Empathy and Intersubjectivity

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This essay has two purposes. The first is to explore the relationship between empathy and intersubjectivity. The second is to explore, within the bounds of intersubjectivity, the way in which empathy entails a “double representation” (and what this means).

The assertion of the first part of this essay is the strong one that no human interconnection would exist at all without the empathic function, in which one individual apprehends, is receptive to, the feelings, the emotional life, of another. Here “intersubjectivity” is understood to mean our interrelated being together with one another in the interhuman world of regard for and sensitivity to the feelings of other persons. We shall discover that the interrelation between empathy and intersubjectivity is twofold. First, a path will be traced from intersubjectivity to empathy, in which empathy will be exhibited as the functional foundation of human intersubjectivity. Then, the return route will be traced. Moving from empathy to intersubjectivity, empathy will be considered as a means or method of reestablishing or instituting contact with another individual when we have strayed into the realms that are experience-distant from those of the other.

In fulfilling the second purpose of this piece, we shall have an opportunity to consider the role of vicarious experience in the functioning of empathy. We shall also explore the distinction between empathy and emotional contagion, on the one hand, and the relation with interpretation (in the form of analogy), on the other hand.

What “intersubjectivity” is may require further clarification. In general terms, it represents an allusion to a philosophical tradition
devoted to exploring the many meanings of the relationship between self and other, ego and other, individual and community. The phenomenological perspective of the philosopher Edmund Husserl makes the constitution of intersubjectivity the goal of the phenomenological act of self-reflection. Husserl was concerned with the problem of intersubjectivity and the constitution of experience. His perspective of the self-as-a-constituted entity includes the experiences of others. This perspective is reflected in the idea of the "other" as a component of the "I". Not only does the individual belong to the community, but the community is a component of the individual. In order to understand the relationship between self and other, ego and other, individual and community, Husserl and his followers have explored the concept of intersubjectivity.

Husserl's phenomenology is concerned with the problem of objectivity. In Husserl's perspective, the object of experience is not external to the subject, but is an internal, subjective experience. This perspective is reflected in the idea of the "experience" as a component of the "I". Not only does the individual belong to the community, but the community is a component of the individual. In order to understand the relationship between self and other, ego and other, individual and community, Husserl and his followers have explored the concept of intersubjectivity.

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musical experience can be even thinkable. We are not longer capable of experiencing it as it is, without our own emotions and thoughts. Empathy suggests a non-linear understanding of the world, where our consciousness and feelings are not just passively received from the environment, but actively constructed by us. This is according to Koffka, who writes in his book 'The Restoration of the Self' (1937, p. 301): "We are not merely spectators, we are also subjects of our own experience."

Now, let's consider the concept of empathy from a neurological perspective. Empathy is not only a subjective experience, but it is also a process that involves the activation of specific brain regions. For example, the insula, a brain structure involved in emotional processing, is highly active during empathy tasks. This suggests that empathy is not just a feeling, but a complex process involving multiple brain regions.

In his book 'Empathy and Intersubjectivity', Louis Agosta explores the idea that empathy is not just a one-way process, but a two-way interaction. He argues that empathy is not only the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, but also the ability to be understood by others.

Agosta suggests that empathy is a form of intersubjectivity, where multiple perspectives and experiences are integrated into a shared understanding. This is not just a mental process, but a physical one, as our bodies respond to the emotions of others through mirroring movements and physiological reactions.

Let's consider the example of a musician playing a piece of music. The musician's emotions, thoughts, and physical responses are all intertwined with the music. This is a form of intersubjectivity, where the musician's experience is shared with the audience. The audience, in turn, responds to the musician's emotions, creating a dynamic and interactive experience.

In conclusion, empathy is not just a subjective experience, but a complex process involving multiple brain regions and a two-way interaction between individuals. It is not just a feeling, but a way of understanding and sharing the experiences of others.
experience in encountering other individuals indicates that we are affected by their feelings and that our feelings (in turn) affect them. What is being suggested is that at some point there must be a functioning capacity for being receptive to the feelings of others in order for the recognition, identification, and further understanding of feelings in another to be "thinkable," conceivable in any sense. Empathy, then, is just such a condition of possibility for describing others (and by implication ourselves) as capable of being affected by feelings.

