***Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, Volume 28 (2021), No. 3, pp. 209-221**

Trying To Bridge the Divide: A Phenomenological Footnote Regarding the Dichotomy Between Empathy and Reasoning

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In this paper, we discuss the historical relationship between empathy and reasoning from a historical and philosophical (continental and Western philosophy) point of view. We explain how empathy has lost its original aesthetic connotations through its journey from one language and culture to another. Nowadays, we often find a quite reduced understanding of empathy in psychology or education. Following this historical overview and opening up the notion of empathy to its aesthetic origins, we then apply a phenomenological lens and argue that reasoning and perspective-taking are interrelated with empathy, if we understand the importance of human embodiment: We argue that any reasonable argument relies on the fact that we indwell the world through a similar body. It is within this nexus of similarity and difference of embodiment and perceptions that our experiences can interlace. With this argument, we are hoping to address the distrust towards empathy as well as break open simplified conceptualizations of empathy in education towards a more complex understanding of this phenomenon.

Contemporary Educational and Political Context

While the eighties were dominated by a "glorification of greed" (Prange, 2006), it seems that we have now entered an "Age of Empathy," as the ethology and empathy expert Frans de Waal claims in his book (2010). During the past ten years, several intervention programs with the goal of fostering empathy among children and youth (e.g., *FRIENDS for Life*, Barrett, 2004; *Roots of Empathy*, Gordon, 1996; *MindUp,* Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010) have been developed. Focusing on children's social-emotional well-being, these programs have tried to counterbalance antisocial tendencies of indifference, competition, or avarice *before* emotional and behavioural health problems emerge. However, and as de Waal argues, empathy is not only beneficial for human well-being at the personal level, it is also important for the larger society at the public level. In fact, it is the key element that holds our society together: a society that seems to become increasingly heterogenic, while the rights and freedom of the individual are claimed sacred. Roman Krznaric (2015) makes a similar argument in his report on the "empathy-effect," in which he emphasizes that empathy can create togetherness and build relationships. He laments that we are at a time in human history when we tend to focus more on the conflicts that divide us rather than on the relationships that bind us (2015, p. 4ff). As an example, we can witness the political climate that has arisen in the US during the past years. Instead of understanding the fight against the pandemic or climate change as a common goal that has the power to bring the country together, these topics are used to highlight the differences, instilling hatred and distrust.

This doubt in the ability of people to transcend their own interests and instead make decisions driven by empathy and the common good has existed since Plato. It has been one of the major criticisms against democratic forms of government.[1] By contrast, more optimistic thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasize the ability of citizens to vote according to the "volonté générale" (i.e., to shift our mental frames from the "me" to the "we"), which Rousseau saw as being at the heart of democracy (Rousseau, 1782/1935). And while Rousseau believes in the "good nature" of humankind, contemporary political theorist Hannah Arendt emphasizes the need to cultivate empathy through imagination: Instead of focusing on national identities based on heritage, race, or religion (i.e., differences that are tied to one's past), she suggests focusing on the dreams and visions we share. Through this kind of engagement with one another, we might be able to develop a future vision of a "complex society" (Weber, 2013b), in which we empathize through similarities while allowing ourselves to be inspired by our differences.[2] In summary, empathy has often been seen by political theorists as the silver bullet that might allow our thinking to shift from a "self-interest frame" to a "common-interest frame." And while more recently the notion of empathy has attracted some attention from political philosophy and psychology, its reputation has not always been that positive. As we look into the history of ideas, it becomes evident that many philosophers deeply distrusted empathy and tried to argue for philosophical reasoning or "rationality" instead.

In this paper, we will first engage with the historical development of the notion of empathy in relationship to reasoning. On this basis, we will apply a phenomenological lens in order to explore how (despite the existing dichotomy) reasoning,[3] empathy, and perspective-taking are interrelated. To do this, we firstly will describe empathy as a more complex term. In a second step, we will unfold the role of human embodiment for our ability to empathize and reason: We argue that any reasonable argument relies on the fact that we indwell the world through a similar body. This similarity allows us to share the emotional context of our experiences (empathy) or our seeing the world from a different point of view (perspective-taking). And within this nexus of "similarity of embodiment" and "difference of perceptions," our experiences can interlace, inspire one another, and create understanding. This realization of similarities and differences allows us to call ourselves into question and become aware that the world could be understood in a different way. In the end, this argument contradicts the reduction of empathy to an immediate, uncontrollable emotional reaction or any similarly simplifying construct. Instead, it calls for more thoughtful cultivation of empathy, entailing aesthetics as well as democratic dialogues.

