



# Phenomenological Distinctions Between Empathy *De Vivo* and Empathy in Fiction: From Contemporary Direct Perception Theory Back to Edith Stein's Eidetics of Empathy

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## Abstract

This paper deals with phenomenological distinctions concerning empathy with real persons and empathy with fictional characters. We will introduce both contemporary accounts of our perception of others and Edith Stein's account of empathy. These theories will turn out to be fruitful in defending our main thesis, i.e. that the differences between empathy with real people and empathy with fictional characters are not structural but just qualitative. We will argue that in both cases empathy is a direct act of perceiving others and their lived experience. However, stemming from Stein's work, we will underline that empathy with real persons is *in principio* more vivid and intense than empathy with fictional characters. In order to identify similarities and differences between empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction, we will focus on the following issues: the quality of perception; the motivational context and the "life-world context"; the ontological status of persons vs. characters.

**Keywords** Direct perception of others · Eidetics of empathy · Fiction · Degrees and quality of experience · Qualitative ontology · Motivational and life-world contexts

## 1 Introduction

This paper deals with phenomenological distinctions between empathy with real persons on the one hand, and empathy with fictional characters on the other.

In the first section of the paper, we will focus on contemporary phenomenologically oriented accounts of the perception of others (Gallagher 2008; Krueger 2012; Overgaard 2012), based on Scheler's topic of «expressive unity» (Scheler 1913/1923) and, in the second section, on Edith Stein's account of empathy (1917). We will point out that in all these accounts the act of perceiving others is a direct one, in which others' lived experiences are given directly to us. Moreover, we will highlight that the contemporary accounts rightly underline the importance of face-to-face interactive contexts for most of our intersubjective encounters, but also recognize that there are cases, in reality as well as in fiction,

in which we understand others without face-to-face interaction and even without sharing their context. However, these contemporary theories do not provide us with an exhaustive account of the extent to which direct perception may still be valid in these non-face-to-face cases. We will point out that the latter are particularly interesting for distinguishing between the direct perception of others *de vivo* on the one hand, and in fiction, on the other hand. Indeed, when we are watching a movie or reading a novel, we have neither face-to-face interaction nor a shared spatiotemporal context with the characters; nonetheless, we will argue, we can still have direct perception of others.

In order to shed light on the similarities between non-face-to-face contexts and fiction on the one hand, and the differences between empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction on the other hand, we will turn to Stein's qualitative account of empathy, in which acts of empathy can vary in degrees of accomplishment: the act of perceiving others and their lived experiences can be more or less fulfilled.

Indeed, Stein outlines what we would like to call an "eidetics of empathy", where empathy is identified as a «type of *sui generis* perceiving acts» (Stein 1917, p. 20, En. Tr. 1964: 11, revised) and, we also suggest, as a whole that is subject to variations of its parts. The crucial point we

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make is that empathy varies according to the variation of its parts. Thus, there are different acts of empathy within the empathy-type, corresponding to different *fulfillment degrees* of empathy.

We will show that Stein's eidetics of empathy tackles what we label the "quality issue": the fact that in empathy the direct perceiving of the other and her/his lived experiences is characterized by gradualness and differences of intensity, and that these bring forth variations that remain internal to the empathy-type, and thus variations in which the direct perception feature is still valid.

In the third section of the paper, we will show that the quality issue is crucial for giving an account of the direct perception of others also in non-face-to-face encounters and consequently in fiction. In fact, our thesis is that the differences between empathy with real persons and empathy with fictional characters are not structural but just qualitative; in both cases, empathy is always a direct and intuitive act of perceiving the lived experience of the other, without imagination becoming a necessary condition.

In order to identify both the essential similarities and the essential differences between empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction, we will focus on the following issues: the quality of perception; the motivational context and the "life-world context"; the ontological status of real persons *vs.* fictional characters.

## 2 Contemporary Accounts of Direct Perception of Others

In this section, we will present some main theses of the direct perception account of our understanding of others—among which, the seminal *expressive unity* topic by Max Scheler. We will also focus on Gallagher's theory, since he presents two points that, according to us, are relevant to the issue of empathy with fictional characters: the importance of well-built possible worlds that constitute coherent contexts inhabited by the characters; the issue as to whether a direct perception account may still be valid in cases of non-face-to-face encounters, such as those with fictional characters.

