The concept of empathy is notoriously ambiguous. What is meant by “empathy” seems to vary not only across different disciplines but even within an individual discipline. One reason why philosophers and psychologists alike have been interested in the notion of empathy has been its purported relevance for moral theory—the idea being that it is empathy that leads somebody to respond with sensitivity and care to the suffering of others. At the same time, however, recent research on social cognition has repeatedly emphasized that empathy may hold the key to important and foundational issues in interpersonal understanding (Goldman 1995a; Goldie 1999; Decety and Ickes 2009). In the discussion that follows we focus on the latter issue, that is, the relevance of empathy for the discussion of the nature of social cognition.

In recent decades much of that discussion has taken place within the framework of the so-called theory-of-mind debate. On one side we find the theory-theory of mind and on the other the simulation theory of mind. Theory-theorists typically argue that we attribute mental states to others on the basis of a theory of mind that is either constructed in early infancy and subsequently revised and modified (Gopnik and Wellman 1995) or else is the result of maturation of innate mind-reading modules (Baron-Cohen 1995). Simulation theorists, on the other hand, deny that our understanding of others is primarily theoretical in nature and maintain that we use our own mind as a model when understanding the minds of others. Some claim that the simulation in question involves the exercise of conscious imagination and deliberative inference (Goldman 1995b); some insist that the simulation although explicit is non-inferential in nature (Gordon 1986); and finally there are those who argue that the simulation rather than being explicit and conscious is implicit and subpersonal (Gallese 2003).

It is in particular within the simulationist camp that the notion of empathy has resurfaced as a central category. In the beginning of his recent book Simulating Minds, for instance, Goldman writes that he considers mind reading an extended form of
empathy (Goldman 2006, 4). As for Gallese, he has in various publications described empathy as a form of inner imitation (2003, 519) and has argued that it is what allows us to understand not only the actions but also the displayed emotions and sensations of others (2001, 45). In fact Gallese has even insisted that empathy “is relevant when accounting for all aspects of behavior enabling us to establish a meaningful link between others and ourselves” (2001, 43). It is consequently not too surprising that some argue that simulationists are today’s equivalents of empathy theorists (Stueber 2006, ix).

One noteworthy difference between Goldman’s and Gallese’s respective uses of the notion of empathy is that the latter is far more interested in the historical origins of the notion. Whereas Goldman makes no significant reference to the extensive discussion of empathy and social cognition found in the phenomenological tradition (cf. Goldman 2006, 18), Gallese refers favorably, not only to Lipps’s discussion of inner imitation, but also to Stein’s account of empathy and to Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of intersubjectivity (Gallese 2001). Indeed, Gallese is quite explicit in considering his own notion of embodied simulation that relies on mirror-resonance mechanisms to be akin to and a further development of the phenomenological proposal (2004, 397; cf. Iacoboni 2008).

In a footnote added in a late Polish translation of his 1918 dissertation—which was supervised by Husserl—Roman Ingarden made the following observation:

At the time when this treatise was written, extensive discussions took place regarding the so-called empathy, a notion that had been proposed by the psychologizing German aesthetes like for instance Theodor Lipps. A number of phenomenologists such as M. Geiger, Max Scheler, Edith Stein and later also Husserl participated in this discussion and it became increasingly clear that the classical theory of empathy which considered it a kind of projection of one’s own psychical states into foreign bodies had to be replaced by a theory that took empathy to be a special kind of perception of the psychical states as they are manifest in the bodily expression. (Ingarden, 1994, 170–71)

Ingarden’s remark not only highlights the need for a distinction between Lipps’s definition of empathy in terms of inner imitation, and the subsequent analyses found in phenomenology. It also suggests that the classical phenomenological account might differ rather markedly from recent attempts to explain empathy in terms of mirroring, mimicry, imitation, emotional contagion, imaginative projection, or inferential attribution.

In the first part of this chapter we outline some of the distinctive features of this alternative phenomenological account of empathy. In the second part of the chapter we compare and contrast the phenomenological account with a recent model proposed by de Vignemont and colleagues (de Vignemont and Singer 2006, de Vignemont and Jacob 2010/under review). We argue that the latter model faces a number of problems that do not arise for the former account.
Empathy and Face-to-Face Interaction

We start with a brief glance at Lipps’s account of empathy since this was an account from which all the phenomenologists to varying degrees distanced themselves. In his 1907 article “Das Wissen von fremden Ichen,” Lipps argues that we have a tendency to reproduce a foreign gesture of expression when we see it and that this tendency also evokes the feeling normally associated with the expression. He talks of this process as being instinctual in character. He speaks of an *instinct of empathy* and argues that it involves two components: a drive directed toward imitation and a drive directed toward expression (Lipps 1907, 713). It is the feeling in myself evoked by the expression that is then attributed to the other through projection. It is projected into or onto the other’s perceived gesture, thereby allowing for a form of interpersonal understanding (Lipps 1907, 717–719). Why is projection involved? Because on Lipps’s account we only know of anger, joy, and so forth from our own case. The only mental states we have experiential access to are our own.