The Historical Discourse Around Reasoning and Empathy

To date, there are a number of words used to describe "reasoning" or "thinking" in opposition to "empathy." Among these are the more complex terms like "philosophical reasoning" (German: *Vernunft*), which embraces various connotations like pure reasoning, practical reasoning, moral reasoning, moral judgement, and so forth. By contrast, the term "rationality" (German: *Rationalität*) is already narrower because of its etymological link to "reckoning" in a mathematical way, while "critical thinking" usually entails logical reasoning, objective analysis, and structures of arguments. In

[1] See the extensive criticism of democracy in Plato's *Republic*.

[2] And while Plato was highly critical of the democracy as a form of government, he expressed a similar vision in his *Republic* in which he aimed for a plurality in unity (Plato, 375 BCE/1998). This notion was tied to his understanding of justice: giving everyone the opportunity to do what they are best at.

[3] In this paper, and despite the historical complexities, we will use the term "philosophical reasoning" or "reasoning" over "moral reasoning" or "rationality." We do this in order to stay open towards the various understandings of reasoning and rationality that have developed throughout the history of ideas.

psychology, the word "cognition" is more prevalent and refers to mental actions or processes in the brain that are involved in acquiring knowledge or gaining understanding. These seemingly small differences are important when used in relationship to empathy (see, amongst others, Bermes, Henckmann, & Leonardy, 2003; Meier-Seethaler, 1997; Simon-Schaefer 2001; Weber 2013b). For the following description, we use the term "philosophical reasoning" to embrace its complexity as much as possible.

And while "philosophical reasoning" has a long history, the English word "empathy" is relatively young: it is a recent Western word-creation that was constructed from Ancient Greek roots. In Ancient Greek itself, the word "empathy" was only used when a person was passively affected by something in an emotional way. This feeling or emotion was different from the receiver's emotions and could be experienced as negative or even unpleasant. This entails negative connotations like *pathetic*, *prejudice*, or *spitefulness*. Moreover, "empathy" had no ethical or aesthetical connotations.[4] Instead of "empathy," the Ancient Greek language uses the word "sympathy,"[5] which literally means to feel or suffer *together with* somebody. It entails the idea that two or more people are "within" a feeling together, influencing one another or "entering" an emotional "atmosphere." This suggests that although the term "empathy" is rather new, the idea of "feeling with another person" is an ancient one. In what is to follow, we will focus on the Western history of this idea,[6] knowing that this concept plays a role in almost every known culture and religion.

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[4] With gratitude for this reference to my esteemed colleague at the University of British Columbia, Michael Griffin:

[empathēs] ἐμπαθ-ής , ές,

A. in a state of emotion, *Arist. Insomn.460b7* (Comp.); ἐ. τινι much affected by or at a thing, *Plu. Alex.21*; "πρὸς τὰ θεῖα" Id.2.1125d; ἐ. φιλία passionate affection, *Alciphr.2.4.12*; τὸ ἐ. sentiment, emotion, Plu.2.25d. Adv. -θῶς with deepemotion, ["τὴνδεξιὰν] πιέσας" *Plb.31.24.9*; passionately, "αἰτιάσασθαί τινα" *J.AJ16.4.2*: Comp. "-έστερον ἔχειν πρός τι" *Plu.Cic.6*; -εστέρως dub. in *Phld.Oec.p.42* J.: Sup. "-έστατα" *Plu.2.668c*; "-έστατα παρεστηκότες τῇ φιλοσοφίᾳ" *Vit.Philonid.*p.9C.