Here the term "transcendental," which may be intimidating at first, requires some unpacking. It can be paraphrased as "not capable of being contradicted by experience, but nevertheless relating to experience and providing the framework or structure within which that experience becomes meaningful." Empathy is what makes possible the experience of affecting and being affected by the feelings of another person. This experience, in turn, is the basis on which we are subsequently justified in positing the existence of the capacity for empathy. But in this experience empathy is itself presupposed, for without empathy the experience itself could not occur. Thus, the argument has the force of logic. It is concerned with what is "thinkable," "conceivable," without contradiction. Yet it is more than mere logic, for it concerns the realm of experience. Empathy is that on the ground of which being affected by the feelings of others is constituted as a realm of accessible experiences in the first place.

What Kohut has in fact given in the cited passage is an example of such a "transcendental argument," although in an implicit and abbreviated form. In tracing a path from intersubjectivity to empathy, in which empathy is the presupposition of intersubjectivity, empathy becomes a component in a kind of metapsychological equation. "Empathy" is being used as a component in theory building. Invoking empathy as an interhuman competence helps to make understandable the experiences we do in fact have. It makes intelligible how we are able to be receptive to the feelings of others. But, at the risk of paradox, how do we explain this principle of understanding?

**From Empathy to Intersubjectivity**

Now we must trace the return route from empathy to intersubjectivity, and examine the role of "vicarious experience" in the functioning of empathy, with particular reference to Kohut's definition of empathy as "vicarious introspection." From this point the discussion can proceed toward the boundary between empathy and "emotional contagion" or toward the boundary between empathy and interpretation. If empathy is to escape the arbitrary caprice of conflicting intuitions, then it must be related to the act of interpretation. This mutual interrelating of empathic receptivity and interpretation constitutes a kind of "hermeneutic circle," in which both components are needed to constitute interhuman knowledge in the full sense. Empathy most authentically becomes a mode of understanding as it is transformed into and communicated as an interpretation. In what follows, different points at which the hermeneutic circle of empathy can be entered will be considered. Insofar as the goal at each of these points is the recovery or establishment of interhuman understanding, we can legitimately be said to be reversing the direction of our discussion and proceeding back from empathy to intersubjectivity.

Once the fates of empathy and introspection are linked—as in defining empathy as "vicarious introspection"—finding an instance of one without the other is virtually impossible. Thus, introspection implies that one is empathizing with oneself; and empathy implies introspecting the feelings and experiences of another as these vicariously emerge in one's own subjectivity. Here we ought to append Olden's (1956) significant reminder that our capacity for empathy with children is often a function of our feelings for our own fate as children. This rule is easily generalizable, and indicates the inevitable intermeshing of introspective efforts at self-understanding and the understanding of others through empathy.

Saying what "vicarious introspection" is not is relatively easy. It is not knowledge by direct acquaintance with another's sensations. Nor is it any kind of intellectual intuition. No privileged, direct (telepathic) access to another's fantasy life is entailed.

In vicarious introspection one is not introspecting the feelings, emotions, sensations, or experiences of the other at all. Rather, one is introspecting a vicarious feeling aroused in oneself by the other's expression of feeling. Through introspection one comes to realize that this feeling is not an endogenous mood or affect, arising from purely inner processes. Rather, it is a vicarious feeling, a representation of another's feeling that is a function of being receptive to another's self-expression. But I myself, not the other, am the object of introspection.

In defining "empathy" as "vicarious introspection," misplacement of the stress may mistakenly suggest that empathizing consists in directly introspecting another's inner life. But surely this goes too far, and leads to absurd consequences. Rather, empathy consists in introspecting one's own vicarious experience of another's experience, and thus establishing a connection between self and other through this vicarious dimension of experience.
A further misunderstanding about the nature of the introspection in question needs to be clarified and avoided. Anyone who thinks that introspection involves concentrating attention on the mental contents (affects, volitions, cognitions) of consciousness will be disappointed and soon become disillusioned with the prospect of using an introspective technique in order to make contact with another person. The harder one concentrates, the more elusive and one-sided are the results. Not only does the person find answers only to questions already posed, but he even suggests the answers to himself. This leads to much of the dispute that has plagued introspection. Furthermore, memories, which are often the content of introspection, behave in a parallel manner. That is, recollections are rarely disclosed by intense concentration. A forgotten name or foreign word may be on the “tip of the tongue.” But, typically, exerting extra effort, trying harder, will get one nowhere. If, however, one is distracted by something for a period of time, then all at once the name or word may pop into one’s mind.