It is not difficult to spot the similarities between Lipps’s account and contemporary proposals. Hatfield and colleagues, for instance, have recently defended the view that the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize one’s facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person is basic to human interaction, and is what allows one to feel oneself into the emotional life of the other (Hatfield, Rapson, and Le 2009).

However, one of the persisting phenomenological objections to Lipps’s account targets precisely his suggestion that (inner) imitation constitutes the basis of empathy. According to Lipps when I observe somebody who is afraid, in pain, or happy, this somehow requires me to be afraid, in pain, or happy. Indeed, if the imitation is to serve any explanatory purpose, my own felt pain or joy must precede rather than follow my conscious recognition of the fear, pain, or joy in the other. But as Scheler writes, we might understand from the wagging tail of a dog that he is happy to see us, but this does not require us to imitate the expression ourselves (Scheler 1954, 11). Moreover, how plausible is it after all to claim that I have to be scared myself in order to understand that my child is scared or that I need to become furious myself if I am to recognize the fury in the face of my assailant (Husserl 1973, 188)? As Stein points out there is a discrepancy between the phenomenon that Lipps seeks to explain and the phenomenon he actually does explain (Stein 1989, 23). Lipps’s theory might explain why a certain experience occurs in me, but it does not offer an explanation of how I come to understand the other. Rather than explaining empathy, that is, empathy understood as an experience of the minded life of others, Lipps’s account is better geared to handle something like *motor mimicry* or *emotional contagion*.

A distinctive feature of what is known as *emotional contagion* is that you literally catch the emotion in question (Scheler 1954, 15). It is transferred to you. It becomes
your own emotion. Indeed you can be infected by the jolly or angry mood of others without even being aware of them as distinct individuals. But this is precisely what makes emotional contagion different from empathy. In empathy the experience you empathically understand remains that of the other. The focus is on the other, and the distance between self and other is preserved and upheld. Another distinctive feature of emotional contagion is that it primarily concerns the emotional quality rather than the object of the emotion. You can be infected by cheerfulness or hilarity, without knowing what it is about. This is what makes emotional contagion different from what Scheler calls emotional sharing. Think of a situation in which a couple is enjoying a movie together. For Scheler such a situation would exemplify the possibility of sharing both the emotion (joy) and the object of the emotion. But emotional sharing must on its part still be distinguished from empathy. Consider the situation where a common friend interacts with the couple. He might perceive their enjoyment without being joyful himself (perhaps because he finds the movie silly or because he is in a bad mood). In this case the friend would be empathically directed at their enjoyment without experiencing the joy as his own. Indeed, their joy and his empathic understanding are clearly qualitatively different and distinct. Their joy is the intentional object of his empathy (cf. Scheler 1954, 12–13).

What about the relation between empathy and sympathy? Compare the following group of cases discussed by Scheler. Consider first the situation in which you see the face of a crying child, but rather than seeing it as expressing discomfort or distress, you merely see certain distortions of the facial muscles, that is, you basically do not see it as emotionally expressive. Compare this (pathological) case with the situation in which you see the same face as emotionally expressive but without feeling any compassion, that is, while remaining indifferent. And finally consider the situation in which you also feel compassion or concern for the child. For Scheler the last situation counts as a case of sympathy, which he considers an ethically relevant act. But in order to feel sympathy, in order to feel compassion with, say, somebody’s suffering, you first need to understand that the other is indeed suffering (cf. Batson 2009, 10), and such understanding may be provided by empathy. In short, whereas empathy, for Scheler, has to do with a basic understanding of expressive others, sympathy adds care or concern for the other.

Apart from stressing the difference between empathy and sympathy, the point of Scheler’s example is also to remind us that it is possible to empathize with somebody without feeling any sympathy (Scheler 1954, 8–9). Just think of the skilled interrogator or the sadist. A high degree of empathic sensitivity might precisely be of use if one wants to inflict especially cruel pain on somebody.