II. opp. ἀπαθής, subject to passivity, *Plot.4.7.13,5.9.4*; opp. ἐνδρανής, *Procl.Inst.80*.

III. Rhet., pathetic, *D.H.Dem.21*. Adv. "-θῶς, εἰρηκέναι" *Demetr.Eloc. 28*.

IV. Gramm., modified, inflected, *A.D.Synt.47.16*.

(From Thesaurus Linguae Graecae. (n.d.). [Word]. In *Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek–English Lexicon*, online, retrieved 4 October 2021)

[5] **[sumpathēs]** συμπαθ-ής , ές,

A. affected by like feelings, sympathetic, "οὐδεὶς ὁμαίμου -έστερος φίλος" *Pl.Com.192*; "ς. ἐστιν ὁ ἀκροατὴς τῷ ᾄδοντι" *Arist.Pr.921a36*,
cf. *Pol.1340a13*; πρὸς τὰ γεννηθέντα συμπαθέστεραι μᾶλλον αἱ μητέρες γίνονται [τῶν τιτθῶν] *Sor.1.87*, cf. *88*.

2. exerting mutual influence, interacting, "ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμασυμπαθῆ" *Arist.Phgn.808b19*, cf. *Epicur.Ep.1p.20U.*; νεῦρα ἀλλήλοις ς. *AP*11.352 (Agath.); sensitive to influence, "τὸ ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ θερμόν . . -έστατον" *Arist.PA653b6*, cf. *Thphr.CP1.7.4*; of the members of an organism, *Hp.Alim.23*, *Plot.4.5.8*; "ὁ κόσμος σύμπνους καὶ ς. αὐτὸςαὑτῷ" *Chrysipp.Stoic.2.264*; exciting sympathy, "χερῶν ς. ὑπτιασμός" Phld.R*h.*1.52 S., cf. *D.H.2.45*: Sup., *PHerc.*176p.39V.
3. of planets, in concord, *Vett.Val.37.14*; defined by Serapio in *Cat.Cod.Astr.*8(4).226.

II. Adv. -θῶς sympathetically, *Phld. Lib.p.37* O., *Cic.Att.12.44.1*; "τῇ σελήνῃ" *Str.3.5.8*; "ς. ἔχειν πρός τινα" *J.AJ7.10.5*; "-έστερον ἐρᾶσθαι" *Arist.Mir.846b9*, cf. Plu.2.3c; "-έστατα" IG12(2).58b33 (Mytil., 1 B.C.). (From Thesaurus Linguae Graecae. (n.d.). [Word]. In Online *Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek–English Lexicon*, online, retrieved 4 October 2021)

[6] Once again, this is only an abbreviated and simplified version. A more complete analysis can be found in Weber 2013b.

We find one of the first attempts to define "sympathy" in Aristotle's work, in which partial identification with the other is a key element. In the *Rhetoric* (1385b), he writes: "Sympathy [is] a kind of pain excited by the sight of evil, deadly or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it; an evil one might expect to come upon itself or one of his friends, and when it seems nearby. For it is evident that one who is likely to feel sympathy must be such as to think that he, or one of his friends, is liable to suffer some evil, and such an evil as has been stated in the definition, or one similar, or nearly similar" (1965). In this context, we also discover the ideas of *mimesis* (i.e., imitation, representation) and *catharsis* (i.e., purification, cleansing)—both of which are central to Greek theatre. Especially in Ancient Greece, sympathy played a core role in understanding all aesthetic forms of expression, such as poems, architecture, theatre, and the like (see Volkert, 1905–14). In this sense, sympathy was seen as essential for understanding all art forms, while vice versa, the exposure to artistic expressions was assumed to cultivate sympathy. Similarly, sympathy was crucial for the appropriate interpretation of divine signals, and thus is related closely to the origins of hermeneutics.

