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THE LEVELS OF EMPATHY.
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION TO
PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

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Translated from the German *Einfühlung*, which basically means «feeling» (*fühlen*) «in» or «inside» (*ein*) the other, with a calque from the Greek,¹ the contemporary concept of «empathy» has a complex history. On the one hand, it derives from the eighteenth-century reflections on sympathy and on the centrality of the latter concept in David Hume's and Adam Smith's ethics [Hunt 2007, 64-65; Lecaldano 2013, 13]. On the other hand, it is also the result of a story that began in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century, originating from an aesthetic elaboration of Kantianism. The hero of this second family line was the Munich-born psychologist and philosopher Theodor Lipps, who considered the *Einfühlung* to be a source of knowledge, or better, our way of being in the world. It is on this second way of understanding empathy that I will focus in the following pages. In fact, it is precisely in dealing with Lipps and his concept of *Einfühlung* that Edmund Husserl, Moritz Geiger, Edith Stein, Max Scheler, Karl Jaspers and other authors who can be brought back to the realm of phenomenological reflection have elaborated their reflections on empathy. The aim of this paper is to outline some peculiar characteristics of Husserl's concept of «empathy», in order to articulate a stratified theory of empathy in the wake of Jaspers and

¹ It was the psychologist Edward Titchener who, in 1909, translated «*Einfühlung*» into English by coining the neologism «empathy». Cf. Titchener 1909; Jahoda 2005, 151-163; Matravers 2017, 77-85.

Scheler. Finally, I will highlight the therapeutic potential present in a similar stratified conception of empathic experiences.

1. Empathy as a separation of experiences: Husserl

Husserl began to work on the concept of *Einfühlung* in 1905.² In this first phase of Husserl's reflection «on the experience of the other», a crucial role was played by «Lipps' theory on the *Einfühlung*»³: a theory that – as shown by the research manuscripts – Husserl knew well and with which he repeatedly dealt over the years. Husserl's fundamental criticism of Lipps was that, starting from the latter's conception of empathy as mimesis and projection, it was impossible to see empathy as what allows us to have an experience of the other as such. According to Husserl, in fact, the concept of empathy proposed by Lipps failed to talk about the other [Husserl 1973a, 21]. In interpersonal *Einfühlung* – this is the Lippsian hypothesis – the observing subject, based on the movements of the person in front of them, immediately experiences what the observed subject is experiencing or, better, unconsciously projects on the other the experiences activated by observing the other's behavior and movement.

Lipps strongly emphasizes the instinctive and immediate character of the empathic relationship, explicitly rejecting an «analog» conception: in the act of empathy I do not need – this is Lipps' idea – to think and build an analogy in which I imagine how I would feel if I were in the other's place. To illustrate this, Lipps makes a well-known example [Lipps 1903, 122]⁴: a viewer who sees an acrobat perform a dangerous performance experiences the acrobat's suspension on their own skin; they reproduce

² Indeed, it is in the so-called Seefeld manuscripts, written in the summer of 1905, that Husserl began to outline the method of phenomenological reduction. Within this theoretical horizon, there is the problem of how it is possible, on the basis of a «method that leads to pure and absolute consciousness, to found multiplicity and difference» [Husserl 1973a, XXV].

³ Indeed, in 1905 Husserl read and copied almost the entirety of Lipps' essay *Weiteres zur «Einfühlung»* and he constantly referred to Lipps also in the following years. Husserl 1973a, 21 ff.; 70 ff.

⁴ This example can be found in A. Smith [1767/2009].

within themselves the same movements, they «mimic» the observed actions and, in this way, they identify completely, becoming «at one» with their object and, at the same time, objectifying themselves in the acrobat. According to Lipps, in true empathy there is no distinction between my own self and that of others: there is rather an ideal self. Similarly, the space in which the empathic relationship takes place is also ideal: when we feel like we are up there with the acrobat we are not in a real place, but rather in an ideal place that is neither the tightrope on which the acrobat is walking, nor the armchair on which we are comfortably seated.⁵ Only when we leave full empathy and reflect on our own reality, do we realize that we are separate: the ideal self turns into two real selves.