### 2.1 Scheler's Legacy in Contemporary Accounts of Direct Perception of Others

In the contemporary debate on social cognition, several authors have referred to the thought of phenomenologists such as Stein (1917), Scheler (1913/1923), Husserl (1905–1920, 1921–1928), Schutz (1932), in order to propose a *direct perception (DP) model* of our understanding of others (Gallagher 2008; Zahavi 2010, 2014; Overgaard 2012; Krueger 2012).

Despite their differences, all versions of such a model started with a critical attitude towards the two well-known contemporary readings of social cognition, that is *theory–theory* (TT) (Baron-Cohen 1995; Gopnick and; Wellman 1992; Leslie 1987) and *simulation-theory* (ST) (Goldman 2006; Gordon 2005; Gallese 2001).<sup>1</sup>

What the proponents of the direct perception model criticize in TT and ST is a common assumption that arguably lies at the basis of both groups of theories. Krueger calls this assumption the "unobservability principle" (UP) (Krueger 2012, p. 149): the idea that the intentions, beliefs, desires and emotions of others cannot be *experienced* by us in a direct way; the experiences of others are perceptually inaccessible to anyone but their owner; the fact that we cannot live such experiences in the same way in which the subjects of those experiences can makes our access indirect and somehow mediated by other kinds of processes.<sup>2</sup>

Both TT and ST can be interpreted as (explicitly or implicitly) adopting this principle. The mental lives of others have to be *inferred* via the adoption of a theoretical apparatus (e.g. folk psychology theory), or *simulated* by the observer using his/her own mind as a model of the other's. In neither theory, others and their experiences are present and directly given to the observer.

Questioning the unobservability principle itself, contemporary defenders of the direct perception approach refer to classic phenomenology in arguing that, quite often, we do have direct perceptual access to the mentality of others. The idea, therefore, is that others and their minds are not inevitably hidden from the observer but can be grasped directly, without necessarily relying upon extra-perceptual cognitive mechanisms, such as inferences and simulations.

This theoretical position is defended by reconsidering what is properly *given* in our encounters with others. DP proponents often start from Scheler's idea according to which, in our encounter with the other, we are neither confronted with a mere body nor with a mere mind, but with

<sup>1</sup> The theories we will consider under the name of *Direct Perception Account* present some differences from one another and do not completely overlap in their theoretical stances. However, as we will see, because of the aspects they have in common and the ways they all differ from TT and ST, the proposed common label appears appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> Concerning our use of "experience", it is needed to make some terminological and conceptual clarifications. In the contemporary debate on social cognition, the expression "mental states" is more common than the one of "experiences". However, since the phenomenological theory of intentionality differentiates between "acts" and "states" because they are marked by different levels of positionality, we will prefer to use the more comprehensive and apt term "experiences" for both acts and states, and the whole class of mental phenomena. On the issue of the different positionality of intentional acts and states, which we cannot deal with here, see Husserl (1901: V LI), De Monticelli (forthcoming), De Vecchi (forthcoming).

a psycho-physical «*expressive unity*» [*Ausdruckseinheit*] (Scheler 1913/1923, p. 261). According to Scheler, what is originally given to us is the living organism as an individual *whole* or, better, as an individual bodily unity; it is only through a subsequent process of abstraction that we can «divide» this unity, focusing either “inward” or “outward” (Scheler 1913/1923, pp. 261–262).

Scheler calls the acts in which we encounter others and directly perceive their lived experiences “vicarious feeling” [*Nachföhlung*], referring with this term to what Husserl first, and then Stein, call “empathy” [*Einföhlung*].<sup>3</sup>

The basic idea in Scheler’s account is that *expressive phenomena* are what are primarily given to us and that our experience of them is our primary experience of the world we inhabit (Scheler 1913/1923, p. 244). This priority of the perception of expressive phenomena also means that our experience of a *living* world precedes our experience of the world as a mechanical and inanimate one.

Contemporary authors such as Gallagher and Zahavi (2008, pp. 181–187) insisted on this point to criticize UP, and Krueger and Overgaard (2012) also try to clarify *how* expressive phenomena can be considered as directly manifesting one’s experiences. They argue, for instance, that expressions can be considered as the visible *constitutive proper parts* of certain mental phenomena. The idea is that such mental phenomena, such as feelings or emotions, can be considered as having a complex hybrid structure, constituted both by internal aspects (e.g. the lived experience of the subject) and external ones (the bodily gestures and expressions) (Krueger and Overgaard 2012, pp. 250–258). In this sense, when we perceive expressive behavior and actions we do not perceive the external physical outputs of internal states, but rather proper parts of mental phenomena. In this way, we can have direct perceptual access to others and their experiences, since we have direct perceptual access to some of their proper parts (Krueger 2012, pp. 155–156).

