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Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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Everyday Aesthetics and Empathy Development

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ABSTRACT. This study examines the role of aesthetic experience in acts of interpretation and evaluation. *Everyday aesthetics* focuses on everyday activities while emphasizing the beauty doesn't only belong to the perfect but to everyday imperfections as well. This work will focus on how the aesthetic experience and working on everyday aesthetics can help in enhancing the capacity of empathy to develop a deeper understanding of others in our daily lives. It will analyze concepts offered by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger in order to research specific relationships between aesthetic experience, empathy and phenomenology.

1. Introduction

This study examines the role of aesthetic experience in acts of interpretation and evaluation. *Everyday aesthetics* focuses on everyday activities while emphasizing the beauty doesn't only belong to the perfect but to everyday imperfections as well. This work will focus on how the aesthetic experience and working on everyday aesthetics can help in enhancing the capacity of empathy to develop a deeper understanding of others in our daily lives. It will analyze concepts offered by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger in order to research specific relationships between aesthetic experience, empathy and phenomenology.

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Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, in their work of detailed analysis of empathy trace the history of the development of the concept of empathy in different branches. The first conceptualization belongs to David Hume (1711-1776) in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) where he argues upon the ability of human beings to sympathize with each other. In *The Theory of Moral of Moral Sentiments* (1759) Adam Smith (1723-1790) discusses how we come to experience the emotions of others through an imaginative perspective-taking. The term *Einfühlung* [feeling into] has been used as a technical term in aesthetics by Robert Vischer (1879). Later, it was used by Theodor Lipps who discussed how people can experience aesthetic objects and understand each other's mental states. Lipps viewed it as a natural instinct of a process of inner imitation that we would seek to imitate the movements and expressions which we perceive in physical and social objects. Freud claimed to have been influenced by Lipps as well as the philosophers in the phenomenological tradition. Edward Titchener introduced the English term "empathy" in 1909 in his *Elementary Psychology of Thought Processes*, using a transliteration of the Greek word *empathia* to translate *Einfühlung* [feeling in]. The phenomenologists Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Edith Stein (1891-1942) and Max Scheler (1874-1928) discuss empathy in a detailed manner. They used Lipps's ideas to revise them in their own philosophical projects, especially dealing with the problem of intersubjectivity. The relation of concept of empathy to hermeneutics has been established through Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) as he uses the concept of understanding [*Verstehen*] to refer to a form of empathy. In the branch of clinical psychology the concept of empathy has

been discussed by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Carl Rogers (1902-1987) and Heinz Kohut (1913-1981) while they discuss the therapeutic relationship with the client through empathy. Beginning around the 1960s empathy came to be a major topic in developmental and social psychology, involving a variety of methodological approaches for how to scale and develop empathy. Recent works in neuroscience made the most crucial contributions to the study of empathy analyzing the nature of empathy and its role in various experiences as well as the importance of “mirror neurons” (Coplan and Goldie, 2011, pp. X-XXXI).

Ioannidou and Konstantikaki (2008) have done work on the relationship between empathy and emotional intelligence, as empathy is defined as the capacity to share and understand another person’s state of mind or emotions (p. 118). Empathy has been described by Zinn (1999) as the process of understanding another’s subjective experience by vicariously sharing in that experience while maintaining an observant stance. Similarly Keen (2007) proposed that empathy means to recognize another’s feelings and the causes of these feelings and therefore, to be able to participate in the emotional experience of an individual without becoming part of it (Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008, p. 119).

In this study, it is argued that human beings have the capacity of “entrance” to the individual sphere of the others. Or to put it another way, to understand the emotions or mental states of others while Hume, Smith, Vischer and Lipps also focused on these relations in their researches. This capacity of empathy shows itself where the boundaries between the self and the other are defined when we transcend the boundary of our “self” to deal

with other's existence. Nowadays, these processes can be explained by the workings of the "mirror neurons." How this ontological connection between self and the other is possible has been a crucial discussion point as the problem of intersubjectivity for phenomenologists like Husserl, Stein and Scheler. The concept of empathy will be analyzed in this work through the philosophical projects of phenomenologists Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger. Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger both analyze intersubjective communication at an ontological level looking for the foundations of various emotional modes of human beings, and to understand the interactions of Self and the Other.

In the work of Coplan and Goldie on empathy, different researchers work on the relationship of art and empathy, giving examples from different forms of art as film, pictures, music, and literature. I will limit the discussions in this work to the visual arts. Murray Smith in "Empathy, Expansionism and the Extended Mind" discusses the role of empathy in representational works of art and in particular, film. He focuses on "other-focused personal imagining" in order to relate to the "emotional frames of the mind of others" to understand emotions and mental states of the characters in a film. Smith relates this capacity to mirror neurons which "fire both when a subject executes and observes an action" (Smith, 2011, pp. 101-102). He defines its relation to understanding: "Such understanding constitutes a 'direct experiential' knowledge of these emotions, achieved by the 'direct mapping' of visual information concerning the emotions of others –in the form of expressions, gestures and posture –'onto the same visceromotor neural structures that determine the experience of that emotion in the

observer” (Smith, 2011, p. 102). Dominic McIver Lopes discusses how empathy is evoked when viewing a picture or a painting. He argues that empathy is a result of a deliverance of an experience which “matches a face-to-face experience of the scene itself” (Lopes, 2011, p. 118). He argues that watching pictures can improve the empathic skill and the component model of empathic response may be taken to support this argument. He argues that for helping developing an empathic skill the pictures should evoke an empathic response (Lopes, 2011, pp. 123-125). According to component model, “pictures exercise components of one type of empathic response by evoking a different type of emotional response if it shares some of the same components. The component model allows for pictures that help refine one type of emotional response by engaging another, different type of empathic response” (Lopes, 2011, p. 125).