Lipps' concept of empathy highlights a fundamental theoretical problem to which it is necessary to give a preliminary answer: what makes I's (*Iche*) different from one another? If empathy is mimesis, do I run the risk of confusing myself and not being able to differentiate my experience from that of the other? Do I risk considering the other's fear, sadness or anger as my own? Or, on the contrary, do I risk projecting onto others experiences that do not belong to them, thus ending up misunderstanding their intentions and moods? After all, the acrobat could only pretend to be afraid or unsteady. The question that Husserl addresses in his reconsideration of Lipps is not how separate subjects can communicate, but rather how we can be certain of being separate from others and how we can recognize otherness as such. It is interesting to note that the first problem that Husserl finds in talking about intersubjectivity is not the relation, but the separation: in order to talk about the other, the first result to achieve is to avoid confusion and distinguish what *originated* within one's experience from what is only *derived* from someone else's experience.

⁵ In this sense, Lipps can be considered a supporter of the so-called «actuality principle» [*Aktualitätsansicht*]. The empathetic experiences, according to the supporters of this theoretical framework, become «actual» for those who experience them: so, by empathizing with the acrobat, I become at one with his experience. On the contrary, supporters of the «principle of representation» [*Vorstellungsansicht*] like Meinong's pupil, Stephan Witasek, argue that in empathizing with another's experience I tend to represent it: when seeing the other sad I represent their sadness. Cf. Geiger 1911, 33-35; Witasek 1904.

In fact, during the lectures held in Göttingen between 1910 and 1911, Husserl already addressed the theme of empathy and, as he would later write, outlined its «chief points» [Husserl 1969, 243]. These lessons are particularly important because it is here that Husserl introduces for the first time the possibility of a phenomenological reduction as an intersubjective reduction, which constitutes an alternative path to the Cartesian one, already followed in *The Idea of Phenomenology*. In these lessons, Husserl seems to be well aware of the risk of transcendental solipsism which can result from a reduction of the world to the subject's consciousness and its stream. What remains after the phenomenological reduction is clarified in these pages: the phenomenologically reduced world cannot be traced exclusively to my stream of consciousness: «Then every phenomenological being is reduced, on the one hand, to one (to “my”) *phenomenological I* that is characterised as a perceiving, remembering, and empathizing I, [...] and, on the other hand, to other *I's*, posited in empathy, and posited as looking, remembering, and perhaps empathizing *I's*» [Husserl 2006b, 86]. Thus, the presence of the other becomes fundamental to be able to phenomenologically delineate the surrounding world and its normativity: «In the phenomenological reduction, everything is also an index for the *empathized I*» and that is why «nature is an index for an all-inclusive normativity, encompassing all streams of consciousness that stand in an experiential relation to one another through empathy» [Husserl 2006b, 86].

In these lectures we also find significant reference to Lipps, which helps us understand the development and difficulties that characterize Husserl's concept of empathy. Empathy, notes Husserl, cannot be understood as «an analogizing consciousness, rendering the other consciousness by means of one's own, similar and simultaneous consciousness». And Lipps was insofar «on the right path» [Husserl 2006b, 83]. Empathy, indeed, must rather be thought of as «an act of the largest group of *presentifications*». According to Husserl, though, the empathic relationship often presupposes a sort of fictional image, through which we *imagine* what is going on in the mind of others: in these cases, we are enacting a form of analogy. However, «to interpret *every* feeling of empathy in this way is problematic: For we intuitively ascribe to (*ein-schauen*) the

other person his lived experiencing, and we do this completely without mediation and without consciousness of any impressional or imaginative picturing» [Husserl 2006b, 84].

The theme of empathy, for Husserl, remains problematically suspended in this duplicity: on the one hand, he recognizes an immediate dimension, on the other hand, the immediacy risks opening the door to the possible confusion of experiences found in Lipps' theory. In the second book of *Ideas*, Husserl's position did not change much with respect to the previous research manuscripts. Here Husserl still focuses on an analysis of perception by referring to an «originary perception», which is related to the «personal selfhood» of objects. Obviously, this presence does not imply the originary givenness of all the determinations of the object. However, the observing subject has the possibility of establishing a perceptive continuum. And here Husserl introduces an important difference: perception in presence differs from «appresence (*Appräsens*)», i.e. a «derived presence».

In the final part of the second section dedicated to the constitution of psychic reality, appresence is described above all with respect to the solipsistic subject and its self-investigation: for example, if I press my hands on the surface of my body where my heart is, «I 'feel my heart'» and if I press strongly I also feel «my bones or inner organs». Along with the tactile impression «then particular new sensations, which are attributed to the relevant felt-through bodily parts, join to the general sensation of pressure and touch» [Husserl 1989, 174]. All these elements are appresented, in that they accompany what is originally presented thanks to touch. The passage from self-reflection to reflection on the other follows immediately: in the case of the «other person», besides these elements that exceed – so to speak – perception in presence, there is also psychic life.

