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

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Recommended Citation
https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1033
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Poroi, 4, 1, March, 2005

1 Empathy translates the late-nineteenth-century German coinage of Einfühlung. 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. 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.) 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*. 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 *empatheia* as the Greek equivalent of *Einfühlung*. 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 *empatheia* as the opposite of *apathy*. This would oppose *empatheia* to the condition of emotional neutrality supposed by some philosophers – Plotinus not among them – to be the most desirable, even the definitive, philosophical state. So *empatheia* was no less technical a term than *apatheia*, its philosophical opposite.
The prefix *em* and its equivalent *en* mean *in*. For *empatheia*, 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 l960s 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 *empatheia* 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.

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.*” That was in l909. Whether Tichener worked consciously from stipulative identification by Lipps of *Einfühlung* with *empatheia*, 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 l912 book, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics*. Perhaps she was following Tichener’s lead.

Curiously the Earl of Listowell (William Francis Hare), who championed and popularized the aesthetics of Lipps in England in the l920s, left the word untranslated. He called his account of aesthetic response “The Theory of *Einfühlung.*” 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 l920s. 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. 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 l960s, *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*, *empatheia*, 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.”

To connect empathy to the expressivist turn is thus to deny the reality of sympathy in the
strong sense suggested 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 wérden Brüder.”

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.

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 propaideutic 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.”

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. 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 Beitrachtung 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.” 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. 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
At times, Lipps did use the technical term Sympathie rather than the standard, non-technical German term Mitlieb. 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’ ['wrung 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” Einfühlung: the Einfühlung 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.

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.

Curiously enough, them, 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 Einfühlung 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 invention 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.


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.


7 The Oxford English Dictionary cites this passage from Tichener’s 1909 Lectures in Experimental Psychology, Volume I, p. 21.


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 Listowel, 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 aesthetische Betrachtung und die 
bildende Kunst_,” _Aesthetik: Psychologie des Schönen und der 
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.