what aspect of her experience I am not likely to get any hold of because of the limitations inherent in human imagination and the differences between us that cannot be dissolved.

<sup>21</sup> However, Stein’s interpretation of Lipps’s theory on this point may not be correct; Lipps is probably closer to her own account of empathy than she wants to admit (Stueber 2006: 8).



*Step three:* To repeat: Stein takes empathy to be a three-step process in which the experiences of the other person (1.) emerge to me as meaningful in my perception of the target, I then (2.) fulfil an explication of these experiences by following them through in an imaginative account guided by the target, in order to (3.) return to a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the target (Stein 2010: 18–19). The imaginative attempt of step-two empathy is prevented from attempts at imaginary sharing rather than merely imaginarily following the experience of the target by being brought back to step-three empathy in which the experiences of the other is presented precisely as an *object* of my own experience again. The steps could possibly be reiterated—step three could serve as a new step one and so on—but they could also be supplemented by other empathy-plus ways of engaging with the other, such as talking to her or starting to do something for/to her or together with her.<sup>22</sup>

It is a common move to stress the importance of dialogue and communication for empathy in, for example, medical practice, psychotherapy and social work (Halpern 2001). It is hardly possible to dispute that a dialogue with the other person could enhance my understanding of his experiences, but one should take care to not confuse standard dialogue with empathy. As Stein writes, there is a difference between approaching what the other says as a statement about things in the world and as an emotional expression found in her *voice* (Stein 2010: 99–100). The other talks from a position and with an emotional expression that I aim at understanding in the empathy process; if I direct my attention towards the object of the statement without regarding it as specifically her words, then I am no longer empathizing: I am no longer feeling towards the other person's experience, but rather judging claims about a common world that does not have anything specifically to do with *her* experience.

## 6 Stein's normative framework in situating the three-step model

Stein's published book is a shortened version of her doctoral dissertation, which additionally contained not only a first part surveying the concept of empathy in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy, but also a fifth, sixth and seventh part about empathy as a social, ethical and aesthetic phenomenon respectively (Stein 2010: xx–xxi). Nobody knows exactly what thoughts Stein put into these parts, because all existing copies of the dissertation are gone (Stein 2010: xxi). What remains is the published book from 1917 containing part two on the structure of the empathic act, part three on the lived body and part four on the concept of the person. In these published parts Stein makes clear that her overall aim is not only to study the empathic experience but the questions of what it means to be a person in a social (and religious) context and how we should live together there. Her goal appears to be no less than to found an ethics built on hierarchies of values that we encounter through feeling towards and with

<sup>22</sup> A reiterated dialectics of the steps should not be mixed up with what Stein calls "reiteration of empathy", in which I empathize with somebody who is empathizing (possibly with me as a target) (Stein 2010: 30).

other persons in the world, an overall aim that one suspects was even more present and developed in the dissertation in total. In this regard her project is very similar to Scheler's, who was more interested in sympathy (love) than in empathy as such (Scheler 2009).

Sympathy can be considered not only as a higher achievement than empathy in the sense of being connected to a life that is ethical (exactly how sympathy and ethics are related is a disputed theme that Stein never deals with in any depth), but also as part of a normative framework in which to situate empathy.<sup>23</sup> Such a connection has been made by many empathy researchers linking the ability and tendency to engage in empathy with an attitude of concern for the other person (Batson 1991, 2009; De Vignemont and Jacob 2012). On level one in Stein's model this concern for the wellbeing of other people may be very general and partly automated in nature, but on level two the question of whether I care about *this* particular individual will surely determine the extent to which I am willing and able to feel with her in the empathic experience.<sup>24</sup>

The person, according to Stein, is the *who* that appears in the empathic act. In feeling with the experiences of the other person we get to know her and she is revealed in various aspects of the expressions and actions that we empathize with (Stein 2010: 126 ff.). This focus on the other person as the subject of a concern that both makes empathy possible and that is being cultivated in the empathic process is illuminating for understanding the dynamics of empathy. Sympathy, as Goldie points out, is a personal focus of attention that disposes us to engage in caring *actions* as regards its targets (Goldie 2000: 213 ff.), but it also disposes us to engage in empathic *feelings* towards and with the targets, as I have tried to point out.<sup>25</sup>

Regarding my Steinian proposal, it remains crucial to point out that empathy is not only facilitated and typically enhanced by sympathy; empathy can also be fuelled by a *negative* concern for the other person found, for instance, in cases of torture and sadistic behaviours (Goldie 2000: 215). Empathy can also be upheld and exercised in a feeling of *professional* concern—typical of doctors, nurses, therapists and social workers—for the other person (Halpern 2012). In all these cases we are not, however, talking about an empathic process devoid of feelings, but about a concerned endeavour, aiming at understanding the predicament of the other person in the steps I have outlined with the help of Stein (see, also: Svenaeus 2015).

## 7 Conclusion

I believe to have shown how Stein's analysis, in combination with further reflections on the nature of emotions, provides a promising phenomenological outline of empathy.

<sup>23</sup> Many contemporary moral philosophers are sceptical towards the project of regarding sympathy and/or empathy "as the high road to an ethical outlook" (Goldie 2000: 180), since they tend to make us care about particular other people only and not about suffering or duties in general; see, for instance, Prinz (2011). For more positive accounts of what role empathy could play in ethics, see Slote (2007) and Svenaeus (2014, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Regarding the question of how psychiatric disorders may affect the ability to empathize on different levels, see Baron-Cohen (2011).

<sup>25</sup> In a phenomenological critique of simulation theories of empathy Shaun Gallagher embarks upon a narrative version of empathy that is similar to Goldie's (and to my own attempts in this paper) (Gallagher 2012).

Empathy, according to this Steinian proposal, is to be understood as a perceptual-imaginative feeling towards and with the other person's experiences. Empathy is made possible by affective bodily schemas and it is enhanced by a personal concern for the target. Empathy is thus an emotional experience, but it nevertheless develops a cognitive understanding of the predicament of the other person. To experience empathy does not necessarily or only mean to experience the same type of feeling as the target does; it means feeling alongside the feeling of the target in imagining and explicating a rich understanding of the experiences of this very person I am facing. This feeling of (towards) and with (alongside) the other person can be developed to different extents as concerns how rich the cognitive understanding of the experiences of the target will become in the empathy process of the three steps.

The feeling of the empathizer provides the driving force of the empathy process expressing a concern for the target that makes the empathizer go along with the experiences of the target in an imaginative understanding of them. As the rudimentary feeling towards made possible by affective schemas develops into an emotion containing judgements about the perceived and imagined state of the target, the empathic understanding will become richer in content. The empathy process is always situated in a situation that influences the directions it will take and to which extent it will become rich and adequate in the sense of being able to understand the predicament of the other person. Sympathy for the particular target person forms an important part of these preconditions that can enhance the force of a pre-personal concern for the other person inherent in affective schemas.

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