So far, we find the phenomenologists insisting on the differences among emotional contagion, emotional sharing, empathy, and sympathy. Furthermore, they would reject the proposal that imitation, emotional contagion, or mimicry should be the
Empathy without Isomorphism

paradigm of empathy. Indeed, they reject the projective theory of empathy, and they also dismiss the attempt to account for the experience of others in terms of some imaginative transformation. On the phenomenological account, empathy is not a distinct and specific emotion (like embarrassment, shame, or pride); rather, it denotes a basic, sui generis, form of intentionality directed at other experiencing subjects as such (Stein 1989, 6). To have empathy with another person is in short to experience the psychological life of that person. But on the phenomenological account that does not entail that the other’s experience is literally transmitted to you. In basic empathy the focus is on the other, on his thoughts and feelings, and not on myself, nor on how it would be like for me to be in the shoes of the other (Scheler 1954, xlviii, 39). To experience, say, the emotion of the other differs from the way you would experience the emotion if it were your own. Thus empathy does not entail that we ourselves undergo the emotion we observe in the other. We might, but this is not a requisite. We might encounter a furious neighbor and become furious ourselves, but our empathic understanding of our neighbor’s emotion might also elicit the reverse response, namely a feeling of fear. In either case, however, our emotional reaction is exactly that—a reaction. It is a consequence of our understanding of the other’s emotion and not a precondition or prerequisite for this understanding. If presented with Goldman’s view that a necessary condition for mind reading “is that the state ascribed to the target is ascribed as a result of the attributor’s instantiating, undergoing, or experiencing, that very state” (Goldman and Sripada 2005, 208), the phenomenologists would argue that such an account conflates empathy with other kinds of phenomena and moreover fails to capture the fact that we can and do experience other minds. It is no coincidence that Scheler repeatedly speaks of the perception of others (Fremdwahrnehmung) and even entitles his own theory a perceptual theory of other minds (Scheler 1954, 220).

But is it not preposterous to claim that we are able to experience other people’s mental states? Does this not overlook the fact that we do not have the same kind of access to the minds of others that we have to our own? To phrase it differently, any convincing account of our understanding of others must respect the asymmetry between self-ascription and other-ascription of mental states and must respect that whereas I enjoy a first-person perspective on my own mental life, I do not have first-personal access to the minds of others. This is true, but neither Husserl nor Stein ignores this fact.

Already in the Logical Investigations Husserl wrote that common speech credits us with percepts of other people’s inner experiences, we see their anger or pain, so to speak. As he then went on to say such talk is to some extent correct. When a hearer perceives a speaker give voice to certain inner experiences, he also perceives these experiences themselves, but as Husserl then adds, the hearer does not have an inner but only an outer perception of these experiences (Husserl 2001, 189–90). So on the
one hand Husserl argues that my experience of others has a quasiperceptual character in the sense that it grasps the other him- or herself (Husserl 1973, 24). On the other hand Husserl also says that although the body of another person is perceptually given, this is not the case with the other’s experiences. They can never be given to me in the same original fashion as my own experiences; they are not accessible to me through inner consciousness. Rather they are appresented through a special form of apperception, or to use a different terminology, they are co-intended and characterized by a certain co-presence (Husserl 1973, 27).

We find a very similar account in Stein. In her view empathy announces in the most direct manner possible the actual presence of the other’s experience, although it does not provide us with first-personal access to it. To exemplify, let us consider a situation in which a friend tells me that he has lost his mother, and I become aware of his distress. What kind of awareness is this? I obviously do not see the distress the same way I see the color of his shirt; rather I see the distress “in” his pained countenance (Stein 1989, 6). In this case it makes sense to say that I experience (rather than imagine or infer) his distress, although I certainly do lack a first-person experience of the distress; it is not my distress. Like Scheler, Stein consequently stresses the importance of not conflating empathy with emotional sharing (Mitführen). In the latter case I feel, say, joy, or distress over the same event as my friend. In the former case I am primarily directed at my friend’s experience (and only secondarily at the object of his experience). Thus, Stein takes empathy to be a unique kind of experience in that when I empathize with another, the empathized experience is located in the other and not in myself. Empathy entails by necessity a difference between the subject of empathic experience and the subject of the empathized experience. Stein then goes on to argue that empathy is a sui generis modality of experience, but she also says that its content (the empathized experience) is given nonprimordially (Stein 1989, 10–11). In short, empathy is both like and unlike perception. It is like perception in being direct, unmediated, and noninferential (Stein 1989, 24). It is unlike perception in not being able to offer us the fullest presence of the empathized experience—that presence is only available to the subject of the experience.

To put it differently, when arguing that we are able to experience others, and as a consequence do not exclusively have to rely on and employ theoretical inferences, internal simulations, or imaginative projections, the phenomenologists are not denying that second- (and third-) person access to psychological states do differ from first-person access. But they would argue that it would be a mistake to restrict and equate experiential access with first-person access. It is possible to experience mental states in more than one way. When I experience the facial expressions or meaningful actions of another person, I am experiencing aspects of his or her psychological life and not merely imagining them, simulating them, or theorizing about them. I am experiencing the other him- or herself and not merely some theoretical or imagined
construct, some simulation, or simulacrum. Moreover, the fact that my experiential access to the minds of other differs from my experiential access to my own mind is not an imperfection or shortcoming. On the contrary, this difference is constitutional. It is precisely because of this difference, precisely because of this asymmetry, that we can claim that the minds we experience are other minds (cf. Husserl 1995, 109).

