

## A RUMOR OF EMPATHY: THE SECRET, UNDERGROUND PHILOSOPHY OF EMPATHY

I know what you feel because I feel it, too, as a vicarious experience, not a merger. Without any prerequisites, this course will engage the deep history of empathy, exploring the underground dynamics of sympathy, fellow feeling, intuition, vicarious feeling, in art, altruism, story telling, before the word “empathy” emerged. It is not as if parents, teachers, doctors, therapists, friends, and neighbors, needed a philosopher to tell them what empathy is; however, clarification of the distinction is needed. Without any prerequisites, empathy is engaged through the lens of selected methods of inquiry including natural history, introspection, transcendental reflection, hermeneutics, and phenomenology. A special syllabus of short readings will be provided by the instructor including Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Scheler, and Ricoeur.

The course follows an ascending path from a natural history of empathy, in which empathy is defined, through methods of disclosing and engaging empathy, to applications of empathy in ethics, the philosophic issue of “other minds,” and so-called diseases of empathy. The approach to class discussion is to discuss a close reading of the texts; but time is also available to discuss what one might call “empathy tips and techniques” in expanding one’s empathy in class and daily life.

When all the philosophical arguments are complete, when all the transcendental deductions are analyzed, when all the diagnostic labels are applied, when all the phenomenological methods are reduced, when all the hermeneutic circles are spun out, in empathy, one is quite simply in the presence of another human being.

Lou Agosta

Lou Agosta, Ph.D. has taught empathy in the history and systems of psychology at the Illinois School of Professional Psychology at Argosy University. He has also taught philosophy at Loyola, DePaul, and Roosevelt Universities and Oakton Community College. He is the author of *Empathy in the Context of Philosophy* (Palgrave 2010) and *A Rumor of Empathy: Resistance, Narrative, Recovery* (Routledge 2015). His PhD is in philosophy (University of Chicago).

### **Schedule:**

**Week 1:** In addition to introductions and getting to know one another, a short history of the word “empathy” and the conceptual distinction (independent of the word) will be delivered. Five Definitions of empathy will be covered: vicarious introspection, walking in another’s shoes, emotional contagion, listening, relatedness to The Other, and being in the presence of an other human being without filters.

**Week 2:** Empathy is about the emotions: Heidegger writes that our understanding of the emotions has not advanced a single iota since Aristotle’s account of the emotions in the *Rhetoric*. Where better to begin? Rhetoric is about producing or destroying emotions in

the listener. If the speaker has fun or is angry, that causes fun or anger in the listener. Not exactly empathy, but this describes input to the empathic process. If we reverse Aristotle's role of the speaker and listener, how close are we to what we understand as empathy? Reading: Aristotle, *Rhetoric*: Book II. i. 8 – II. Xi. 7

**Week 3:** A delicacy of empathy: If you are aware of a sensation, affect, or feeling of which I am unaware, is your empathy more accurate than mine? David Hume had at least five different definitions of the word “sympathy” – the word “empathy” was not invented in English until 1890 – we will look at Hume's delicacy of sympathy and of taste in art, aesthetics, and, most importantly, human relationships. Reading: David Hume's “Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion” (1741) and “A Standard of Taste” (1751) – don't laugh there is a lot of empathy in the theory of beauty.

**Week 4:** Kant's necessary and universal “communicability of affect”. Empathy requires something like a general and necessary communication of feeling within the community of human beings. Kant's theory of natural beauty distinguishes disinterested, universal, necessary, and purposeful play of the imagination and understanding. How does this communicability of feeling map to what we understand as empathy (if it does) and is there a logical space for fellow feeling within Kant's philosophical anthropology? Reading: *Critique of [the Power of] Judgment* (1790): pp. 89-127.

**Week 5:** The Phenomenology of Empathy: The analysis of the different forms of fellow-feeling [*Mitgefuehl*] performed by the phenomenologist Max Scheler puts “aesthetic empathy” in its proper place and defines the scope and limits of our modern understanding of “empathy”. Reading: *The Nature of Sympathy* (1912/22): Chapter 2: 8 – 36.

**Week 6:** The hermeneutics of empathy: The encounter with The Other: Hermeneutics is an approach to the theory of interpretation – in this case, interpreting the experience of The Other in encounter with oneself. Because other people are sometimes remote, hard to fathom, and even mysterious, the encounter with them calls forth interpretation. All behavior is a communication – but of what (?) Reading: Paul Ricoeur, “Phenomenology and hermeneutics” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (1981). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: pp. 101- 130.