In terms of morality or moral reasoning, the most famous juxtaposition of "reasoning" and "sympathy"/"benevolence" occurred in Scotland around 1750, when David Hume (1739–40/2000, 1751/2007) interpreted "sympathy" as a moral feeling. Hume argued that passions were the motor of all our deeds: without passions, we would simply not be motivated to act or even to reason in the first place. This led him to his famous claim that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions" (Hume, 1740/2000, T II.3.3, 415). As a consequence, "sympathy" became the fundamental criterion for moral actions for some time. This was severely challenged by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1785–88/1963), who argued for "practical reasoning" being at the core of a principle-based morality. He argued, and against Hume, that if we act only according to our emotional inclinations (even if this inclination is in accordance with our practical reasoning), this action cannot be called moral. Instead, an action can only be called truly moral if we act according to our inner moral law (categorical imperative) and against our inclinations.[7] This was an important differentiation and created a stark dichotomy between sympathy on the one side and practical reasoning on the other, which lasted for over a century. And it was not until the early twentieth century that a slow "renaissance" of *Mitgefühl* (i.e., feeling *with* someone) started to emerge. First and foremost, Max Scheler (1912/1973) and Theodor Lipps (1903) emphasized the moral and aesthetic impact of *Mitgefühl* or *Einfühlung* (i.e., feeling *into* someone), especially in relationship to understanding literature. Using the German word for sympathy, they were able to draw out the multiple connotations of "feeling into" or "feeling with" someone. The term was no longer limited to the moral inclination to help out of "compassion" for the other's suffering, but rather expanded to all emotional states, including happiness, surprise, anger, pain, sadness, etc.

During the twentieth century, this revitalization of the notion of *Mitgefühl* spread to English-speaking countries. This was when Titchener (1909) coined the neologism "empathy" by translating the German word *Einfühlung* into English.[8] Around this time, the notion of "empathy" attracted the interest of other specialists such as psychologists, sociologists, and pedagogues. In the following years, researchers began to explore the interrelationships between emotions, intelligence, and social behaviour (Goleman, 1995; Greenspan, 1979), and thus, the connection between empathy (as a measurable behaviour) and cognition has been reconsidered; yet now from a psychological or sociological perspective (Dalgleish & Power, 1999; de Waal, 2010), empathy is seen as a pro-social *behaviour* within the social science (see, for example, Eisenberg & Fabes, 1991, and later, Preston & de Waal, 2002). More recently, the re-evaluation of empathy has led to a large number of experimental studies that examine the development of social and emotional competencies (such as perspective-taking and

[7] See Tiefenbacher (2009) for a more detailed analysis of the debate between Kant and Hume on morality.

[8] Other sources (see Wind, 1963) say that Robert Vischer used the term in 1873 when he talked about aesthetics and perception (see Eisenberg & Strayer, 1989, p. 17).

empathy) in relation to promoting children's overall well-being. Especially during the last decades, psychology has witnessed a shift from merely treating weaknesses and mental health problems to taking a strength-based approach, investigating the enhancement of positive qualities and preventing or heading off problems before they arise (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentimihalyi, 2000). Along with the positive psychology movement, a large number of current theoretical and empirical literature supports a social-emotional competence perspective in which children with positive social and emotional skills, including empathy and perspective-taking, develop into healthy adults when faced with challenging, stressful, and complex situations (Greenberg, et al., 2003; Jerabek, 1998; Kinman & Grant, 2010; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2009; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010; Schonert-Reichl & Oberle, 2011; Waechtler, 2012). In other words, empathy has new popularity, but it remains reduced to an observable "behaviour" of an individual.

In education, some have tried to retrieve the complexity of empathy, leading to a more differentiated understanding of empathy. Among those is cultural policy expert Megan Boler, who explains how "passive empathy" can deceive us into denying power relations or any manifestations of social injustice within society. It can create a pitfall, which too often recognizes the other solely at the personal level, thinking that "walking in the other's shoes" is all that matters. But as Boler (1997, p. 263) says, in order to truly understand injustice, we have to move beyond passiveness and didactic ways of eliciting empathy by "situating oneself in relation to that suffering" and recognizing our own implication in that suffering. The philosopher Charles Bingham (2006) looks at Boler's idea of passive empathy and social injustice through the lens of "recognition" and applies it to the context of education. He states that "students should be encouraged to identify the oppressive power relations that have made empathy necessary in the first place" (p. 338). This initial need for recognizing the other has to be understood and addressed. In addition to recognizing oppressive power relations, Boler suggests taking action and calls this her "pedagogy of discomfort." That is, we should walk not only in the other's shoes, but in our own shoes thereafter and take a stand. The latter is not easy and entails significant discomfort. Acknowledging the complexity of empathy, Susan Verducci (2000) describes the domination of the cultivation of empathy in schools prescribed by the curriculum. And, like Boler, she warns that empathy must not only be cultivated through texts. Instead, meaningful cultivation involves responding to others' needs and understanding the ways those needs have been shaped. While curriculum, and in particular texts/literature, may prepare students for moral interactions, they cannot create the conditions for fully understanding the experiences of others. That is, feeling another's pain and practising projective empathy is limited regarding what is morally required of them.