In this work, it is argued that enhancing empathy in individuals through aesthetic experience is possible. Interpretations of works of art may evoke a kind of empathic response in understanding, to access the emotions or mental states of the artist, just as the Lopes argues. The perception of a work of art opens lines of communication between artist and observer through an indirect transfer of emotions and reason through the interpretation of the observer, especially through the workings of “mirror neurons” as Smith also denotes. Through art we may have the capacity of “entrance” to the individual sphere of others by transcending the boundary of our “self” towards understanding others. Promoting empathy through aesthetic perception allows for changes in the levels of communication between people and therefore society respectively.

2. Phenomenology and Empathy

As a phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty has a similar approach when he discusses our perception of objects of art. According to this philosopher, the world is conceptualized to be “flesh” (Barbaras, 2004, pp. 157–158). This terminology of “flesh” stresses that the world is a living, sensible world: “Sense is incarnate, the world is sensible: there is a being of the sense only to the extent that the sense exists as being and as world” (Barbaras, 2004, p. 159). This conception of flesh as communication of the visible parts is put clearly:

My access to a universal mind via reflection, far from finally discovering what I always was, is motivated by the intertwining of my life with the other lives, of my body with the visible things, by the intersection of my perceptual field with that of the others, by the blending in of my duration with the other durations (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 11).

In a similar manner, Anya Daly writes on Merleau-Ponty and intersubjectivity, exploring the Self’s relation to the Other as an embodied cognition. She explains the process:

Someone is making use of my familiar objects. But who can it be? I say that it is another person, a second self, and this I know in the first

place because this living body has the same structure as mine. I experience my body as the power of adopting certain forms of behaviour and a certain world, and I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world: now, it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another person, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world. Henceforth, as the parts of my body together comprise a system, so my body and the other person's are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomena, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously. (PP:353, 354, PP:412, PP:370, PP:411) (Daly, 2016, p. 193).

Daly discusses that Merleau-Ponty's intuitions with regards to the interdependence of self and Other shed a light to the more contemporary discovery of mirror neurons. (Daly, 2016, p. 193). In this sense, empathy can be analyzed in relation to embodied cognition. She puts it:

So too with vision; the other functions as mirror and decentres me. I can see myself from another vantage. I am aware of myself from outside myself and I can take another viewpoint but I cannot see myself as the other sees me. I see the Other and the Other sees me, but I do not experience myself being seen as she or he does; I am always on this side of my body, not on his or her side (VI:147–148, VI:194). Both the reversibilities of touch and vision are possible through 'the flesh', the being of which both unites and separates the Other and me.

It is this ‘flesh’ which both guarantees the connection and communication with the Other and at the same time ensures differentiation. Unlike Husserl, who sought to ground the connection in a transcendental consciousness, Merleau-Ponty stresses the carnal nature of the encounter; the flesh of the Other connects but simultaneously resists both actively and passively. (Daly, 2016, p. 80).

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty’s discussions in his paper *The Child’s Relations with Others* in the field developmental psychology are significant with regards to his assertions concerning the development of the capacities to apprehend an Other. Daly argues that Gallagher and Meltzoff, in their paper ‘The Earliest Sense of Self and Others: Merleau-Ponty and Recent Developmental Studies’ argue that Merleau-Ponty’s interpretations are closely linked with the research of his time, some of which has been superseded and the newborn is in fact, capable of a basic differentiation between self and others (Daly, 2016, p. 81).

The ability to understand and empathize with others has been discussed by Merleau-Ponty as being a phenomenological and ontological ground for existence. Heidegger puts it also in a similar way and he discusses this ability within fundamental concepts found in *Sein und Zeit* [Being and Time]. Frederick A. Olafson (1998) discusses how a theory of morality could be founded on Heidegger’s philosophy, and Heidegger’s relevant concepts would be Being-with [*Mitsein*], solicitude [*Fürsorge*] and Resoluteness [*Entschlossenheit*] (pp. 3-5). The concept of “Being-with” implies “our being in the world together with one another” where solicitude