The distinction between the empathic-introspective attitude and one of concentrated attention is documented by Freud in his “Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psychoanalysis” (1912). Both empathy and introspection are amalgamated in this text. The physician is listening with empathic receptivity to the other, and he is also introspectively receptive to himself:

The technique, however, is a very simple one. . . . It rejects the use of any special expedient (even that of taking notes). It consists simply in not directing one’s notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same “evenly-suspended attention” (as I have called it) in the face of all that one hears. In this way we spare ourselves a strain on our attention which could not in any case be kept up for several hours daily, and we avoid a danger which is inseparable from the exercise of deliberate attention. For as soon as anyone deliberately concentrates his attention to a certain degree, he begins to select from the material before him; one point will be fixed in his mind with particular clearness and some other will be correspondingly disregarded, and in making this selection he will be following his expectations and inclinations. The fact, however, is precisely what must not be done. In making the selection, if he follows his expectations he is in danger of never finding anything but what he already knows; and if he follows his inclinations he will certainly falsify what he may perceive. It must not be forgotten that the things one hears are for the most part things whose meaning is only recognized later on [p. 111].

What we have here is, so to speak, the external form of an empathic-introspective attitude. Kohut’s remark in this regard is worth citing:

“Even if hovering attention . . . is the analyst’s active empathic response to the analysand’s free associations” (1977, p. 251). Saying that empathy is an extension of introspection does not mean that the analyst extends his introspective monitoring of his own mind to encompass the consciousness of the other. Nor is his introspective scanning of his own consciousness reducible to the spontaneous, unstudied talk characteristic of free associating. Rather, an introspective phase emerges from his empathic receptivity, in which he becomes aware that he is open to the other.

However, in order to attain “empathic receptivity” in the full sense, using Freud’s vocabulary, something must be added to “evenly hovering attention.” This something is alluded to by Freud as “induced vibrations.” This way of talking may help us to isolate the dimension of empathic receptivity. The doctor:

. . . must bend his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the emerging unconscious of the patient, be as the receiver of the telephone to the disc. As the receiver transmutes the electric vibrations induced by the sound waves back again into sound waves, so is the physician’s unconscious mind able to reconstruct the patient’s unconscious, which has directed his associations, from the communications derived from it [Freud, 1912, pp. 115–116].

That Freud juxtaposes the two aspects of receptivity and reconstruction (interpretation) in this text is no accident. The intertwining of “receptive organ” and “receiver” with the task of reconstructing “the patient’s unconscious” highlights the hybrid nature of empathy. By itself empathy is rather like a belt that is too small, and, hence, it must stretch to include everything that is a part of the experience of empathy. The burden of explicating this complexity can be effectively unloaded by keeping in mind the distinction made earlier between receptivity and understanding.

Now the discussion can proceed in two directions. It can proceed toward the boundary between empathy and “emotional contagion” (or “emotional infection”) or toward the boundary between empathy and interpretation. We shall consider in which specific ways empathy is related to each of these without, however, being reducible to either of them alone. Let us trace both of these trajectories in turn.

Empathy and Emotional Contagion

In posing the question of the difference between empathy and emotional contagion, a preliminary word of caution is in order. If, at some
point in our examination of these two distinct phenomena, we discover that an area of overlap (however limited it may be) does in fact exist, that does not mean that the two phenomena were identified with one another or confused. Indeed, the best available means to prevent confusion is to give a clear account of the distinction between them. Such an account must also include a statement on why it is possible for some people to distort empathy into mere emotional contagion. This will serve the valuable purpose of answering those critics who try to dismiss empathy by first reducing it to a form of emotional contagion.