de Waal (2010) has also tried to retain some of the complexity of empathy by identifying at least three layers. The first layer is emotional contagion, in which the flush of emotions runs through a group of people during a dramatic event. The next layer is feeling for others, our empathetic response when we see another's predicament. The third layer is "targeted helping," the ability to feel the way another does. This complexity, however, is often reduced or pushed to one side or the other. For example, if the argument is to condemn empathy, we observe a reduction of empathy to a passive, uncontrollable emotional contagion. Vice versa, when an argument is to be made for the benefits of empathy, then empathy becomes the engine for our moral actions (see Hume's argument).

A very recent example of this can be found in Paul Bloom's (2016) book, *Against Empathy*, in which he reduces empathy to a kind of reflex or immediate and uncontrollable emotional contagion. He consequently argues that empathy stands in the way of a reason-based morality and productive decision-making that is healthier for both the individual and society – an argument as old as the dispute between Hume and Kant.[9] Other critical voices can be heard from some feminist scholars like Sara

[9] As shown above, this is a very old argument and can be traced back throughout the history of philosophical ideas.

Ahmed (2014), whose argument is more nuanced, exploring how emotions are used in narrations to manipulate political decision-making. Whereas Lauren Berlant (2004) makes us aware of the underlying disregard for the other when we help out of "compassion." She criticizes that all it does is keep our guilty conscience at ease, which allows us to retain the structures of inequality in place. Berlant (2004) writes, "compassion can be said to be at the heart of this shrinkage, because the attendant policies relocate the template of the justice from the collective condition of specific populations to that of the individual, whose economic sovereignty the state vows to protect" (p. 1ff). Consequently, compassion leads to an asymmetrical positioning between different social classes, thereby sustaining the injustice that has led to the misery in the first place.

As we have seen above, this distrust towards empathy comes and goes like the tides, alongside our changing definitions (and its relationship to philosophical reasoning or rationality). Using a phenomenological lens, we are trying to disclose the various emotional, embodied, and cognitive aspects of empathy (Weber, 2013b) and loosen some of the gridlocked discourses, especially regarding the assumed dichotomy of empathy and philosophical reasoning. This impacts the cultivation of empathy, the understanding of morality, and the role of empathy in the public space.

Towards a Phenomenological Understanding of Empathy

Already at the turn of the last century, Scheler (1912/1973) and Lipps (1903) stated that we ought to see empathy as – what we call it – a "cloud-term" that embraces a variety of emotional states, thoughts, and bodily experiences. They believed that every theory of emotions is a reduction of a complex lived experience. In the subsequent decades, existentialists and phenomenologists have tried to revitalize the various aspects of empathy and reconsider its relationship with philosophical reasoning and embodiment (Fink-Eitel & Lohmann, 1993; Hamburger, 1985; Mensch, 2003; Schmitz, 1981; Solomon, 1976, 2004; Weber 2013b). In the following, we will highlight some exemplary dimensions[10] that can help us understand the broader context within which empathy occurs.

Firstly, emotions are never "pure," but rather always appear as "mixed feelings." For example, if a person feels sadness, then this designation just "points towards" a vague direction, yet never "captures" the complexity of the actual emotional state (Stein, 1917). Sadness is never *just* sadness, but can also be, for example, disappointment, frustration, longing, and/or melancholia. No sadness ever feels exactly like another sad situation. Rather, feelings intertwine, flood, and ebb, and create a complex melody of an emotional being towards and within the world.

This already refers to the second layer of complexity: No emotion is static, but rather unfolds through time. This means that we might start with an emotional and sensual experience, such as a shock; but as we withdraw from the immediacy of our reaction and come to awareness about what just happened, another wave of emotions unravel. An analogy would be the experience of viewing a painting, in which the observer slowly discovers the many details, shades, and nuances of a drawn scene while their eyes wander from one aspect of the image to the next.