## 2.2 Gallagher’s Smart Perception Theory

Insisting on perception’s ability to give us direct access to others and their experiences, Gallagher (2008) defines perception as *smart*. The basic idea is that, most of the time, perception is smart enough on its own, without the aid of other inferential or simulationist mechanisms, to deliver some sense of others’ intentions, feelings, desires. As in the case of visual perception where, for instance, I do not see just a certain red-colored unrecognized mass with a specific shape and then use some other cognitive mechanisms

to arrive at the experience of my car, but simply and directly see my car; similarly, most of the time, I do not need inferential or simulationist mechanisms to access others and their experiences, but can have a direct perceptual access to them (Gallagher 2008, pp. 536–538).<sup>4</sup> The idea here is that perception does not grasp just low-level properties such as color or physical bodily movements but also high-level aspects such as the kind of objects I am seeing (a car, another subject) and some of their properties.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, this also means that perception can be cognitively penetrated (e.g. I need to possess the concept of “car” to recognize that red object in front of me as a car, just as I need to know something about academic conferences in order to recognize what a group of people is doing in a university room). However, this does not necessarily mean that such a recognition is indirect and not perceptual.<sup>6</sup> Even though I need to master some concepts in order to see my car as “my car” or a group of people as “subjects discussing a scientific issue”, this does not make my access non-experiential, nor does it turn my car and the researchers in the room into a kind of unobservable or theoretically postulated objects.<sup>7</sup> This role of contextual information in a direct perception account of our understanding of others will turn out to be fruitful in our account of empathy with fictional characters. Indeed, the idea will be that the more the author provides us with information that makes the world inhabited by the characters a coherent context, the more we can have a direct perception of others in fiction.

Moreover, in defending his direct perception account, Gallagher particularly focuses on *interactive* contexts. Indeed, when speaking of the ordinary cases in which direct perception seems to suffice to understand others, he usually refers to cases of interaction, where the perceiving and the perceived subjects share the same world and are involved in face-to-face practices or even in mutual understanding (Gallagher 2008, p. 540). As he clarifies:

Indeed, in ordinary instances of interaction with others, I am not in the observer position; I am not off to the

<sup>3</sup> Both Stein (1917) and Scheler (1913/1923) recognize that the phenomenon that one calls “empathy” [*Einföhlung*] is the same that the other calls “vicarious feeling” [*Nachföhlung*].

<sup>4</sup> To be sure, Gallagher and other defenders of DP do not exclude that other processes, such as theoretical inference or simulation, may be used in our practices of understanding others. Rather, they just maintain that they are neither the ordinary nor the primary methods we employ. On this point, see Gallagher and Zahavi (2008, Ch. 9 *How we know others*), Gallagher (2008), Zahavi (2010).

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noticing that the psychological theory of *Gestalt* had already highlighted that in perception we do see structured wholes and not just their juxtaposed parts – as also Husserl underlined and applied in his theory of Parts and Wholes (Husserl 1890, Ch. XI § 11 *The Figural Moments*, pp. 215–222, 1901, III LI). For a re-evaluation of Gestalt’s contribution in phenomenology and philosophy of perception, see Smith and Mulligan (1982), De Monticelli (2018).

<sup>6</sup> See also Gallagher’s arguments about infants’ and children’s smart perception of others (Gallagher 2005, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> For a similar argument, see Zahavi (2010).

side thinking or trying to figure out what they are doing. Rather, I am responding to them in an embodied way. What we call social cognition is often nothing more than that social interaction (Gallagher 2008, p. 540).

However, even though interactive contexts are the most common ones in which we are involved in our everyday life, our understanding of others also happens in other circumstances. As Gallagher (2012) himself and also Zahavi (2010) recognize, there are cases in which we understand others without interacting face-to-face with them (e.g., when the other is not aware I am observing him/her in real life or when we read a story in a book or see a theatre performance).<sup>8</sup> But, in such cases, how can social cognition, intended as an embodied responding to others or as a social interaction, be realized? And, above all, is the direct perception model still valid in these cases, in which, such as in fiction, we do not share the same spatiotemporal context of the people we are looking at or reading about, and thus are unable to interact with them?<sup>9</sup>

We would like to respond positively to this question. However, we would also like to account for the phenomenological *differences* between our perceptions of those whose contexts we share and our experience of those who belong to different worlds—especially fictional ones.