**Week 7:** Applications of empathy: the philosophical problem of “other minds”: Thomas Nagel (1974) “On what it's like to be a bat” in *The Mind's I*, ed. D. R. Hofstadter and D.C. Dennett. New York: Bantam Books, 1981.

**Week 8:** Applications of empathy: empathy and neuroscience: diseases of empathy: autism spectrum, neurological disorders, psychopathy. Reading: Peter Hobson, “Empathy and autism” in T. Farrow and P. Woodruff (eds.). (2007). *Empathy and Mental Illness*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.: pp. 126 – 141.

**Week 9:** Applications of empathy: ethics of empathy: a single text: The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Matthew). This is a subtle and surprisingly complex example and the

relation to empathy is by no means as obvious as it seems. I am going to create some suspense and not give away the surprise ending.

**Week 10** Wrap up, round up, and review: “Hell is other people” as Sartre famously said in the last line of *No Exit*. Does empathy have a future? Does the future hold forth an opening for expanded empathy? The resistances to empathy are complex and deep – do we really want to get close to other people in their struggles and imperfections? What are the trade-offs? Is there any other viable choice than empathic relatedness if we as human beings want not just to survive but to flourish?

**Office Hours:** As posted and announced on the first day of class.

**Course requirements (grading):** None. This is an enrichment course in the Graham School. Attend class and participate. Get value. No papers, tests or formal grades.

All the usual disclaimers apply. This syllabus and schedule is subject to change without notice. Questions, feedback, and comments are welcome. Please contact Lou Agosta ([LAgosta@UChicago.edu](mailto:LAgosta@UChicago.edu)) with questions, comments, and suggestions.

**Learning (method) goals:** by the end of this course, students will be able to

- Distinguish different methods of inquiry into empathy
- Be able to formulate a basic empathic inquiry using these methods
- Engage in a critical inquiry into basic empathic, cognitive questions
- Engage a philosophical text of above-average difficulty with velocity and success
- Respond coherently in writing and verbally to inquiries engaging empathy and philosophy with promptness and clarity as compared with the student’s ability at the beginning of the semester

**Content goals:** the student will be able to engage and answer the following questions:

- What is the definition of empathy as a multi-step function, implemented as an experiential information supply chain cutting across emotional, sensory, and cognitive information channels
- Why enhancing an individual’s aesthetic sensibility also improves the individual’s empathy (and vice versa)
- Why enhancing an individual’s empathy also improves the individual’s ability to make ethical distinctions, aesthetic distinctions, cognitive distinctions

- How do vicarious experience, affect, emotion, function in empathy
- How to apply empathy in diverse contexts such as ethics, aesthetics, cognitive inquiry, and human relations
- How empathy is validated

### **Selected Readings** [on reserve in Regenstein]

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Howard Bacal. (1985), "Optimal responsiveness and the therapeutic process." In *Optimal Responsiveness: How Therapists Heal Their Patients*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998: 3-34.

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Michael Franz Basch. (1983). "Empathic understanding: a review of the concept and some theoretical considerations," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, Vol. 31, No. 1: 101-126.

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T. Farrow and P. Woodruff (eds.). (2007). *Empathy and Mental Illness*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

S. Ferenczi. (1928). "The elasticity of psychoanalytic technique." In *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. M. Balint, tr. E. Mosbacher et al. New York: Basic Books, 1955: 87-101.

Robert Fliess. (1942). "The metapsychology of the analyst," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 11: 211-227.

Sigmund Freud. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XXIV Volumes. Hereafter abbreviated as *SE*.

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\_\_\_\_\_. (1893a). "Miss Lucy R, Case Histories from *Studies on Hysteria*." *SE*, Volume II: 106-124.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1905). *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. *SE*, Volume 8: 1-247.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1907). "Delusions and dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*." *SE*, Volume 9: 1-96.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1909a). *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five Year Old Boy*. *SE*, Volume X: 1-150.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1909). *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis*. *SE*, Volume X: 151-318.

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Ralph Greenson. (1960). "Empathy and its vicissitudes," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 41: 418-424.

Karl Groos. (1892). *Einleitung in die Aesthetik*. Geissen: J. Ricker'sche Buchhandlung.

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I. Grubrich-Simitis. (1986). "Six letters of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi on the interrelationship of psychoanalytic theory and technique," *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 13: 259-277.

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Martin L. Hoffman. (2000). *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

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George H. Mead. (1922). "A Behavioristic account of the significant symbol," *Journal of Philosophy*, 19 (1922): 157-63.



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George Pigman. (1995). "Freud and the history of empathy," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 76: 237-256.

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