Regarding empathy, this becomes even more complex, because here we enter a social situation of at least one person relating to *another* person's set of emotions: we now not only experience sadness ourselves, but moreover we also experience *another* person's sadness from the outside. At this point, Scheler (1912/1973) makes some important distinctions: At first, we might feel an immediate and embodied experience of the other's feelings, almost like an emotional contagion. However, we do not really feel the otherness of the other in this moment. An example is when a friend cuts their finger, and we grab our own finger in shock. In a second attempt, we might then feel inclined to help the other in

[10] These are just some representative dimensions of empathy; the scope of the paper does not allow for a deeper phenomenological analysis. For further information, see Weber, 2013b.

their misery or pain. Both are emotional reactions, but while the first remains within the individual, the second is intentional and might be called "moral." To go back to Kant and Hume to clarify the differences of their argument: For the former, an action brought on by an emotional inclination cannot be called "moral," while for the latter, reason is the "slave" of the emotions. Consequently, Kant believes that reason is active while emotions are passive, while Hume believes the reverse. Both fail to see emotions unfolding in time, embracing an array of actions, reactions, affections, and intentions.

However, instead of a moral response (i.e., trying to help the other), we can also imagine a person being in too much *distress* so that she removes herself from the situation. In that case, we feel *with* the other person, but our own reaction is too overwhelming to actually enable us to help. The German psychologist Philipp Lersch (1962) adds to these variations of empathy and suggests that even if we do *not* have an immediate bodily-emotional response to the other's pain, we can still act morally. This is what Bloom (2016) calls "rational compassion" – meaning, we rationally understand that the other person is in discomfort and therefore we decide to help. In this case, instead of an emotional inclination to help, the person experiences a kind of cognitive dissonance that prevents her from remaining passive.

Scheler (1912/1973) further argues that we never exactly feel what the other feels – for example, we do not suddenly have a toothache because the other has a toothache. Instead, he argues, we are in pain over the other's pain (e.g., her pained face) or happy for the other's happiness (e.g., her smile). Our empathetic feeling "for" the other is, in his view, a second-order feeling. By contrast, Edith Stein (1917) postulates that we *do* have immediate access to the happiness or pain of the other. For example, the other's toothache can indeed provoke a toothache within me, or the other's happiness can drift into my own body. This is so because, for Stein, empathy is always experienced as present in the here and now. It is not a product (second hand) that occurred due to a cause, but it happens to us, or we find ourselves experiencing it. In order to find a middle ground here, we need to keep in mind that empathy arises across time and embraces a variety of feelings. Thus, one could argue that Stein and Scheler each highlight only one aspect on the broad spectrum of what we call "empathy."

Empathy, Reasoning, and Embodiment: Between Similarity and Difference

> All interactions are dynamic and more complex than might appear at first glance, and that it is the pursuit of understanding, rather than a pre-conceived function of its end, that allows one to recognize another in their full complexity, acknowledging nuances of similarity and alterity both.
> – Polina Kukar, in response to Edith Stein

In this debate between Stein and Scheler, we can already intuit the problem arising, whether or not we are able to empathize with the experiences of the other. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler (2005) explores this discussion in more depth. She sees the self as being in relation to a given social context. That is to say, our self-understanding, as well as our understanding of the other, is shaped and mitigated by dynamic social forces. Emphasizing the limits of self-knowledge, she states that the self is formed within a normative structure, which is beyond the control of the self. This limits the self from providing a full account to the other whom it addresses, and therefore, not all experiences can be completely understood by everyone: "There are certain realms of experiences that are not available to a given individual but are lived by others" (Kukar, 2016, p. 7). Or, in other words, we have to acknowledge that we always have *limited capacity* to empathize with another's experience as human beings. Consequently, empathy is never complete but rather occurs on a continuum. In what is to follow, we will explore the role of the body in this process of understanding while emphasizing the notions of similarity and difference.

According to the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the body is the primary source of knowing. In his late and unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1964/1986) writes: "One can say that we perceive the things themselves, that we are the world that thinks itself / or that the world is at the heart of our flesh … [T]here is a ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside" (p. 136).

