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Empathy, Psychology, and Aesthetics: Reflections on a Repair Concept

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Word Tour

**Empathy, Psychology,
and Aesthetics**

Reflections on a Repair Concept

David Depew

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- 1 *Empathy* translates the late-nineteenth-century German coinage of *Einfühlung*.¹ Like *empathy* after it, *Einfühlung* arose in a part of empirical psychology that is no longer much cultivated, namely the psychology of aesthetic response. This may seem odd. But the fact that the German empirical psychologists of the late nineteenth century, who virtually founded the field, would have accorded much importance to the empirical, psychological side of aesthetics is actually not strange at all.
- 2 The underlying interest springs from the fact that the discourse of aesthetics played a central role in the constitution of modern German identity. Aesthetics inform the emergence, trajectory, and legitimation of Germany's state institutions as well as its system of education and culture. The original formulation of aesthetics in Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, G. W. F. Hegel, and others had been idealist. The rise of a unified German state under Bismarck required that key concepts in what Marx would have been pleased to call "the German ideology" should be examined and justified objectively. If possible, this was to be done by experimentation, but failing that by rigorous, methodical introspection. (German empirical psychologists were as divided on this methodological question as their American heirs remain.) At this time, German aesthetics took an empirical, even materialist turn. Empirical examination of the psychology of aesthetic response was widely cultivated, and it conferred great professional ethos on those psychologists who were taken to treat the subject insightfully.
- 3 Eventually the concept of empathy became residual in aesthetics. The waning of empathy as an aesthetic concept is what left this notion available for other uses, such as those related to psychotherapy and ethics. If we ask why aesthetics turned away from *empathy*, it is tempting to see this as due, among other things, to the modern *ist* artistic movements that prized as artistic

effects alienation and defamiliarization rather than identification. It is also relevant that the Nazi state gave aesthetics as a whole, but especially on the moral and political side, a black eye. A suspicion of aesthetics lurks, for example, in the writings of Jürgen Habermas. He particularly doubts a key theorem of German aesthetics that goes back to Schiller: namely the notion that cultivating judgments of the beautiful and the sublime leads to moral sensitivity and political reform.² Many take the Holocaust to have discredited that idea more or less completely, and with it any strong link between aesthetics and empathy. Empathy, yes, we might say; aesthetics, no.

- 4 *Einfühlung*, the German word for empathy, literally means *in-feeling*. In its first use, in 1873 by German psychologist Robert Vischer, *Einfühlung* names the placing of human feelings into inanimate things, plants, animals, or other humans in a specific way. For the moment, at least, *Einfühlung* so fuses a human's experience with an object's experience that it no longer feels like the human's own experience but instead like that of the object. Another German psychologist, Theodore Lipps, elaborated the idea around the turn of the century. The main point of Lipps's aesthetic psychology is to assert that those who think our own feelings or emotions are the *object* of aesthetic experience are wrong. (The criticized view can be found in Tolstoy's *What is Art?* – among many other places.³) The *object* of aesthetic experience is the sensuous aesthetic object itself, which we contemplate from a suitable “aesthetic distance” or with the characteristically aesthetic “disinterest” of which Kant spoke. Our own feeling states are not the object of aesthetic experience, argued Lipps, but merely the *ground of their possibility*.⁴ His reasons for this spring from what might be called introspectionist phenomenology.
- 5 Lipps forged the link between *Einfühlung* and *empathy* when, about 1910, he gave *empathia* as the Greek equivalent of *Einfühlung*.⁵ There was, to be sure, such a Greek word. But it is late, not in common use, and not what we mean now by *empathy*. *Empatheia* named an intense passion or state of emotional undergoing. *Pathos* comes from *pathein*: to suffer or undergo. Plotinus, a late source, treats *empathia* as the opposite of *apathy*. This would oppose *empathia* to the condition of emotional neutrality supposed by some philosophers – Plotinus *not* among them – to be the most desirable, even the definitive, philosophical state.⁶ So *empathia* was no less technical a term than *apatheia*, its philosophical opposite.