Thus, reminders can be assembled from a variety of contexts which can help to delimit a natural or lower boundary to empathy. The way enthusiasm, courage, fear, or panic is communicated through the members of a crowd received the attention of early sociologists (see Freud, 1921). Laughing and crying are also often spoken of as “catching.” Children experience uncontrollable seizures of both the latter in playing with friends or in being punished for some misdemeanor. Many adults also testify to such experiences in which mirth or grief are infectiously communicated between individuals. A similar instance of contagion (though not involving feelings in the narrow sense) occurs when the sight of extensive scar tissue on another person makes the viewer’s skin tingle or wince, or when a friend’s account of his trip to the dentist’s office and the latter’s detailed procedure arouses sympathetic pains (as they are called) in the listener as he follows the story. Nor is this mechanism restricted to those capable of self-reflection. Animals can be quite exquisitely sensitive to a person’s feelings—when a dog senses my underlying fear of him (in spite of my attempt to maintain a calm exterior visage) and continues to bark excitedly at the supposed intruder (thus, accurately assessing my emotional state, but not my motives).

Let me hasten to add that none of these instances is an example of empathy. The point, however, is that empathy involves something which is, in fact, involved in these cases of contagion, too.

In all of the foregoing cases, including that of empathy, an initial phase exists, in which one individual’s feeling arouses what amounts to an “after-image” (to employ a visual expression) or perhaps an “echo” of the feeling in another individual. Note that “after-image” or “echo” refers to a representation of a feeling in an attenuated sense, which can best be unpacked by a careful examination of the term “vicarious.” Words often contain valuable clues to the nature of the phenomena they distinguish in our experience. This is the case with “vicarious,” for it is directly related to “vicar”—a substitute or deputy. Ordinary usage is instructive on this point. “Vicarious authority” occurs when one person assumes the office of another. Contrasting “vicarious experience” with “firsthand experience” is meaningful, and distinguishing “vicarious” from “original” experience is what we in fact typically do. So-called ordinary language philosophy has documented instances when we do talk of “feeling another person’s displeasure” or say “his anger could be felt” (Austin, 1946, pp. 374–376n). This segment of our experience is properly marked by the term “vicarious” (even in ordinary discourse). Attention to it may occasion the recognition that a legitimate sense exists in which a feeling in one person causes a representation of that (qualitatively) same feeling to emerge in another person.

In emotional contagion a representation of the other’s feeling is aroused in the subject. That is all that happens. In the case of empathy, in addition to this first representation of the other’s feeling, a second representation is mobilized. The subject becomes aware that the other’s feeling is the source of his own. Thus, this second representation—which is indeed a representation of the other—is conjoined with the first.

This, then, is the crucial and irreducible difference between empathy and emotional contagion. Empathy involves a double representation. First, it involves a representation of another’s feeling. (This is what empathy shares with emotional contagion.) Second, it entails a representation of the other as such as the source of the first representation. (This is what is lacking in emotional contagion.) Thus, what differentiates empathy from contagion is the emergence, the distinguishing of, a representation of the other as the object as well as the cause of what is being felt.

Warrant is available for saying that this double representation in empathy corresponds to the above-cited distinction between receptivity and understanding. In finding a representation of another’s feeling aroused in myself, I am displaying a capacity to be receptive to the other’s expression of feeling. In conjoining this first representation (of my vicarious experience) with the representation of the other as such (as the source of my feeling), I am mobilizing my understanding in the interest of what amounts to a simple interpretation. The interpretation asserts that my feeling is not of endogenous origin, does not come from me alone, but originates with the other and, by implication, with my interaction with him. It is a function of our situation and intersubjectivity. Further negotiation with the other person about the accuracy of this interpretation then becomes possible according to the
standard criteria laid down in “Constructions in Analysis” (Freud, 1937).

**Empathy and Interpretation**

In shifting the emphasis of the discussion from empathic receptivity to empathic understanding, we approach the boundary between empathy and interpretation. In this sense, interpretation is a derivative mode of understanding, a specific application of interhuman understanding. In particular, the way in which the proper interpretation can release blocked empathy and institute or reestablish the intersubjective connection between self and other indicates a tendency within empathy itself to unfold in the direction of intersubjective communicability. Further, when, in empathy, a representation of the other is amalgamated with vicarious experience, our understanding of the relation between self and other is broadened. Indeed, a genuine sense is available in which empathy delivers back to us an enriched self.