Phenomenologists would typically not dispute that self-experience is a precondition for other-experience. But there is a decisive difference between arguing that the former is a necessary condition (and that there would be no other-experience in its absence) and claiming that self-experience somehow serves as a model for other-experience, as if interpersonal understanding is basically a question of projecting oneself into the other. Consider, by contrast, Goldman’s simulation-plus-projection routine. Goldman explicitly talks of the routine as consisting of “the act of assigning a state of one’s own to someone else” (Goldman 2006, 40). But this seems de facto to imprison me within my own mind and to prevent me from ever encountering others. It is not insignificant that Lipps, after having argued very much like Goldman, reaches the following conclusion: “Psychologically considered, other human beings are duplications of myself” (Lipps 1900, 418).

Phenomenologists would not deny that in some cases we rely on imagination, memory, or theoretical knowledge when we attempt to understand others. We can for instance attempt to identify the goal of their actions and then imagine how we would seek to accomplish it and what experiences we would be living through. Or we might rely on memory and remember what we went through when, in the past, we sought to realize a similar goal (Schutz 1967, 114). Finally, we can also make use of our general knowledge regarding the kind of action in question and then seek to infer its causes and motives (Schutz 1967, 175). In fact, if we really want to understand the full psychological life of others, if we want to understand what others are up to, why they are doing what they are doing and what that means to them, we have to go beyond a narrow focus on face-to-face interaction and embodied engagement. Although it might be permissible to say that certain aspects of the other’s consciousness, such as his joy, sorrow, pain, shame, pleading, love, rage, and threats, are given to us directly and noninferentially, it does not follow from this that we also have a direct access to the why of such feelings. And in order to uncover these aspects, it is not sufficient simply to observe expressive movements and actions, we also have to rely on interpretation, and we also have to draw on a highly structured context of meaning (Schutz 1967, 23–24). In short, if we wish to reach a deeper level of interpersonal understanding, we have to go beyond what is directly available (Schutz 1967, 168).

However, even if one concedes all of this, it should not lead one to question the importance of the face-to-face encounter. The latter remains basic in the sense that it constitutes the foundation for all other forms of interpersonal understanding (Schutz
Although it is quite true that theoretical knowledge or past experience might facilitate our understanding of what somebody is up to and what he or she is thinking or feeling (which is why an obstetrician or mother might be better able to understand what a woman giving birth is going through than a teenager), this valid (if somewhat trivial) point regarding concrete facets of interpersonal understanding must be distinguished from the erroneous view that our very conviction that we are faced with a minded creature is to the same extent a result of theorizing or simulation.

To summarize, for the phenomenologists empathy provides us with an experiential access to other minds. But to avoid misunderstandings it is first of all important to realize that empathy, rather than being some mysterious form of telepathy, simply amounts to an experience of the embodied mind of the other, that is, simply refers to our ability to access the life of the mind of others in their bodily and behavioral expressions; it is an ability that can improve with familiarity, learning, and salience. Second, although it is important to recognize the importance of empathy, it is also important to recognize its limitations. There is a limit to how far empathy (plus sensitivity to the immediate context) can get us. Our everyday understanding of others draws on other resources as well. If we wish to unearth why somebody is feeling the way he does or why he is acting the way he does, we might need to consider the larger social, cultural, and historical context, and this understanding cannot be provided by empathy alone (cf. Stueber 2006).

Isomorphism and Interpersonal Similarity

In this section, we take a closer look at a recent model of empathy that on important points seems to converge with the phenomenological account just outlined. Yet, there are also some significant differences, and as we argue, the former faces some difficulties that do not affect the phenomenological account.

In a number of publications Frédérique de Vignemont and various co-authors have advanced the following ideas about empathy and related notions. First, in order to “enable precise claims to be made about the nature of empathy,” we should opt for a narrow definition of empathy that allows us to preserve important distinctions between empathy, on the one hand, and phenomena such as sympathy and emotional contagion, on the other hand (de Vignemont and Singer 2006, 435). Second, whereas emotional contagion is “self-centered,” empathy is essentially “other-centered” (de Vignemont 2009). Third, we should resist the temptation to account for empathy in terms of motor mimicry or mirror-resonance mechanisms, both of which are better geared to handle something like emotional contagion.

These are all observations with which we agree, and here we see a clear overlap with the phenomenological proposal. However, whereas de Vignemont and colleagues
concede that the similarity between a mind reader’s psychological state and her target’s affective state is not a necessary, nor even an enabling condition, for ascribing an affective state to the target in standard mind reading, they do claim that such an interpersonal similarity constraint holds true in the case of empathy. More specifically they insist that empathy requires isomorphic emotional or sensory states in empathizer and target. In addition they stipulate a number of other conditions that must be met if empathy is to obtain, and as will become clear from what follows, we suggest that given their definition, it is doubtful whether empathy can play any foundational role in our understanding of others. To put it differently, whereas we agree on the importance of defining empathy in such a manner that it is distinct from other forms of interpersonal understanding, we still consider empathy a basic form of interpersonal understanding, and on the definition provided by de Vignemont and collaborators it is anything but that.

