

The Philosophical Significance of Empathy

Heidegger's "Special Hermeneutic
of Empathy"

By Lou Agosta, Ph.D.

The argument

- Human being is inauthentic, distracted, lost in being with others
- Human being (Dasein) is authentic, individualized in the face of death – alone in the face of death
- There is a third possibility – authentic being with others (in empathy) that is undeveloped in Heidegger – this talk develops it
- Apply Heidegger's structures – affectedness, understanding, interpretation, speech – to develop a Heideggerian inquiry into empathy (authentic being with others)

Definitions

- Dasein – human being, human existence, the possibility of possibility (no essence)
- Authentic (eigentlich) – being one's own self
- Ontology – formal study of being – things that are the target of scientific inquiry; tools/technology; human beings that are the target of self inquiry – inquire into conditions of possibility
- Hermeneutics – theory of interpretation

Possibility of Heidegger's Special Hermeneutic of Empathy

	Individual human being	Being together with other
authentic	<p>X</p> <p>Ownmost Possibility Commitment: Being toward death</p>	<p>Special Hermeneutic Of empathy</p>
inauthentic	<p>Caricature Of existentialism</p>	<p>X</p> <p>Das Man (the one) The "They Self"</p>

Heidegger's Special Hermeneutic of Empathy

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Lack of intimacy motivates Empathy

“Empathy” does not first constitute being-with: only on the basis of being-with does “empathy” become possible: it gets its motivation from the lack of intimacy of the dominant modes of being-with (Heidegger/Macquarrie, 1927: H125).

“Empathy” – the name of a problem

- But the fact that “empathy” is not a primordial existential phenomenon . . . does not mean that there is nothing problematic about it.
- The special hermeneutic of empathy will have to show how being-with-one-another [*Miteinandersein*] and human being’s knowing of himself are led astray and obstructed by the various possibilities of being which human being himself possesses, so that genuine “understanding” gets suppressed, and human being takes refuge in substitutes; the possibility of understanding the other correctly presupposes such a hermeneutic... (Heidegger/Macquarrie 1927: H125)

Parallel: Dasein confronts death; dasein confronts the other [person]

- Dasein is individualized out of its distractedness of the conformity to the crowd behavior by death [explicit in Heidegger]
- Dasein is humanized by its encounter with the other, who gives Dasein its humanness [Agosta's reading of Heidegger]
- Without the other Dasein dies a kind of affective, spiritual death similar to being an emotional zombie to whom nothing matters [Agosta's reading of Heidegger]

Design distinctions for Dasein

- Affectedness (befindlichkeit)
 - Understanding (Verstehen)
 - Interpretation (Auslegung)
 - Speech (Rede)
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- These exist in authentic and inauthentic forms and in relation to self and other – but the other is undeveloped. I develop it.

Reinterpreting *Angst* in the face of death

- The prospect of the loss of the other in the face of death sends the human being fleeing into the distractedness of the “the one,” – the “they self” that goes to parties to forget finitude.
- Anxiety in the face of the (negative) loss of the other and a positive respect for the presence of the other are two sides of the same coin and are opportunistically transformed into one another.
- Ontically, the infant does not first experience the possibility of death; she experiences being left alone, abandoned by the other, which is like death and puts one at the effect of negative consequences that are all the more dreadful for being unknown.

A Heideggerian Inquiry into empathy - affectedness

- Affectedness: Empathic receptivity: emotional contagion, vicarious experience, communicability of affect, the paradigm affect of respect as disclosing the other (the way anxiety discloses finitude (death))
- Social referencing – the toddler falls down and looks at the care-taker to decide how to feel

A Heideggerian inquiry into empathy - understanding

- Empathic understanding: Understanding presses forward into possibility – the other as possibility – the possibility of possibility – we make up meanings about others
- The therapist treats the patient using empathy as an indispensable tool and technique; the patient humanizes the therapist, calling her *not* just to her role as empathic therapist (though he does that too) but to her ontological possibility as a human being in empathic relation to another human, all-too-human being.
- The patient by his very being gives the therapist her humanness – as it were, making the therapist a fellow inquirer into being human - so that the therapist can give it (humanness) back to the patient in a hundred-and-one contingent circumstances requiring empathy.