Standard DP accounts do not seem to offer a theory of how this can be accomplished: in other words, how can we preserve a DP account of our experience of others, both in face-to-face encounters and in non-face-to-face encounters, such as in fiction, while at the same time accounting for the differences between these situations?

We suggest that Edith Stein's account of empathy, on the contrary, can provide us with a fruitful theoretical framework and the instruments to achieve this goal. In what follows, therefore, we will present Stein's account and then argue for the thesis that the differences between empathy with real persons and that with fictional characters are not structural but just qualitative.

### 3 Edith Stein's Eidetics of Empathy

In this section, we argue that Stein's account of empathy is an eidetics of empathy: an analysis of the "essence and forms of acts of empathy",<sup>10</sup> which is based on the eidetic

<sup>8</sup> For Zahavi's conception of empathy as a direct perceiving of others, see Zahavi (2001, 2007, 2010, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> See Zahavi's skeptical position on the actual possibility of empathy with fictional characters in Zahavi (2014: 151–152).

<sup>10</sup> By the expression "essence and forms of acts of empathy", we are of course paraphrasing the title of Scheler's book *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (1913/23), translated in English as *The Nature of Sympathy* (1973). Moreover, Stein herself titles the second section of her book on empathy *The essence of acts of empathy* [*Das Wesen der Einfühlungsakte*].

concepts of "whole", constituted by bounds to possible co-variations of its parts, "foundation" [*Fundierung*] and ontological dependence.<sup>11</sup>

The first claim we make is that, according to the eidetics of empathy, empathy is one type of acts that as a whole is subject to variations of its parts, and that the limits of possible co-variations of parts correspond to the essential structure of empathy: if co-variations of parts exceed their limits, then they become parts of phenomena which are other than empathy.

Moreover, the second claim we make about Stein's eidetics of empathy is that empathy is characterized by different degrees corresponding to different fulfilment stages, where every fulfilment stage involves a specific variation of parts of empathy, and consequently variations of acts of empathy.

Both claims will turn out to be very fruitful in helping to distinguish empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction. In dealing with Stein's eidetic of empathy, we aim to point out the instruments Stein provides for discovering the qualitative ontology of empathy.<sup>12</sup> We are convinced that the qualitative issue of empathy plays a very important role in accounting for the similarities and differences between empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction.

#### 3.1 The Type of Acts of Empathy

We aim to show that empathy is a specific type of acts of perceiving. This point exemplifies the eidetic claim that empathy is a whole, made up of parts that are subject to variations within the type-whole "empathy". The fact that empathy is a specific type of acts means that it is one type of acts irreducible to other types of acts—even those that are the most similar in the intersubjective and social landscape, such as sympathy and emotional sharing<sup>13</sup>—and that the empathy-type represents a set of acts grouping together single and individual acts of empathy, which can display modifications and variations of their parts. It needs to be stressed that what is mostly at stake here is that empathy is an act of direct

<sup>11</sup> Eidetics of empathy is an application to the phenomenon of empathy of Edmund Husserl's eidetics. It is worth noticing that Stein provides eidetic accounts also of other phenomena of the social reality, such as the state and law-making acts (Stein 1925); on this point see De Vecchi (2015) and De Vecchi (2017). On the husserlian concept of "eidetics" and the topic of constraints on possible co-variations of parts that define any whole as such, see Husserl (1901, III LI; 1913), and De Monticelli (2013).

<sup>12</sup> On the issue of qualitative ontology and, more specifically, in the social field, see De Vecchi (2016).

<sup>13</sup> On other acts, which are similar to empathy but are not empathy, see Stein 1917: 21–30; En. Tr. 1964: 12–18. More in general on the different types of acts that are protagonists of the social reality, see De Vecchi (2014).



perception of others and their lived experiences and that, even though it is one type of acts which are subject to modifications, its essential feature of being a direct perception of others remains still valid in all of these modifications.

In the second section «The essence of acts of empathy» [*Das Wesen der Einfühlungsakte*] of her book *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917), Stein affirms that empathy is a «basic type of acts in which the lived experiences of the other are grasped» [*Grundart von Akten in denen fremdes Erleben erfasst wird*] (Stein 1917, pp. 13–14; En. Tr. 1964: 6, revised). Other subjects and their lived experiences are the specific “field of competence” of empathy. Indeed, empathy is that type of acts in which we immediately perceive that there are others in the world (both as psycho-physical individuals and as persons<sup>14</sup>) who are constituted by living bodies [*Leib*] and are subjects of experiences as we are (Stein 1917, p. 12).