So how do they define empathy? There are a handful of slightly different definitions in circulation, but let us focus on the one offered by de Vignemont and Singer:

There is empathy if: (i) one is in an affective state; (ii) this state is isomorphic to another person’s state; (iii) this state is elicited by the observation or imagination of another person’s affective state; (iv) one knows that the other person is the source of one’s own affective state. (de Vignemont and Singer 2006, 435)

Loosely put, the main point of the first condition is to set empathy apart from more theoretical, detached or “colder” ways of working out what another person is feeling. The second condition is supposed to distinguish empathy from sympathy, while the function of the fourth condition is to distinguish empathy from emotional contagion (de Vignemont 2009). But, to start with the latter issue, it is not clear whether the definition is really able to hold all cases of contagion apart from cases of empathizing.

Consider the following example discussed by de Vignemont and Jacob. Suppose a screaming infant is injected with a painful vaccine in a hospital ward, and his six-year-old sister, witnessing the event, tenses up and shrinks “as if she were anticipating her own future painful experience caused by the penetration of the needle into her own skin” (de Vignemont and Jacob 2010/under review, 2–3). This response, de Vignemont and Jacob note, is an example of contagion. Now, of course, this sort of contagion is not just something to which young children are prone—adults sometimes react this way as well. The difference is that, whereas a six-year-old may not realize that the other’s pain is the source of her own wincing and tensing up, adults may be fully aware that this is exactly what is going on. But, crucially, this hardly makes the case less a case of contagion. On the contrary it obviously remains contagion, for just like the six-year-old, we adults may primarily be concerned with how unpleasant it is for us to have the needle penetrate our own skin. Our knowledge that the other’s
pain is the source of our wincing does nothing to change the fact that we are “self-centered.”

Let us be clear that this episode involves empathy, as we understand it. The initial observation of the infant’s expressions of pain qualifies as empathizing, as the phenomenologists understand it. However, we believe that the overall state the observer is in by virtue of meeting de Vignemont and Singer’s (2006) four conditions does not merit the label “empathy.” For the wincing reaction, even when it is coupled with the empathic experience that gave rise to it and with the realization that it is a reaction to another’s painful experience, is a phenomenon of contagion, not an empathic phenomenon.

A similar problem arises with respect to the distinction between empathy and sympathy. Suppose someone sees that her friend is depressed and feels sad for him. Following de Vignemont and Singer’s scheme, this is a case of sympathy, not empathy, and indeed this seems the most natural way to describe it. However, it is questionable whether the reason why it should be classified in this way is that the two people are in different affective states. For what if someone sees that her friend is sad and feels sad for him? Now the “isomorphism” condition is met, and it is likely that the other conditions are met as well. So, according to de Vignemont and Singer, this should be a case of empathy, not sympathy. But this, it seems to us, is wrongheaded. For the two examples are identical in all relevant respects: they are both cases of someone feeling sadness and concern directed at another person’s plight. And is it really plausible to suggest that, merely because we change the target subject’s emotion, what would otherwise have been a clear case of sympathetic concern becomes a case of empathizing instead?

Let us note a further troublesome implication of the isomorphism requirement. A quite common phenomenon, we assume, is that one person expresses a certain emotion—say, anger—and another person sees this and reacts with a different type of emotion—say, fear. This sort of case has no straightforward place in de Vignemont and colleagues’ classificatory system. In not meeting the isomorphism requirement, it can count neither as a case of empathy nor as a case of emotional contagion. Nor does it count as sympathy—the frightened person will typically not feel concern or sympathy for the person expressing anger. So the only available option is to classify it as a case of “standard mind reading.” In other words if I react with fear to someone else’s anger, this is simply standard mind reading; but if I react with anger, I am—if the other conditions are met—empathizing. But is that really plausible? Qua events of mind reading, the two cases are surely identical: what varies is the mind reader’s emotional reaction to the emotion she perceives in the other. And it is just not clear why one should accept that isomorphic reactions yield empathy. Indeed, if we accept this, we should have to say of the youth who reacts with violent rage to another
person’s anger that the former, *in virtue of reacting in precisely this way and no other way,* “empathizes” with the latter.8