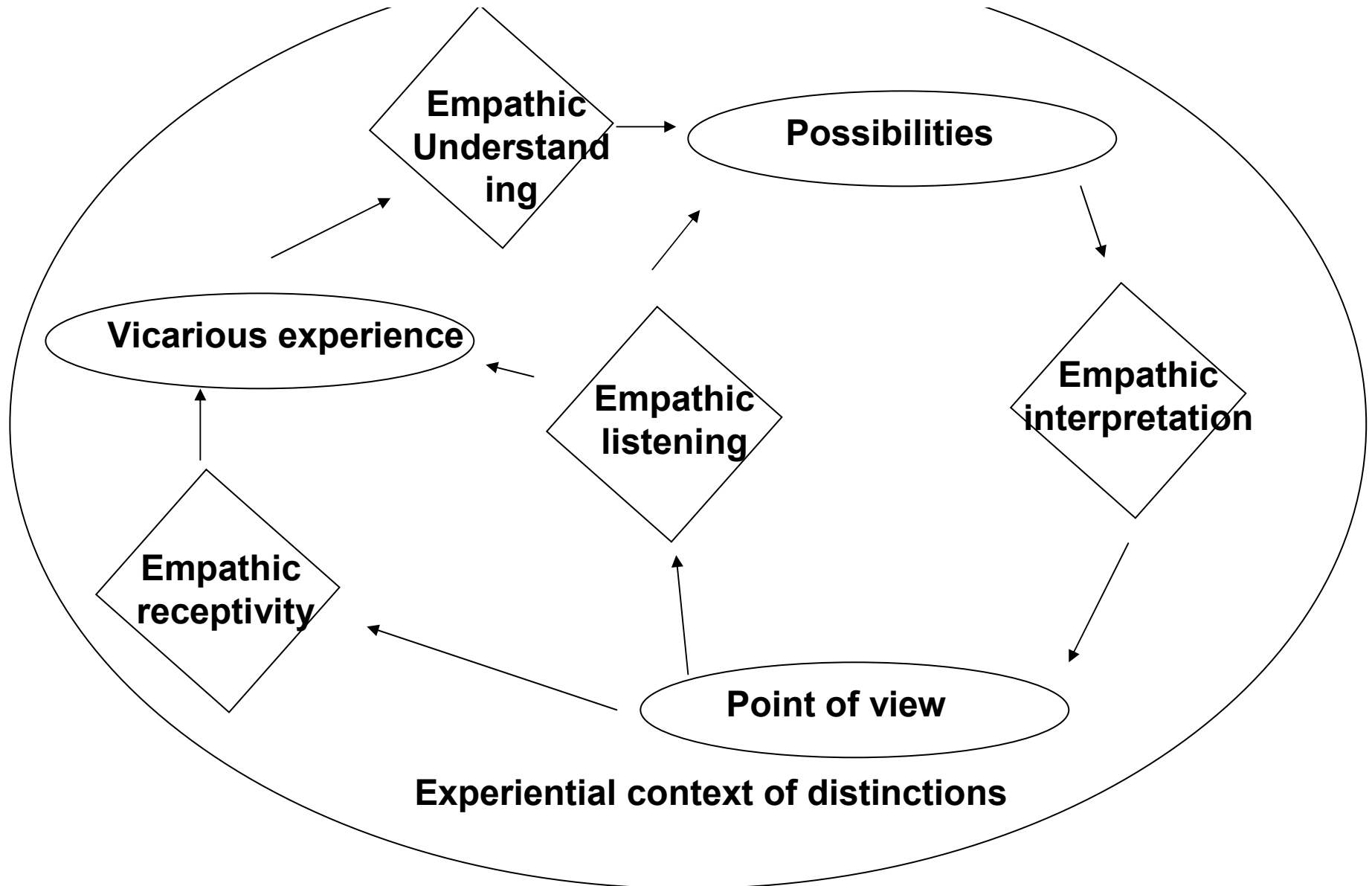
A Heideggerian inquiry into empathy - interpretation

- Empathic interpretation as perspective taking: first-, second-, third-person
- Behaviorism collapses the first- and third person perspectives
- The introspectionist isolates the first- and third-person perspectives
- The second-person perspective leads to empathic listening

A Heideggerian inquiry into empathy - speech

- The form of speech of empathy – keeping silent to engage a generous and gracious listening
- The paradox of empathic speech – quiescing the idle chatter
- Heidegger is doing something with the paradox of speech as falling silent – he is quieting the idle chatter so one can be empathic

Hermeneutic circle of empathy



The authentic, committed listening of empathy

- As authentic being a self, commitment does not detach human being from its world, nor does it isolate it as free floating ego. How could it, if commitment as authentic disclosedness is, after all, nothing other than authentically being-in-the-world? Commitment brings the self right into its being together with things at hand, actually taking care of them, and pushes it toward concerned being-with with the others (Heidegger/Stambaugh 1927: 274; H298; “commitment” translates “*Entschlossenheit*,” also translatable as “decision” or “resoluteness”; translation modified).