[*Fürsorge*] is central to being-with and it implies “one human beings’s caring about another” (Olafson, 1998, pp. 3-4). The concept of “resoluteness”, on the other hand also “pushes us into a caring *Mitsein* [Being-with] with others (Olafson, 1998, pp. 4-5). Heidegger emphasizes that *Dasein is for the sake of others* (Olafson, 1998, p. 4). In addition, he maintains that “Being with others belongs to the Being of Dasein, which is an issue for Dasein in its very Being. Thus as Being-with, Dasein ‘is’ essentially for the sake of others” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 160). “For the sake of” arises from our caring for each other, while Mark Okrent (2007) asserts that “we understand ourselves and our existence by way of the activities we pursue and the things we take care of.’ The self is primarily tacitly intended as that ‘for the sake of which’ things matter to us and our activities make sense” (p. 151). Since Dasein is already projected into possibilities in existential structures and Heidegger calls *for-the-sakeof-which* as *projection* on possibilities, there is always purposivity in the understanding and existence of Dasein (Dreyfus, 1991, pp. 186-187). Hence, “Dasein is for the sake of others” means that human existence is on purpose and in the direction of living with others. Heidegger argues that “even if one particular factual Dasein does *not* turn to others and supposes that there is no need to contact others or one person manages to get along without dealing with others, *s/he is still* in the mode of existence of *Being-with*. In Being-with, as the existential ‘for-the-sake-of’ of others, these have already disclosed in their Dasein”; this statement occurs because Dasein “with their Being-with, their disclosedness has been constituted beforehand; accordingly, this disclosedness also goes to make up significance—that is to say, worldhood”

(Heidegger, 1996, p. 160).

Heidegger maintains that “the world is always the one that I share with others. The world of Dasein is a *with-world* [*Mitwelt*]. *Being-in* is *Being-with* others. Their *Being-in-themselves within-the-world* is *Dasein-with* [*Mit-Dasein*]” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 155). Being-with [*Mitsein*] others is ontological, while Heidegger maintains that the assertion of “‘Dasein is essentially Being-with’ has an existential ontological meaning” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 155). It corresponds to the fact that Being-with works through the understanding of Dasein which makes the existential-ontological worldliness possible.

Understanding itself is bound to the understanding of others; therefore, the world which is made by the understanding of Dasein belongs to the world of Being-with [*Mitsein*] ontologically. As Heidegger (1996) puts it: “Being-with is such that the disclosedness of the Dasein-with of others belongs to it; this means that because Dasein’s Being is Being-with, its understanding of Being already implies the understanding of others” (pp. 160-161). In conclusion, this understanding is related to the way of Being: “This understanding, like any understanding, is not an acquaintance derived from knowledge about them, but a primordially existential kind of Being, which, more than anything else, makes such knowledge and acquaintance possible” (Heidegger, 1996, pp. 160-161). Heidegger (1996) defines “one’s kind of Being” as Being-with [*Mitsein*] where “opening oneself up [*sich offenbaren*] and closing one’s self off is grounded in one’s having Being-with-one-Another as one’s kind of Being, in its “primarily Being with him in each case” (p. 161). Due to the fact that the truth of *Dasein* belongs to a

world of being-with others primarily, the realization of self cannot be independent from the life of others. Therefore, the concept of solicitude [*Fürsorge*] binds people together in an ontological sense related to Being. Trying to understand the life of others, Dasein “constitutes Being towards others” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 161). Through such a founding of Dasein’s existence and understanding others, the phenomenon of *empathy* is made possible.

Empathy is able to “provide the ontological bridge from one’s own subject, which is given proximally as alone, to the other subject, which is proximally quite closed off” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 162). Heidegger (1996) maintains that empathy is “possible only if Dasein, as *Being-in-the-world*, already is with others. ‘Empathy’ does not first constitute Being-with; only on the basis of Being-with does ‘empathy’ become possible” (p. 162). Hence, the ontological *being-with* opens the possibility of *empathy* where the understanding of others is made possible ontologically. In this common ontological ground of Being with Others, understanding of Others is made possible and empathy can be constituted.

Heidegger (1996) also argues upon the possibility of empathy to be suppressed while genuine understanding may be restrained due to any number of conditions experienced in our daily lives: “The special hermeneutic of empathy will have to show how Being-with-one-another and Dasein’s knowing of itself are led astray and obstructed by the various possibilities of Being which Dasein itself possesses, so that a ‘genuine’ understanding gets suppressed” (p. 163). The fallenness in the world leads Dasein to have deficient modes of solicitude where capacity of

understanding others in empathy is suppressed. Heidegger (1996) implies that “Being-alone is a deficient mode of Being-with” whereas the other deficient modes of Dasein-with are “Being missing” and “Being away” (p. 157). Heidegger argues that *Dasein*’s way of living is being-with others as it develops empathy in understanding others in solicitude and in authentic care for others which makes the worldhood.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, Merleau-Ponty brings a unitary and unique approach to our capacity to perceive the worlds of others since people are bound to each other as being one “flesh” ontologically. Therefore, the perception of the other is connected to perceiving one’s own self, which opens discussions on the foundation of empathy at an ontological level while we continue to maintain a position with regards to the perceptions of the other. Heidegger offers an ontological analysis of emotional experiences of human beings with his concept of *Mitsein* [Being-with] and *Mitwelt* [with-world]. These concepts offer a reflection upon the ontological foundation of empathy. These thoughts offered by phenomenologists in search of the fundamentals of emotions allow us to research how empathy may be enhanced through aesthetic experience.

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