Perhaps partly in an attempt to address counterexamples like the ones we have canvassed, de Vignemont and Jacob impose a further requirement on empathy, namely what they call the “Caring condition.” This condition states that an empathizer must “care about” his or her target’s affective life (2010/under review, 21). However, the condition is ambiguous: precisely what is involved in “caring about” someone else’s affective life? The most natural reading of this would suggest something characteristic of sympathy rather than empathy: to care about someone else’s feelings and emotions, surely, is to feel sympathy or concern for him or her. As this would collapse the distinction between empathy and sympathy, however, we doubt that it is the way de Vignemont and Jacob would want the caring condition to be understood. Alternatively, it might be suggested that the caring condition simply makes explicit the “other-centeredness” that the phenomenologists would agree is central to empathy. If so two comments are in order. First, this surely raises the question of whether de Vignemont and Singer’s original four-part definition of empathy—which was after all supposed to have secured the other-centeredness—should not be rethought altogether rather than patched up with further conditions that do the work the original definition was unable to do. Second, on this understanding of the caring condition it is, of course, still the case that the angry youth empathizes with his victim: the problem with this case is not that the youth is not other-centered but that it seems strange to label the violent rage he directs at his victim “empathetic.”9

This discussion highlights what in our view is the main problem with de Vignemont and colleagues’ definition. For them empathy is a less direct and more mediated form of interpersonal understanding than the kind provided by standard mind reading (de Vignemont 2010, 292; de Vignemont and Singer 2006, 439). And they specifically target Gallese’s claim that empathy provides a “direct experiential understanding” of others (de Vignemont 2010, 284). The explanation repeatedly offered for why empathy is indirect is that it is influenced by contextual factors and can be modulated, for instance, by appraisal processes (de Vignemont and Singer 2006, 437). But is it impossible for something to be both direct and contextual at the same time? For comparison consider the case of vision. Vision usually counts as the paradigm of direct experience. I can theorize about the aurora borealis, I can imagine what it must be like to see the phenomenon, and I can see and experience it in all its splendor, but—and this is an old insight—when we perceive an object, we perceive it in a perceptual field. We are conscious of it in a particular setting, and the way it is given to us is influenced by what is co-given with it. We see no conflict between this insight and the claim that the perceptual object is directly given. Similarly, consider the case of utensils, say, an iPad. For something to be intended as an iPad, for something to appear as an iPad, a
whole network of equipmental contexture, to use a Heideggerian phrasing, must be in place. But again, this fact does not make the perception of an iPad indirect and theory laden in the same way as our positing of black holes or subatomic particles. It does not make our access to the iPad nonexperiential; it does not turn the iPad into an inherently unobservable construct. To put it differently, there is no contradiction in defending the direct and contextual character of perception at the same time. This point also applies to interpersonal understanding.

One possible retort to the claim that empathy provides us with a direct experiential understanding of others is that such a claim is nonsensical since it overlooks the fact that we do not have the same kind of access to the minds of others that we have to our own. To phrase it differently, any convincing account of our understanding of others must respect the asymmetry between self-ascription and other-ascription of mental states; it must respect that, whereas I enjoy a first-person perspective on my own mental life, I do not have first-personal access to the minds of others. This is precisely the objection we find in de Vignemont, since she equates Gallese’s (2004) notion of direct experiential understanding with that of having an access to other people’s states “as if they were one’s own” (de Vignemont 2010, 284). The problem, however, is that there is not one golden standard of what directness amounts to. As Bennett and Hacker (2003) recently remarked, we can speak of indirect evidence or of knowing indirectly only where it also makes sense to speak of a more direct evidence, but there is no more direct way of knowing that another is in pain than by seeing him writhe in pain. By contrast, noticing a bottle of pain-killers next to his bedside together with an empty glass of water and concluding that he has been in pain is an example of knowing indirectly or by way of inference (Bennett and Hacker 2003, 89, 93). On this understanding of what “direct access” to another’s psychological state amounts to, such direct access is not in any sort of tension with the important point that we do not have access to other people’s states “as if they were our own.”

There is a further problem facing de Vignemont and Singer’s (2006) account. We have noted that they (correctly) attribute to empathy an important role in enabling us to understand the feelings and emotions of others. Empathy “enables us to understand what they feel,” as de Vignemont and Singer (2006, 439) put it. Now, if what this means is that empathy may, for example, enable us to understand the type of emotion someone else is having—that she feels angry, sad, happy, or whatever—then again, along with the phenomenologists discussed above, we would agree. But the problem is that empathy as defined by de Vignemont and Singer seems to presuppose such understanding and, if so, cannot be what enables it. To see the problem we must remember that, according to de Vignemont and Singer (2006), it must be “the observation or imagination of another person’s affective state” that elicits an empathizing person’s isomorphic state. I must imagine or observe someone else’s anger, say, and this must be what elicits a feeling of anger in me. But then it seems I must already
understand that the other is angry before I can myself get angry, and if so the engendering of the isomorphic state in me, and the knowledge of what caused it, cannot be what enable me to understand that the other is angry: these states themselves must be elicited by such an understanding.\textsuperscript{10}

Obviously, one consequence of such a view would be that empathy has a more modest role to play in social understanding than many philosophers and psychologists have believed; but in itself that is maybe not a very damaging criticism of the view. Indeed, de Vignemont and colleagues might cheerfully accept this result. After all they themselves stress the marked difference between the complex machinery of empathy, which must meet four requirements,\textsuperscript{11} and the simpler and presumably more widespread “standard mind reading,” which has to meet only one requirement—that of attributing a mental state to another (de Vignemont and Jacob 2010/under review, 22).