- 6 The prefix *em* and its equivalent *en* mean *in*. For *empathia*, this seems to mean being *into* one's own pathic state of experience, of undergoing. This is passion in the original, and New Testament, sense. More weakly, it is the 1960s counter-cultural sense of "being into" something. In any case, it does not mean entering into the emotions of others, or more generally putting oneself in the position of another, as the current concept does. Accordingly the stipulative identification of *Einfühlung* with *empathia* by Lipps might suggest that he did not know Greek well. But his Greek was, in this instance at least, fine. For he meant just what the late Greek term meant – an especially intense state of feeling – with the added inference that we experience feeling states this intense as belonging to an external object that occasions them. They are ek-static.
- 7 What about the English term *empathy*? It came into the language through the influence of German empirical psychology in Great Britain and the United States. (All early American psychologists, including William James, were educated in Germany.) Thus E. B. Tichener, a German-trained psychologist writing in English, defined *empathy* as "the process of humanizing objects, of feeling ourselves or reading ourselves into them." He remarked, "I see gravity, modesty, courtesy, stateliness [in someone], but also feel them. I suppose that's a simple case of empathy, if we may coin the term as a rendering of *Einfühlung*."⁷ That was in 1909. Whether Tichener worked consciously from stipulative identification by Lipps of *Einfühlung* with *empathia*, while disguising or forgetting that influence, I do not know. But it is clear that the English aestheticist Vernon Lee, who *was* influenced by Lipps, used *empathy* in connection with specifically aesthetic responses in her 1912 book, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics*. Perhaps she was following Tichener's lead.
- 8 Curiously the Earl of Listowell (William Francis Hare), who championed and popularized the aesthetics of Lipps in England in the 1920s, left the word untranslated. He called his account of aesthetic response "The Theory of *Einfühlung*."⁸ We may perhaps sense here the beginnings of a loosening of the connection between the English word *empathy* and its aesthetic roots. The loosening might have been intensified by the first translation of Freud into English in the 1920s. Following the lead of Tichener and Lee, Alix and James Strachey used *empathy* to translate Freud's *Einfühlung*. Like Lipps', Freud's *Einfühlung* implied psychological projection. But it was not specifically aesthetic.⁹ Perhaps it was by

way of this translation of Freud that *empathy* first entered into the psychoanalytical and, later, psychotherapeutic discourses that are the proximate roots of its current meaning. (Beginning in the 1960s, *empathy* began to disseminate itself widely into the general culture through the “client-centered therapy” of Carl Rogers and the related ideas of Hans Cohut.)

- 9 As tie to aesthetics weakened, the notion that empathy can be objectified into or projected onto *every* sort of object – whether inanimate, animate, or personal – we experience aesthetically (the joyous chirping of birds, the sadness of the willow tree, the sublimity of the stars) also began to dissipate. By our own time, empathy comes to be restricted to what we “feel into” other *people* and maybe a few animals. But here the theory of *Einfühlung* virtually turns itself on its head. Originally the paradigmatic cases of empathy were inanimate objects, including “expressive” works of art. Once psychotherapy and ethics captured the term, however, persons became paradigmatic. With the exception of a few higher animals, mostly pets, persons seem now the *exclusive* objects of empathy. With this change, comes another. In the original theory, *empathy* acknowledges that the feelings we feel about others are actually our own; in the new meaning, *empathy* refers to our ability to identify with others by getting in contact with feelings that *they* have (although the ability to empathize in this sense might be stimulated by analogous experiences we have had).
- 10 To reflect on this reversal of meaning, we should recall that Lipps’ aesthetic *Einfühlung*, *empathia*, or empathy was integral to “the expressivist turn” in aesthetics. The vocabulary of expression and expressionism has been deposited into the common sense of modern languages by a sequence of more or less successful artistic movements. It has become so pervasive and seemingly transparent that we fail to see that it was put in place not so long ago. We fail to note that it helped self-consciously realistic, objectivistic psychologists like Lipps *deny* that our finer feelings intimate or refer tacitly to a universal “feeling together” (sympathy) among all things. Lipps and company did not trace our creativity and aesthetic receptivity to such sympathy, nor did they explain artists as better attuned to it than the rest of us.
- 11 The “sympathetic” view explains aesthetic experience through recourse to philosophical idealism. It holds that consciousness itself constitutes, in varying degrees, the very nature of whatever exists. The sympathetic idealist argues that all nature affords appropriate, veridical objects of our feeling states – exactly to the

extent that everything is, to one degree or another, alive and that every living thing shows at least faint traces of mind. By contrast, the philosophy of expression – the German word is *Ausdruck* – asserts different ways of accounting for aesthetic creativity and receptivity. Expressive accounts do *not* presuppose, as did the hitherto dominant aesthetics of romanticism, that “nature may be really penetrable through and through by thought . . . that the stubborn opposition of subject and object which appears to vanish in the deepest sympathy may really be an illusion, and that in reality all people and things are one.”¹⁰ To connect *empathy* to the expressivist turn is thus to deny the reality of sympathy in the strong sense suggested by the quoted formulation. It is also to repudiate the radical, revolutionary politics of the romantic movement: the politics of Schiller and Beethoven, who proclaimed that “*alle Menschen werden Brüder.*”