The crucial point Stein makes about the specificity of the type of acts of empathy is that empathy is a type of «original» [*originär*] acts, as they are performed *in prima persona* by the empathizing subject, but at the same time empathy is a type of acts whose content is not originally given [*nicht-originär*] (Stein 1917, pp. 15–16, 20; En. Tr. 1964: 5, 7–8, 11, revised): indeed, it belongs to the other, since it is the lived experience of the other that I grasp in empathy, and not mine (Stein 1917, p. 20).

Stein claims that empathy is a type of acts of perceiving but a *sui generis* one, since the content of such perceiving is the other and his/her lived experience. In empathy, we immediately perceive given data belonging to the lived experiences of the other, and this makes that perceiving a *sui generis* one, different from other acts of experiencing in which the lived experience is my own experience, as in the perception of material objects [*Wahrnehmung*]. In affirming that empathy is «a type of *sui generis* perceiving acts» [*Eine Art erfahrender Akte sui generis*] (Stein 1917, p. 20, En. Tr. Stein 1964: 11, revised), Stein points out that any lived experience is originally embedded in the living body of a subject, and thus empathy, as the type of acts of perceiving the lived experience of the other, is necessarily marked by a gap between me and the other. This is why in empathy perceiving is *sui generis*: it is not the standard kind of perceiving, the one we usually have, which is *in prima persona*. Stein’s definition of empathy preserves the boundary between me, the empathizing subject, and the

other, the empathized subject, correctly—a boundary that corresponds exactly to that between my living body and the living body of the other.

The fact that the lived experience of the other, which is perceived in empathy, is not originally given, does not imply at all that it is given to me in a mediated way; rather, empathy is an act of perceiving the lived experience directly, *hic et nunc*—without the need of inferences and simulation processes.<sup>15</sup> According to Stein, empathy as well as perception of material objects [*Wahrnehmung*].

[h]ave their object itself there, and meet it directly where it belongs, where it is anchored in the context of its being [*Seinszusammenhang*]. They need not represent it in order to draw it close (Stein 1917, p. 31; En. Tr. 1964: 19, revised)].

In general, we can legitimately wonder what precisely distinguishes acts whose content is originally given (e.g. perception of material object, self-perception, value-perception [*Wertwahrnehmung*], eidetical perception [*Wesensanschauung*]), from acts whose content is not originally given (empathy, imagination, memory, fancy, expectation). They have of course two different perspectives, *prima* and *secunda persona*, respectively. But there is an aspect highlighted by Stein that is very perspicuous and precious: it is the difference in the quality of the experience, which is more intense and vivid [*lebendig*] in the case of originally given contents, and paler and shadowy [*schemenhaft*] in the case of not originally given contents (see Stein 1917, p. 28; En. Tr. 1964: 17). We will argue that this point is also important for distinguishing empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction (see § 3).

Moreover, it is worth noticing that the fact that empathy is an act of perceiving involves that it is an act in which we *perceive* [*erfahren*] the given data of the other and his/her lived experiences, and it is not a «*mere knowledge*» [*bloßes Wissen*] about the other and his/her lived experiences. The difference between “knowing about the other” and “perceiving the other” is a crucial one: it distinguishes empathy from other acts by which we are informed about what the other is living—John tells me that Dan is sad. Unlike empathy, these signitive acts are lacking in given data: indeed, they are not acts of perceiving. This is a mark that distinguishes empathy

<sup>14</sup> According to phenomenology, persons are entities characterized by a layered structure, that is by a psychophysical layer marked by causal connections (such as in neurobiological functions, sensations, moods) and the layer of personhood marked by motivational connections (e.g. such as in volitional acts, affective acts, position-takings).

<sup>15</sup> On this point, see Stein’s arguments against both analogy and imitation theories of empathy (Stein 1917: 32–42). Stein mainly goes back here to the arguments presented by Scheler (1913/23: 43–66) on these issues. For a contemporary review and discussion of these topics and their connections to contemporary debate on intersubjective understanding, see Gallagher and Zahavi (2008, Ch. 9 *How we know others.*) Krueger (2012), Overgaard 2012. See also *supra* § 2.

essentially.<sup>16</sup> This mark is also very relevant in relation to fiction: we can perform genuine acts of empathy in fiction just because fiction, if it is well built, is not a sequence of information about this and that character but, rather, it is a narrative work in which we can perceive characters and their lived experiences, just as we do with persons in the real world. Our thesis is that also in fiction, and not just in the real world, we can directly perceive characters, without the need *in principio* to integrate empathy with imagination, inferences, simulation processes—as we will show (see § 3). In other words, our idea is that empathy in fiction is one of possible modifications of the empathy-type, a modification that preserves the essential features of its type, including, of course, the fundamental trait of direct perception.