At this point it might be suggested that the claim of de Vignemont and co-authors (2006, 2010/under review) is not that empathy enables us to understand the type of emotion another person is having. Rather, what empathy enables is an understanding of what it is “like” for the other person—what that person is “going through.” In other words, empathy improves or “deepens,” as it were, the understanding of others’ emotions that we get from other sources, and it does so by giving us more of an “inside-view” of a stretch of their affective lives. We suspect something along such lines may indeed be what de Vignemont and co-authors would want to say. Consider what she and Singer say about the conditions under which a person is able to empathize with someone suffering from vertigo: “An empathizer who does not suffer from vertigo can hardly empathize with a target who is frightened by the void below him because he does not have the specific feeling of vertigo in his repertoire” (de Vignemont and Singer 2006, 438). The point here is surely not that you cannot see that the person suffering from vertigo is frightened unless you yourself suffer from vertigo. Rather, the point must be that you cannot really know “what it is like” for the other person unless you share his affliction.

We think, however, that it is far from obvious that empathy, as understood by de Vignemont and colleagues (2006, 2010/under review), will consistently facilitate this sort of deepened understanding of what another person is going through. If the two subjects in de Vignemont and Singer’s example—and the description certainly does not rule this out—both have a void below them, one might wonder whether a would-be empathizer who \textit{does} suffer from vertigo would be able to empathize with another person in this situation. Surely, it would be natural to think that his own feelings of vertigo would make him anything but “other-centered” in the sense required for empathy. What seems right about de Vignemont and Singer’s (2006) observations is that unless you \textit{have} felt similar things in the past and retain some memory of them, you may not be able to understand “from the inside” what a person suffering from
vertigo is going through. But, first, it is not clear that only previous experiences of vertigo will fit the bill here. Why can I not achieve an equally good grasp of what the sufferer from vertigo is going through on the basis of having had other experiences of intense fear? Second, and more importantly, empathy, on de Vignemont and Singer’s (2006) account, requires you to currently feel such feelings. And it seems plausible that in many situations being oneself in the grip of some affective state is disadvantageous, rather than helpful, when it comes to understanding what another person is going through.

If all this is right, it is questionable whether empathy as understood by de Vignemont and colleagues (2006, 2010/under review) really does contribute much of significance to social understanding. Perhaps this is a consequence that they would be willing to accept. But our hunch is that most researchers working on empathy will prefer to search for other options before embracing such a deflationary conclusion.

Conclusion

To summarize our arguments in the previous section, the definition of empathy offered by de Vignemont, Singer and Jacob is inadequate because:

1. It does not distinguish properly between empathy and emotional contagion.
2. It implausibly counts certain cases of responding with anger to other people’s displays of anger as cases of empathizing.
3. It does not distinguish properly between empathy and sympathy.
4. It seemingly deprives empathy of any foundational role in interpersonal understanding.

If our arguments are on the right lines, then the obvious thing to do would be to rethink empathy altogether. In particular we should abandon the idea that an empathizer must be in an affective state that is isomorphic to the target’s state. The phenomenological account offers one—in our view quite plausible—way of achieving these aims.

Compared with ambitious attempts—along the lines of de Vignemont, Singer and Jacob—to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for empathy, the phenomenological proposal may seem vague and imprecise. According to the phenomenologists empathy is a kind of direct, noninferential, (quasi-)perceptual awareness of other people’s emotions, sensations, and other psychological states. I empathize with another, that is, I have an empathic understanding of another when I see her anger as expressed in her face, for example. This makes empathy look like a simple phenomenon, and per se it gives us no inkling of the “mechanisms” involved in empathizing. But if we understand empathy in this way we have no problem seeing how it can be distinguished from emotional contagion or sympathy, and its pivotal
role in interpersonal understanding becomes clear. Sometimes I may catch the mood in a bar, say, without empathizing with any particular person in the bar—which gives us contagion (seemingly) without empathy. At other times it may be the empathic perception of another’s fear or sadness that leads me to feel afraid or sad myself—in which case contagion would seem to “build on top of” empathy. In neither sort of case can the two phenomena be confused. Similarly, the empathic detection of someone else’s emotion, as we have explained in the first section of this chapter, is clearly different from the element of sympathy that may (or may not) accompany it. Finally, although empathy understood in this way has some clear limitations, its central role in social understanding can hardly be disputed.