In order to engage this issue—how interpretation can release blocked empathy—I propose to narrow the scope of the discussion and look at one particular form of interpretation, that provided by the example of “analogy.” Analogy occurs in the examples cited by Freud in support of his empathically based constructions. When Freud writes that “the patient answers with an association which contains something similar or analogous to the subject-matter of the construction” (1937, p. 262), an analogy is being drawn between an interpretation and a response. The analogy here is between the analyst’s interpretation (construction) and the analysand’s report of some memory or experience. In other instances, talking of an “analag model” is more accurate. For example, when Greenon experienced that he was “out of touch” with one of his patients—when he was in doubt about why she should start to cry at that point in her talking about a party (1960, p. 421)—he mobilized a working model of the patient, which he shifted into the foreground of his listening. Such a working model is, of course, a representation of the other.

Empathy often does not immediately succeed in opening up channels of intersubjective communication. One encounters limits to one’s capacity for vicarious feeling with individuals whose experiences are either actually remote from one’s own or related in an idiosyncratic and cryptic way. In these instances, an analogy can initiate the activity of empathic receptivity and guide it from start to finish. That is, an analogy can help to guide our empathic receptivity back to concrete experience when, as frequently happens, we have been forced into experience-distant domains.

When, in listening to another, I find an experience analogous to what the other is recounting spontaneously emerging in my own recollection, then this embedded analogy is the nucleus of a spontaneously generated interpretation. The analogy provides a guide for seeking the experience of the other, who would otherwise be lost to my empathic receptivity. Let us call this an “analagical recollection,” for what I am experientially recalling is a candidate for being regarded as an analogy to the other’s experience.

The case of fantasy adds a further nuance to this discussion. When, in imagination, I find aspects of the other in myself (in answer to the question: How are we alike?), or of myself in the other (in answer to the question: How is he like me?), then this, too, becomes a candidate for being regarded as an analogy with the other’s experience. Let us call this “analagical apperception,” for “apperception” refers to the simultaneous perception of self and other together.

Naturally, neither of these forms of analogy constitutes, in and of itself, a complete interpretation. But both are important as points of emergence of interpretation from experience. It is as if a tendency in receptivity were striving in the direction of interpretation. When, in listening to someone recount a childhood preoccupation, I am suddenly paired with him through the arousal of an analogous recollection or fantasy of my own, then what would otherwise be an anomalous experience-distant story is brought nearer to myself. The analogy provides a rule for seeking the experience of the other. The inchoate interpretation that occurs here in the specific form of a pairing of self and other in imagination or recollection is capable of guiding empathic receptivity back to experience when it has otherwise been blocked.

Insofar as empathy displays the form of a hermeneutic circle, it can be engaged at three levels or from three trajectories. First, when I experience a vicarious feeling, the possibility opens up that empathy can be directly grounded in the intersubjective communicability of affect. But when this communicability of feeling is blocked, then two other routes are available for arousing empathy. Through “analagical recollection,” I can recall an experience similar to or resembling that of the speaker. Through “analagical apperception,” I can have a fantasy in which some aspect of the other’s experience is paired with my own. Although the first case seems to be the purest, in the sense that the empathy is spontaneous and not intellectually mediated, the other two cases provide legitimate points at which the hermeneutic circle of em-
Conclusion

Let us reflect anew on the ground covered by this essay as a whole. The two main parts of this essay indicate how empathy is possible as a double representation of the other. It is also shown that the actual difficulties, as derived from the way between being and becoming, and from empathy, are not entirely the same as before. In fact, what was said earlier—namely, that the correct application of empathy can mislead the reader is also true. The correct application of empathy is to be avoided, as it can mislead the reader. In order to appreciate why the correct application of empathy is impossible, we have shown why it is possible in a particular way to the outcome. These results must now be

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relation to other individuals regarded collectively as an intersubjective community, empathy is part of the foundation of that intersubjectivity. Here the self is enriched by belonging to a community of other individuals whose cultural tradition provides opportunities for innovation or conformity in making decisions about one's life. Second, in relation to particular individuals, empathy furnishes a way of access to the other person's emotional life and of disclosing how our lives overlap or diverge. Here the self is enriched by discovering the variety and multiplicity of experiences of which other individuals are capable. Third, in the relation of the self to itself, empathy eases an appreciation of how others are affected by oneself, how others regard oneself. This enriches the self by presenting possibilities for enhanced self-knowledge. Thus, the other is inevitably implicated in the self's own process of disclosure, so that the truth of Shakespeare's aphorism resonates with new meaning:

This above all, to thine own self be true
And it must follow as the night the day,
You cannot then be false to any other man.

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