### 3.2 Degrees of Empathy

Now we aim to show that empathy, as one specific type of acts, is a whole that is subject to modifications corresponding to possible co-variations of its parts. This means that modifications of the empathy-type are possible and that different acts of empathy can be performed. Consequently, different forms of empathy can be realized, all of them belonging to the empathy-type and maintaining the direct perception feature.

The main argument adduced by Stein rests on the discovery that there are different «degrees of accomplishment» [*Vollzugstufen*] of empathy—three, to be precise.

The *first* and basic *degree* of acts of empathy consists in the «arising of the lived experience» [*das Auftauchen des Erlebnisses*] of the other: for instance, «the sadness I see in another's face». At this first grade of empathy, I (the empathizing subject) have only a vague and empty perception of the lived experience of the other, which «faces me as an object».

The *second degree* is the moment of the fulfilling perception of the lived experience of the other: now I see the specific ontological status of the lived experience, and grasp its being something subjective that does not present itself to me as an object anymore. I perceive the lived experience of the other in its meaningful unity, in its motivational connection with the situation with respect to which the other is living that experience. This is the moment that Stein calls «fulfilling explication» [*erfüllende Explikation*] of the lived

experience of the other, and it represents the point of the highest proximity of the empathizing subject with respect to the empathized subject, the point where the empathizing subject is, so to speak, «pulled into» the lived experience of the other, and, from this new emplacement can turn to the object of the lived experience of the other, placing himself at [*bei*] the empathized subject (Stein 1917, p. 19, En. Tr. 1964: 10).

Finally, the *third degree* of fulfilment of acts of empathy is the moment of the «comprehensive objectification of the explained lived experience», in which, «after successfully executed clarification, does the lived experience again face me as an object» (Stein 1917, p. 19, En. Tr. 1964: 10, revised), and the empathizing subject comes back to his initial distance from the empathized subject.

The crucial point of Stein's analysis of «degrees of accomplishment» [*Vollzugstufen*] of acts of empathy is that they represent different «modalities of accomplishment» [*Vollzugsmodalitäten*] of these acts. Indeed, when we perform an act of empathy, we do not perform all of these degrees always, and we «are often satisfied with one of the lower ones» (Stein 1917, p. 19; En. Tr. 1964: 11). Consequently, empathy is not merely a type of acts we may or may not perform, but it is rather a type of acts that, if performed, can be accomplished in different modalities: either realizing all three stages of the performing process or limiting itself to the first one. In other words, we can perform acts of empathy that are fully achieved or partially achieved.

The fact that empathy is a type of acts that is subject to various modalities of fulfilment is a new and very important point for the ontological status of empathy and its key role in intersubjective and interpersonal relations. When we encounter others in the social landscape, we perform both complete and partial acts of empathy: sometimes we follow-up on the lived experience of the other, which we have previously only grasped vaguely and emptily (first stage), and thus we fully perceive her/his lived experience in its motivational context, in its meaningful unity (second stage)<sup>17</sup>; in other cases, we interrupt the process of accomplishment of acts of empathy, and stop the encounter with the other at the first step of empathy; in this case we have only a very rough perception of the lived experience of the other. In both cases, however, even when it is limited to the first and lowest level of accomplishment, empathy is the type of acts by which we encounter others directly: in fact, empathy is the type of acts in which we realize that there is another, facing

<sup>16</sup> This point is grounded on the phenomenological topic concerning the distinction between «intuitive content» of acts of experiencing (the given datum), on the one hand, and conceptual-propositional content of signitive acts. The distinction goes back *in primis* to Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (Husserl 1901). Stein deals with the difference between «perceiving the other» and «knowing about the other» in Stein (1917, § 4. *Der Streit zwischen Vorstellungs- und Aktualitätansicht*, pp. 30–33; En. Tr. 1964: 18–20).

<sup>17</sup> In saying that in the second and highest degree of empathy achievement we fully perceive the experience of the other, we do not claim, of course, that we have an exhaustive and complete experience of him/her. Indeed, the empathized subject, as perceptual object, always has a transcendence, an excess of being, with respect to what we can experience of him/her.

us. The encounter with the other may then have a follow-up and be developed and transformed in an interpersonal and interactive relation, be it an extemporaneous or stable one, in virtue of iterated and mutual acts of empathy (Stein 1917, p. 30, En. Tr. 1964: 18).