For Merleau-Ponty, we are visible beings who see, we are feeling beings who can be felt by others, and we are embodied beings who understand the world through the medium of the body. Both the acquisition of language and the learned engagement with the world occur through the body and within a social setting. For example, although a baby has not seen herself in the mirror, nor is her body the same as mine, she will always intentionally imitate our movements: if we open our mouth when we raise a spoon to feed her, she too intentionally opens her own mouth. Thus, "she perceives in her body her intentions, my body with my intentions and thus my intentions within her body" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1966, p. 404ff). It is through this immediate imitation that children learn how to use tools and indwell in the world of cultural objects. In fact, since our bodies are similar, we learn to relate to the things around us and ultimately find them as extensions of our own body. This allows us to understand the meaning and usage of cultural objects like chairs, writing utensils, or musical instruments, even if no one has shown us how to use them.

The phenomenologist James Mensch (2009) elaborates on Merleau-Ponty's idea and emphasizes that from learning to write with a pen to using a spoon or riding a bike, we do not learn these concepts in isolation, by ourselves, but rather as part of a pattern of our bodily engagement with other people (our social environment).[11] In turn, we are able to engage with the other and create meaning because we share a similar (albeit not identical) body, whose structure of perception and movements are open to the world. This openness, however, comes with the impossibility to ever gain a complete or absolute vision, neither of the world – every perspective, every experience is unique, limited, and concrete – nor of ourselves. However, this antinomy of openness and limitation of perceptions enables us to share our experiences and live together with others in one world. It is the similarity with the other's way of being in the world – bodily, emotionally, and cognitively – that can drift into my own way of experiencing the world. Yet, this "drifting" of experiences into mine does not lead to the extinction of my own experience. Rather there is a fine line of similarity and difference: in fact, I can only feel the "difference" of the other if I am at the same time grounded in my own experience. For example, when I read about the experiences of a blind person, I can empathize with this difference of being in the world while still holding onto my own being in the world as someone capable of seeing.

Consequently, there is a nuanced intertwining of similarity and difference: we indwell the world through a similar body, and yet our experiences of the world are never identical because our perspectives and experiences are unique, diverse, and dependent on our cultural upbringing and environment. This very nexus of similarity and difference, openness and limitation, is where experiences can interlace and inspire one another. It is the grounding for all nuances of empathy, including contagious emotions, ethical empathy, perspective-taking, distress, etc. The disclosure (coming to awareness) of the difference of the other's experience through empathy is finally what also calls into question our own experience.

Mensch (2009) writes, "this empathetic ability to experience through the other is crucial to learning" (p. 6). And it is here where the question of "why" arises. He explores this with the example of sitting at home in a warm and cozy apartment and having dinner. On TV, we see a child being out in the cold, hungry and desperate. Suddenly our food snatches from our tongue, and we ask: *Why are we safe? Why do we have food and she doesn't? Why are things this way rather than another?* The difference of

[11] We are quoting James Mensch's most central book on this topic, which elaborates on this topic in much more depth (Mensch, 2009).

experience penetrates our consciousness because another way of being in the world has entered our worldview. Yet again, the experience of the other that I have empathy with is not deleting my own experience, but rather they interlace and create a space of both dissonance and togetherness. Understanding is never complete, but rather will always remain "under way." Or in other words, my inability to completely understand the other calls for a continuous return to understand the other more and better.

In summary, the ability to empathize with the other allows us to call our own experience into question and suggests that the world could be disclosed otherwise. This is the starting point of all *understanding*, be it epistemologically, ethically, metaphysically, or aesthetically, such as what we may consider to be a chair, how we feel about happiness, or the way we see a painting. Thus, "[t]he ability for empathy is also our ability to understand others and disclose alternative ways of being in the world; we would otherwise remain within ourselves and absolutely separate" (Mensch, 2009, p. 7). And it is for this reason, that rather than a divide, there seems to be an interlacing between empathy and philosophical reasoning through embodiment, as it is the bodily being in the world that we all share and from which stems the possibility to empathize and dialogue with others. We do this every day: when we try to make ourselves understood, we rely on a shared experience, a similar way of being in the world; from there, we depart into the difference of our point of view. If we lived in completely separate realities or ways of being in the world, there would not be the common ground from which any authentic dialogue departs.