Death and the other: individualization and humanization

- The self of Dasein is individualized in the face of death
- The self of Dasein is humanized in the face of the other
- The loss of the other is the loss of humanness, death in life, worse than physical death (“emotional zombie”)
- The loss of empathy provided by the other is worse than the death itself

Empathy is ontological

- Empathy is not merely a cognitive function of knowing what is going on with other (though it is perhaps that too); it is a foundational way of being in the world with other beings.
- Empathy is ontological, and its withdrawal or absence is an ontological crisis (“who am I?”) that renders individuals (and communities) vulnerable to breakdowns that are dreaded as much (and sometimes more) than death itself.

For example...

- Ontically, the friend wordlessly embraces the other in his empathically felt joy and sorrow with the friend's joy and sorrow;
- Ontologically, the other creates the possibility of friendship by his shared humanness.
- The other by his very being gives the friend his humanness – making the friend an inquirer into what it means for friends to share human experiences as friends – so that the friend can give it humanness back to the friend in an act of friendship that makes them a part of the same community of friends.

For example ...

- Ontically, the Good Samaritan uses empathy to grasp who is his neighbor prior to taking altruistic action as he experiences the distress of the injured traveler;
- Ontologically, the traveler creates the possibility of empathic community by his loss of humanness.
- The Samaritan rescues the traveler; the traveler humanizes the Samaritan, calling him the possibility as a human being in relation to another finite, fragile, dependent human being.
- The injured Jewish traveler by his very being gives the Samaritan his humanness – as it were, making the Samaritan a fellow inquirer in saying who is the neighbor - so that the Samaritan can give it (humanness) back to the distressed traveler in an act of rescue that defines them as part of the same community of fellow travelers on the road of life.

For example . . .

- Ontically, the care-taker (parent) uses empathy to satisfy the needs of the infant, gaining access to what she or he feels because the care-taker feels it too in the form of a trace (vicarious) affect, thus, deploying the care-taker's humanness to bring into being another human being as member of the community (family);
- Ontologically, the infant creates the condition of possibly of empathic parenting by her or his readiness for humanness, which may indeed show up as a lack of socialization.
- The care-taker socializes the infant; the infant humanizes the care-taker, calling it to its possibility as a human being in committed relationship through thick and thin to another emerging human being.
- The infant by its very being gives the parent his humanness – as it were, making the parent an inquirer, an expert in adulthood, in being a human - so that the parent can give it (humanness) back to the infant in a hundred-and-one contingent circumstances requiring empathy.

How the other shows up...The other as ...

- A demand to be responsible in the face of the other (Levinas)
- A mind that one finds endlessly perplexing (John Wisdom, E. Husserl)
- Suffering that requires a response (“altruism”) (Parable of the Good Samaritan)
- An example embodying the moral law (Kant)
- The source of being human (“humanness”) (Heidegger)

Result

- Empathy is the silent listening to the possibilities of the self and other in affectedness as respect, as an interpretation to give the other its own possibilities as an interpretive choosing of authentic selfhood in the face of commitment.
- Each of the design distinctions of human being as being in the world is implemented as being with human being
 - (i) in its affectedness in respect—as empathic receptivity
 - (ii) in understanding and its interpretive fore-structure—as empathic understanding
 - (iii) as first-, second-, and third-person perspectives as empathic perspective taking and
 - (iv) in silent speech where the one becomes the conscience of the other in taking a stand—as empathic listening.

Empathy: A Bridge Over Troubled Waters

- Empathy is where being with human being and being human are authentically disclosed as an authentic form of human relatedness.
- We live in a forgetfulness of the very possibility, of which this talk serves as a reminder. Empathy is the foundation of authentic interhuman relations.
- Thus, if, as Heidegger asserts, being with one another is indeed the ontological bridge between selves; and empathy is an example of authentic being with one another; then empathy is an example of the ontological bridge between selves.