Notes

1. “Empathy” is usually considered the standard translation of *Einfühlung*, and it so happens that Scheler himself only used the latter term rather sparingly, and when he did use it his attitude was frequently rather dismissive. However, Scheler’s reservation was mainly due to his dissatisfaction with Lipps’s projective theory of empathy, and for want of a better term we have decided to use “empathy” as the best way of capturing what Scheler was referring to when he spoke of a basic experience of others. It is telling that other contemporary phenomenologists reasoned in a similar way. Both Stein and Husserl also referred to Scheler’s theory of empathy (*Einfühlung*) (Stein 1989, 27; Husserl 1999, 147).

2. The same, by the way, goes for sympathy. As Husserl writes, feeling sympathy with someone who has, say, lost his father, involves feeling sorry about the other’s loss and sorrow, rather than simply feeling sorry about the death of the father (Husserl 2004, 194).

3. Strangely, this definition only seems to give us collectively *sufficient* conditions for empathy, whereas we would expect a definition to provide *necessary* and sufficient conditions. That the latter is indeed what de Vignemont and Singer (2006) intended to give is, however, at least implicitly confirmed by the fact that in another paper de Vignemont offers essentially the same definition but now implies that it gives *necessary* (but not sufficient) conditions: “Individual X could not empathize with individual Y unless (i) X were in some affective state or other; (ii) X’s affective state were isomorphic with Y’s affective state (or target state) in some relevant aspects; (iii) X’s state were triggered by Y’s state; and (iv) X were aware that Y is the source of X’s own affective state” (de Vignemont 2009).

4. One slightly odd thing about this description is de Vignemont’s and Jacob’s (2010/under review) emphasis on the temporal mode of the experience. Why is the child anticipating a future pain of her own? What future are we talking about, the near or the far future? Why is she not simply experiencing vicarious pain in the present moment?

5. Actually, some may wish to classify this as a case of “personal distress” (see, e.g., Batson 2009, 7–8). However that may be, de Vignemont and Jacob (2010/under review) are clearly right in thinking of it as a “contagion-like” phenomenon.
6. The first person sees that the other person is sad, so condition (iii) is met. She feels sad herself, so (i) is met, and she is of course aware the other’s sadness is the source of her own sorrow—hence (iv) is met too.

7. The case can easily be construed in such a way as to meet all de Vignemont and Singer’s (2006) requirements. It obviously meets (i) and (ii); if what causes me to explode is the other person’s expression of anger, (iii) is met as well. And finally if I am aware that my anger was caused by the other person—which is surely not implausible—(iv) is met.

8. Note that we have no problem accepting that empathy plays a part in the case that we describe. According to the phenomenological account of empathy, the fearful and the hot-tempered person alike empathize when they notice the other person’s anger. What is implausible is the suggestion, to which de Vignemont and colleagues (2006, 2010/under review) are committed, that only the hot-tempered person empathizes and that he does so precisely by responding with an isomorphic emotion—that is, anger.

9. Perhaps there is a third way of reading the “caring condition” that escapes the dilemma presented? Maybe so, but then the onus is on de Vignemont and Jacob (2010/under review) to explain how the condition must be understood.

10. To this, de Vignemont and colleagues (2006) might object that ascriptions of “observations” are extensional and thus do not imply understanding of what one sees. Just as I can observe the new iPad without having any inkling that that is what I am looking at, so I can observe another’s emotional expression without understanding what I am seeing. This takes care of the circularity problem we have just claimed to detect in de Vignemont and colleagues’ (2006) account. However, it does so at an implausibly high cost. For if “observing someone else’s emotion” implies no understanding of what one observes as an emotion, the following (pathological) case would meet the requirements for empathy: A person notices another person’s facial expression without realizing which affective state it expresses, indeed without realizing that it expresses any affective state. Yet the expression elicits a certain affective state in the observer (say, anger), and the observer is aware that her anger is somehow caused by the other person’s facial contortions. Further, suppose that what the other person is expressing is an emotion of anger. Now if observation does not imply understanding, this example meets all the de Vignemont and Singer (2006) conditions for empathizing with another person’s anger. Yet in our example the observer is entirely oblivious of the other’s anger—indeed she is unaware that the target is feeling any particular emotion. And surely it will not do to classify such a case as one of empathizing with another’s anger.

11. According to de Vignemont and Jacob (2010/under review), indeed, a subject must meet no less than five conditions to count as empathizing with someone else.

12. But if what is meant is only that an empathizer’s own subpersonal emotional centers must be recruited (Goldman and Sripada 2005), then our criticism is compatible with this idea. But empathy is a personal-level concept; empathizing is something persons do or do not. A definition of empathy should therefore be in terms of what people experience and feel. Once such a definition is in place we can proceed to inquire into the underlying neural states and processes.
Whether empathy is in part enabled by neuronal states that “mirror” states in the target is a question on which we intend to remain neutral (cf. Zahavi 2011).

References