The idea that there are different degrees and forms of empathy turns out to be a very fruitful avenue for investigating empathy in fiction and pointing out the relation between empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction (their essential similarities and distinctions), as we will show in the next section of the paper (see § 3).

It is in any case crucial for us to highlight that in Stein's analysis of degrees of empathy, the encounter with the other in empathy does not require *in principio* any interaction between the empathizing subject and the empathized subject. This is a very salient point about the conditions of possibility for empathy: what is necessary in order for acts of empathy to be performed is that there is an empathizing subject facing an empathized subject, but no genuine interaction is needed. I, the empathizing subject, can perform acts of empathy with respect to others who are not even aware of my acts. This point, then, shows that it is possible to perform acts of empathy and even fulfil them, in all their degrees of accomplishment, without any sort of interaction by the empathized subject. It is plain that this point is crucial for accounting for empathy with fictional characters who are not able, typically, to enter into an interactive relation with us (with a few exceptions, such as *The purple rose of Cairo* by Woody Allen (1985) or *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello (1921)).

## 4 Empathy *De Vivo* and Empathy in Fiction

In this section, we aim at developing how the theoretical frameworks and the topics we have discussed can be used to argue for the main thesis we defend, i.e. that the differences between empathy *de vivo* and in fiction are not structural, but qualitative. Indeed, there are no structural differences because empathy in fiction, as well as empathy *de vivo*, is subject to three accomplishment degrees, depending on the fulfillment stage of the perception of others. In other terms, in both empathy in fiction and empathy *de vivo*, we can perform various different acts of empathy with higher or lower degrees of achievement and, therefore, either fully perceive the lived experience of the fictional character and grasp its motivational context or just have a vague and rough perception of what she/he is experiencing.

However, between empathy *de vivo* and in fiction, there are qualitative differences because they differ in principle in the *intensity* of the experience: stronger with respect to real persons, weaker with fictional characters.

As we already mentioned (see *supra* § 0.), in order to pinpoint the similarities and differences between empathy *de vivo* and in fiction, we will tackle three main issues: the quality of perception, the motivational context and “life-world” context, the ontological status of real persons vs. fictional characters.

### 4.1 The Quality of Perception

Empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction mainly differ in the quality of the experience.

We suggest applying to both empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction Stein's insight about the qualitative differences between first-person perspective experiences and empathy (i.e. between originally given contents and non-originally given contents). The point highlighted by Stein is that the lived experience of the other, say joy or sufferance, which is perceived in acts of empathy, is qualitatively inferior to the experience, say joy or sufferance, lived in *prima persona*. The experience of the other in empathy is «shadowy» [*schemenhaft*] and not alive, not originally mine, while my own experience is «lively in the flesh» [*leibhaft-lebendig*]; the former is less-defined and vaguer, the latter is better-defined and fine-grained (see Stein 1917, p. 28; En. Tr. 1964: 17).

Analogously, empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction are marked by these qualitative differences: taking for granted the structure identity between empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction, the latter is in principle less vivid and powerful than the former. This is due to the fact that fictional characters are not just other than us, with their lived experience embodied in their own living bodies and not in ours (as in the case of empathy *de vivo* with respect to experience *in prima persona*), but they also belong to another world, another spatiotemporal context. In other terms, fictional characters are here and now while I am empathizing with them watching a movie or reading a novel; but this “here and now” is placed in another world (i.e. the fictional one and not the actual, real one in which I am now living) and, thus, there is an insuperable gap between this world and mine.

### 4.2 The Motivational Context and “Life-World Context”

We would like to distinguish between motivational context and «life-world» [*Lebenswelt*]<sup>18</sup> context, which are both crucial in defending the idea of empathy with fictional characters.

As regards the motivational context we refer to Stein's account, according to which the highest degree of empathy is that in which we fully perceive the lived experience of

<sup>18</sup> See Husserl (1936).

the other grasping it in its *motivational context*, i.e. in its meaningful unity with the situation from which it arises.

In applying this to empathy in fiction, where we do not share the same spatiotemporal context with the other, we argue that the more the motivational context is well-constructed and well-woven by the author of the fiction, the higher the accomplishment degree of empathy. More precisely, through a good display of the motivational context of the character provided in the narrative by the author, the reader or the spectator is able to achieve the second and highest degree of fulfillment of empathy. This implies that the role of the author in enabling the spectator to achieve such a high level of empathy is crucial: it depends on the author's ability and intention to display all that is needed for providing a setting that is as complete as possible (of course, it may be that the author has a specific narrative strategy that does not require all parts of the characters' motivational context to be presented, in order to make his/her characters more mysterious and enigmatic).