Psychic life is given in the expression and movement of the living body of others: «Since here this manifold expression appresents psychic *existence* in corporeality, an objectivity is constituted which is precisely double and unitary: man – without 'introjection'» [Husserl 1989, 175]. Both animals and humans are understood as «dual units», units that can be distinguished into two layers: thinghood and psychic life. In the case of humans, the possibility of communication and mutual relations is

also given. The point is to distinguish what is present in human unitary apperception. The first layer is that of the material somatic body that I «originally perceive» [Husserl 1989, 170]. The realities that cannot be given in originary presence are animal beings that have a subjectivity. The subjects are given as units of living body and psyche, so I experience the living bodies that stand before me in their originary presence.

In the 1923-24 lectures on *First Philosophy* we find another interesting indication of Husserl's incessant work on empathy: «*the perception of another lived-body is, in keeping with its distinctive essence, perception through originary interpretation*» [Husserl 2019, 267].⁶ We can call this perception «originary» because it is founded on a reference that is essential to and inseparable from my bodiliness. In my bodiliness I have «the primordial experiencing of an incorporation of the subjective in something appearing in thingly form». Husserl speaks of our body as a «*primordial lived-body (Urleib)*» [Husserl 2019, 267-268]: for me, I am the originary human being. The similarity between my body and that of the other leads me to recognize that «that thing» is something in which «a subjective element is embodied [...]. This spatio-thingly seeing and *originary interpreting viewing*, which binds itself together in the apprehending of another's lived-bodiliness, this understanding as expression, is, as against the simple external and the already founded perception of my own lived-body, a distinctive basic form of experience, which is still, according to its nature, to be designated perception» [Husserl 2019, 268]. This peculiar type of perception, adds Husserl, which «quite inadequately, [...] has commonly come to be called 'empathy'» is a second-level perception because it presupposes «in its own sense, perception of one's own lived-body and constantly takes its cue from this perception» [Husserl 2019, 268]. Therefore, although this is a perceptive process, Husserl feels the need to insert an interpreting activity of the I that presupposes the experience of their own living body. In this sense, it is confirmed that empathy is an activity that involves a non-instinctive and immediate dimension.

The *Cartesian Meditations* are probably the most important non-posthumous text that Husserl dedicated to the subject of the rela-

⁶In the manuscripts we often find the idea of an "interpretation", or *Deutung*, in relation to the empathic experience. On the topic, see: Yamaguchi 1982.

tionship with the other. In order to talk about intersubjectivity, in the fifth meditation, Husserl chooses to begin with the «reduction to the sphere of ownness». [Husserl 1960, 92] This move may appear unsettling: Husserl implements an epoché to let emerge what belongs to the single subject and would belong to them even if everything that constitutes them as intersubjective were to vanish [Costa 2010, 80]. Although Husserl is well aware of the fact that «the ego gains personal self-awareness in the I-you relationship» [Husserl 1973a, 171] the reduction to the sphere of ownness or «primordial world» is a fictitious operation that helps us shed light on the minimal self that «does not depend on history and intersubjectivity» [Costa 2010, 83]. On the other hand, it also helps bring out all that is originally intersubjective in subjectivity. This abstract process – which after all is somewhat forced and complicated – leads me to recognize the relevance of the body of the other, which I grasp as a body similar to mine.

Husserl's starting point is clear: the body of the other is given to me in the primordial sphere, while its subjectivity is given to me only in the mediated way of appresentation. However, this appresentation that we find as characterizing the process of «pairing» (*Paarung*) by similitude must not be thought of as an active synthesis, but as a passive synthesis, which determines the very existence of this layer of subjectivity. Here Husserl clarifies the experience of the other precisely through passive syntheses, that is, with the pairing appresentation of the other's body [Yamaguchi 1982, 76]. In the 1920s, Husserl began to attribute greater importance to the passive dimension and the *Paarung* process became an associative and non-reproductive unity between me and the other: it was a co-belonging (*Zusammengehörigkeit*). Thanks to this idea of the associative unity there was no longer any need for an empty indication of the exteriority referring to the interiority that must then be filled. It was a process more similar to the passivity of retention (which, together with protention constitutes the way in which we perceive) than to memory [Yamaguchi 1982, 76], understood as an act of presentation that involves an activity of the I. A passive synthesis means that I do not need to look at the other's body, then associate it with mine and draw from it the inferential conclusion that if the other has a body similar to mine, then they will

also have a psyche and a spirit. Passive synthesis implies that similarity leads me to grasp my body and that of the other immediately as a unitary phenomenon (*Pairing*), through a synthesis.