Closing Thoughts

In this theoretical exploration of the relationships between philosophical reasoning, empathy, and embodiment, we tried to cover a relatively vast, complex, and multidisciplinary ground.[12] We first described the renaissance of empathy in recent Western educational programs and psychological research, while at the same time pointing towards the long tradition of critical voices regarding empathy. We then tried to follow the epistemology of the word "empathy" and its various meanings. Those different interpretations of empathy led us to a phenomenological exploration of the lived experience of empathy. Here we finally tried to connect the similarities and differences of embodied experiences to the very possibility of empathy, which we interpreted as the starting point of putting our own experience into question. The latter is, of course, neither easy nor comfortable. Among others, Megan Boler (1999) discusses this in her concept of pedagogy of discomfort, in which she urges us to move beyond just a "passive empathy" and instead try to situate ourselves in relation to the suffering of the other. In such a situation, we find that through self-reflection and exploring the complex relationship towards the other, we gain an ethical inclination to become active. In other words, through the critical exploration of one's connections, a person might be moved "to become engaged." However, and as described above, this kind of sensitivity and resonance with others depends on our awareness of our emotional and bodily being in the world. Sharon Todd (2004) makes a similar argument on the more concrete level of social injustice. She states that feeling with another's experience, and acts of "fellow-feeling" (p. 338), in order to promote a common understanding may appear to be constructive on the surface (because of the idea of bonding individuals and creating unity). However, there is also the risk of assimilation through projection. In that case, we are missing the point of attending to differences responsibly and meaningfully because projection undermines the otherness of the other. For example, in the teacher–student relationship, teachers often attempt to feel with their students to gain a better understanding of how to interact with them. However, somewhere on the way,

[12] By no means were we able to attend to all the various accounts on empathy. For example, see the in-depth analysis of empathy in Eastern philosophies.

they project parts of themselves into students and think that they *know* what a student feels. The process of "understanding the other," however, remains much more complex and is ongoing and adventurous. Understanding the other always entails misunderstanding the other as well as a reinterpretation in togetherness. As educators, as humans, we might come out of this process changed. As such, empathy is both a danger and an immense possibility: to depart from an authentic dialogue – with our fellow citizens, our family, our children – as other to ourselves.

In the context of education, Natalie Fletcher (2016) discusses moral imagination as a precursor to empathy and a way to cultivate practical wisdom in children relative to their life experience. Using the pedagogy of Philosophy for Children, founded by educational philosopher Matthew Lipman, she illustrates how fictional instances (e.g., the story of the Three Little Pigs), hypothetical instances (e.g., "if animals could talk, would we treat them differently?"), and actual instances (e.g., sex discrimination) can act as stimuli to cultivate the virtue of empathy through morally imaginative dialogue with children. This idea suggests that by engaging children in philosophical dialogues, empathy and perspective-taking might be cultivated by means of imagination and shared embodiment.

In all three pedagogical approaches by Boler, Todd, and Fletcher, we are encouraged to bring the world into suspense or to question our assumptions and beliefs. This requires courage. The metaphor of the god Eros in Plato's *Symposium* comes to mind, in which the "philosophical attitude" is described as the courage to question and perhaps even depart from the familiar and to learn to dwell in the unfamiliar. This departure becomes an inwardness that penetrates the mind and the body. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) writes on the adventure of perspective-taking and understanding: "Those kinds of experiences are always an adventure and, like every adventure, they are dangerous" (p. 51). They are dangerous because they involve a painful falling apart and recomposing of established opinions (*doxa*) or core values – the awareness of the profundity of one's own ignorance and how this uncertainty affects one's life. It is this courage that brings our perspective in suspense and allows for something truly new or "other" to enter our experience – a true moment of *em*-pathy. This is why, for Gadamer, the questioning process can never be fully captured by a method, but rather resembles more of an "attitude" that has empathy at its core. To display such an empathic and open attitude is similar to Socrates in the *Symposium*. He is characterized as the one who never gets tired of disputing, asking, and pondering, even after an entire night of drinking and discussing philosophy. Therefore, at the very end of the dialogue, Plato (375 BCE/1998) describes how everyone else is either asleep or drunk, and only "Socrates, having laid them to sleep, rose to depart" (p. 223).

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (the Insight Development Grant) under Grant [430-2013-0160] to Barbara Weber and Kimberly Schonert-Reichl.

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