By the expression "life-world context", in going back to Husserl's concept of «life-world» [*Lebenswelt*], we mean the context made up by the common and everyday-life world, which is the world we inhabit with others, as marked by a sharing of habits and meanings that constitutes the background of our lives and practices.

As Gallagher proposes (Gallagher 2008, p. 540), our perception of others can be smart if it is informed, among other things, by this "life-world context". Our idea is also that, in a world filled with cultural meanings, such a context can be defined as the background context, or condition of possibility, of the motivational context itself. Indeed, in these cases, the motivational connections of our lived experiences that constitute our motivational context are framed in a broader context of habits, shared practices, social and cultural norms. Let us think, for instance, of the anxiety of a passenger in a train, motivated by the fact that he/she cannot find his/her ticket while the controller is approaching. I can empathize with the passenger's anxiety fully, achieving the second accomplishment degree of empathy, if I grasp that the motive of the anxiety is the lost ticket and if I share that set of norms and cultural meanings that inform his/her life-world context (e.g. if my perception is informed by the fact that passengers on trains must have their valid tickets with them).

The point that is interesting for us here is to apply this idea to the case of empathy in fiction. In this case, in fact, the author himself has to provide the reader/spectator with a sufficiently well construed life-world context, that is with a coherent plot of meanings and references that enable the reader/spectator to grasp the life-world of the characters. Only in this case will the reader/spectator be able to empathize with the characters themselves. Moreover, the more distant the context of the fiction is from that of the reader/

spectator, the richer and more detailed the plot has to be in order for the act of empathy to be accomplished (e.g. science fiction, fantasy, historical novels and movies).

It is worth noting furthermore that, endorsing Gallagher's (2008) and Zahavi's (2010, 2014) position, we maintain that our perception of others can be culturally informed and still remain an experiential direct act in which the other is present and not just theoretically postulated.

### 4.3 The Ontological Status of Real Persons vs. Fictional Characters

Even though real persons and fictional characters do have a different ontological status, we maintain that empathy with fictional characters can still be considered as an act of direct perception of others.

As for the ontological differences between persons and characters, it is worth underlining that fictional characters, unlike real persons, are constitutively both unable to interact with us under any perspective and to share with us the same spatiotemporal context.

Moreover, while real persons are infinite sources of given data, which we can experience *immer wieder, immer weiter*, fictional characters are instead limited sources of given data; indeed, fictional characters present the given data that the author of the fiction offers to the experience of the reader or spectator. This means that, unlike real persons, fictional characters are not distinguished by the same kind of transcendence as real persons. Let us think, for instance, of the fact that our understanding of the personal identity of others is an endless process.<sup>19</sup> This also involves that fictional characters cannot dissimulate their affective states in the same way as real persons. Indeed, a real person can dissemble with us and, in empathizing with her, we can realize that she is dissembling; while, a fictional character cannot dissemble with us even though, in empathizing with him/her, we may realize that he/she is dissembling with the other characters in their own fictional world.<sup>20</sup> Obviously, fictional characters may be mysterious and enigmatic but the point we make about dissembling is another one, namely that the fictional character is not able to show to us an experience he/she is not actually living here and now while we are empathizing with him/her. We may subsequently discover that she/he was not actually living that experience but this does not modify our original act of empathy. Moreover, since characters do not have the same kind of transcendence that persons have, there is a limited possibility for us both to verify and correct our acts of empathy on the one hand, and to be misled

<sup>19</sup> On this point, see De Monticelli (2008).

<sup>20</sup> Stein tackles the issue of dissimulation and empathy in Stein (1917, pp. 68–72).



in our perception of the lived experience of the characters on the other.

Our thesis is that we can account for these ontological differences by once again referring to the main thesis we have been positing in this paper, i.e. that the difference between empathy with real persons and empathy with fictional characters is a qualitative one, consisting in different degrees of vividness and intensity, higher with real persons, lower with fictional characters.

**Authors' contributions** FDV, FF: Wrote Introduction and Empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction. FDV: Wrote Edith Stein's Eidetics of Empathy. FF: Wrote Contemporary Accounts of Direct Perception of Others (nevertheless these paragraphs are the product of a joint revision).

### Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** Francesca De Vecchi declares that she has no conflict of interest. Francesca Forlè declares that she has no conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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