- 12 Romanticism taught that my aesthetic feeling not only is objective but is referentially the *same* feeling that exists in the object. The feeling is literally shared. In the eighteenth century, even before the romantics radicalized the term, one sympathized *with* someone or something. One did not have sympathy *for* them.
- 13 At the outset of the twentieth century, though, a new generation of idealist philosophers came belatedly to the defense of this romantic theory and with it the orientation of aesthetics toward the ultimate truth. These later idealists coöpted *expression* from its psychologistic opponents. I have in mind such thinkers as Benedetto Croce and Josiah Royce. Both thought that rejecting the objective reference of aesthetic intuitions spelled something little short of nihilism. They took seriously the claim that experiences of beauty and sublimity are propaedeutic to morality. So they tried to re-secure the objectivity of aesthetics by propounding, implausibly enough, a metaphysical idealism more radical than Hegel’s. They asserted not a universal sympathy but a universal “expressiveness.”
- 14 The change in terminology was not without influence. Even today so fine an interpreter of Hegel as Charles Taylor can propose to locate his late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century subject in an “expressivist culture.” Thus he uses a term that, in its anachronism, brings much unwanted baggage with it.¹¹ Having been displaced *expression*, *sympathy* began the long decline into its current, sentimental sense associated with Hallmark cards. The older meaning of *sympathy* had been articulated by a succession of thinkers, ranging from Shaftsbury to Hegel, who were far more

insightful and politically radical than idealist epigones in the late nineteenth century.

- 15 What remains most fundamentally true, if overlooked, is that *empathy* was coined to replace or redefine *sympathy*. The theory of art as expression (rather than intimation) was the vehicle for this deflation of *sympathy* into *empathy*. We may see this process at work in Lipps, though he is far from alone among thinkers of his generation. In summarizing the main points of his aesthetic theory at the outset of the second volume of his *Die Aesthetische Betrachtung und die Bildende Kunst*, Lipps claims that the connection between *Einfühlung* and *Ausdruck* is definitional. If there is to be a gap between an aesthetic object and its psychological ground, the aesthetic object must be an *expression* of the psychological ground.
- 16 The aesthetic object then amounts to an ex-pression, an out-pressing, a squeezing out, as of grapes to make wine. On this account, we press out our feelings onto external objects. “In aesthetic experience,” Lipps wrote, “a sensuous object distinct from me ‘expresses’ [*ausdruckt*] something interior or soul-like.”¹² Thus we experience willows as sad, weeping. But we must not mistake this for willows pressing their feelings into us. From our perspective, that would be an im-pression: an in-pressing like the type face printing onto a page or John Locke’s stylus of experience pressing into the blank slates of our minds. In aesthetic experience, however, according to Lipps and company, we project *our* feelings onto willows. Presumably we do this on the basis of schematic similarities – the drooping leaves, for example – that make willows “expressive” of our feelings. For Lipps, aesthetic experience is a placing of *our* feelings into willows. It does *not* refer, however obscurely, to any fact about the experiences of willow trees. *A fortiori* it does not mean that we share the same feelings as the occasioning objects. We, not the willows, feel sad.
- 17 Aside from idealists like Croce, virtually all of twentieth-century aesthetics taught that each human, whether as creator or perceiver, brings his or her own feelings to the expressive object. The art object is merely a stimulus.¹³ It is not far from this perception to the notion, promoted by E. H. Gombrich, that art is illusion – in the same, projective sense that led Freud to declare religion an illusion. In either case, individuals are locked within the small circles of their own feelings or experiences. Some mediating remedy – call it communication – is called for, and

desperately, to heal the breach.

- 18 At times, Lipps did use the technical term *Sympathie* rather than the standard, non-technical German term *Mitleid*. In this he explicitly echoed the British roots of “Sympathy.” For example, he wrote, “Sympathy [*Sympathie*] is nothing other than this, that . . . an ‘I-experience’ which is bound up for my consciousness with a distinct object gets ‘expressed’ [‘wring out of me,’ *in mich eindringt*] and comes to be free of me.”¹⁴ But this is just to commandeer *Sympathie* as a synonym for what Lipps calls “positive” *Einführung*: the *Einführung* that affirms life.¹⁵ This assimilation of *sympathy* to *empathy* did nothing to help reverse or slow the descent of *sympathy* from the sense of universal attunement and resonance in romanticism to the smarmy sense of pity and superiority that the term now connotes.
- 19 Does *empathy* share this fate? Not exactly. Like *sympathy*, *empathy* eventually became a residual, even rejected, concept in aesthetics. As noted, it was thereupon taken up by what came to be called “humanistic psychology,” of which Rogerian psychotherapy is but one tendency. From there, *empathy* has been re-inflated in recent decades into a universal ethic, perhaps because the Nazis exhibited so little of it.
- 20 Curiously enough, then, *empathy*’s current work closely resembles the work that *sympathy* was supposed to do in the heyday of romantic idealism, but no longer does. Empathy is to bind us together – *alle Menschen werden Brüder (und Schwestern)* – in ways that *Einführung* originally was intended to douse in a little cold water. In its current meaning, *empathy* is a repair concept. We use it to restore the sympathy that buoyed modernity in its salad days. Conventionally we restrict this new empathy to the shared or mutually projected feelings of human beings, or those animals where we experience some resonance of human psychology. Thus we free our sense of empathy from the metaphysical burdens that the earlier notion of sympathy seemed unable to bear. Nevertheless questions about any grounding of empathy in the reality of an intersubjective relationship, potential or actual, remain to be clarified.

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Notes

- ¹ My research on this topic was stimulated by the The Promise of Empathy, a cross-disciplinary conference sponsored by the Project on the University of Iowa, October 16-18, 2003. On the inventional side, I would like to thank Merrie Snell, Daniel Gross, Russell Valentino, and Page duBois for stimulating discussions of the topic. On the side of *dispositio*, I am especially grateful to Russell Valentino and John Nelson for insightful help with the draft of the essay.
- ² Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity – An Incomplete Project," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, New York, Norton, 1998, pp. 3-15.
- ³ Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* Aylmer Maude, tr., New York, Oxford University Press, 1930.
- ⁴ Theodore Lipps, "Empathy, Inner Imitation, and Sense Feelings," Melvin Rader and Max Schertel, trs., from *Archiv for die gesamte Psychologie*, Volume I, 1903, in Melvin Rader, *A Modern Book of Aesthetics*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, fifth edition, 1979, pp. 371-378.
- ⁵ *Einfühlung* may have been coined before Vischer by the philosopher Rudolf Hermann Lotze in his 1869 *Geschichte der Aesthetik in Deutschland*. This work is mentioned in this connection in the Earl of Listowel, *Modern Aesthetics: An Historical Introduction*, New York, [Columbia] Teachers' College Press, 1967, p. 50.
- ⁶ See Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996.
- ⁷ The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites this passage from Tichener's 1909 *Lectures in Experimental Psychology*, Volume I, p. 21.
- ⁸ The Earl of Listowell, *Modern Aesthetics: An Historical Introduction*, New York, Teacher's College Press, 1967. This work revises Listowell's *A Critical History of Modern Aesthetics*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1933.
- ⁹ This generalized use of *Einfühlung* is not exclusive to Freud.

From the start, Lipps himself had distinguished between *Einfühlung* and specifically *aesthetic Einfühlung*. The influence of Lipps' own work, however, produced a narrowing of the term's actual use to aesthetics. I imagine that Freud moved in the opposite direction: from the objectifying or projective aspect of aesthetic *Einfühlung* to psychological projection generally.

10 The Earl of Listowell, who is paraphrasing Emile Meyerson without agreeing with him, in *Modern Aesthetics*, p. 84.

11 Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975. Taylor's view of Hegel's expressivism is colored by his treatment of J. G. Herder, who was at work in the generation before Hegel. Herder did terms like *Ausdruck* and *Einfühlung* in an unsystematic way. If theoretically reconstructed, however, his view would not be the same as that of the later expressivists and sponsors of the theory of empathy.

12 Theodore Lipps, " *Die ästhetische Betrachtung und die bildende Kunst*," *Asthetik: Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst, Zwither Teil*, Hamburg und Leipzig, Leopold Voss, 1906, p. 1, my translation.

13 It is true that an effective painting of a willow tree might trigger in perceivers the fact that they, too, have experienced the sadness of willow trees. But this simply means that both willow trees and artistic representations of them in inanimate material media are expressive of the feelings of artists and their audiences. In neither case is there an identity between feelings of the painter and feelings of the perceivers. Feelings are inherently subjective, and can only look objective through projection.

14 Lipps, " *Die ästhetische Betrachtung*," p. 21, my translation.

15 Lipps, " *Die ästhetische Betrachtung*," p. 21, my translation. Negative empathy consists in the "life denying" identification with the pain and suffering of others.