This unitary phenomenon, however, appears immediately with the awareness that there are two different consciousnesses, with different temporal flows and different points of view on things. The ordinary pairing synthesis presents difference as a central element: the other has a here and now that is different from mine. Thus, there is no risk of falling into a sort of fusion of experiences – a risk that, according to Husserl, was present in Lipps' theory. For an intersubjective relationship and an encounter with the other to be possible, one must recognize the mediated character of empathy. The experience of the other belongs to my stream of consciousness, but the other's experience doesn't. The other is similar to me, but is still other than me. Empathy in Husserl remains suspended between being an activity of understanding the other and a constitutive and transcendental element of subjectivity. If we think of it as a passive synthesis and retention, it takes the direction of this second hypothesis. However, at least in the works he published in life, Husserl has given greater importance to the first path.

2. The stratified theory of empathy and psychopathology

In 1912, with the essay *The Phenomenological Approach in Psychopathology*, Karl Jaspers inaugurated phenomenological psychopathology. At the heart of the phenomenological method we find precisely the empathic capacity: the only tool to understand the experiences of others. Jaspers does not refer to much secondary literature on the subject; he cites, though, the important lecture that Moritz Geiger gave in 1910 at the International Congress of Experimental Psychology. The essay, entitled *On the Essence and Meaning of Empathy*, was a sort of punctual and analytical overview of the topic, and had already been positively reviewed by Husserl [Husserl 1911/1987, 40]. It was therefore an excellent tool to take a look at the various theories of «empathy». Yet, Jaspers does not dwell too long on the problem posed by Geiger's essay. The reflection on the role of empathy in psychopathology must be limited to establishing a sort of «implementation of a knowledge» linked to these

experiences and – above all – to posing the problem of its «validity». For Jaspers it is not relevant – at least in this context – to try to investigate the essential characteristics or the genetic origin of the empathic experience: it is something given that allows us to enter into relationship with the other. Instead, the understanding of the theoretical status of the experience of empathy is hastily assigned to a comparison: «if we presentify our own psychic experiences of the past or those of other people it is roughly the same» [Jaspers 1912/1963, 319].⁷

In this way Jaspers refers directly to the Husserlian theory which, as we have seen, considered empathy an act of the large group of presentifications. Unlike perception, whose object is «originally» right there in front of the subject, all the acts that presuppose that something (which is not given in the flesh) should become present to the subject's consciousness are presentifications⁸: memories, expectations, hopes, and above all empathic acts [Husserl 1982, 79]. The pain of the other becomes part of my experience, but it is not my pain. If empathy is understood as an experience in which the empathiser becomes «one with the empathized» it is impossible to describe the intersubjective relationship and, *a fortiori*, the therapeutic relationship; in this sense, Jaspers also distances himself from the Lippsian theoretical framework. Jaspers' choice is to give some «guidelines» for the use of empathy in the therapeutic relationship, which allow each psychopathologist to learn how to use this «organ» that we all have, in order to restore relevance and citizenship to the subjective symptom. The relationship is structured by three means or three forms of empathy, thanks to which the doctor tries to access the subjective symptom and the experience of the patient:

⁷ There is an English translation available of the text *Die phänomenologische Forschungsrichtung in der Psychopathologie* (1912): *The Phenomenological Approach in Psychopathology*, in: *British Journal of Psychiatry* 114 (1968), 1313-1323. However, I have chosen not to use it because it can be somewhat misleading, especially in relation to empathy.

⁸ It is no coincidence that in this case Husserl does not use the term «representation»: his conception of empathy cannot be associated either with theories of actuality (like Lipps'), or with those that reduce empathy to a representation, thus eliminating the reference to the pathic dimension. On the differences between Husserl and the Graz School (in particular Meinong and his students, such as Witasek) see Rollinger 1999.

1. first of all the therapist must «immerse themselves (*Versenkung*) in the patient's behavior, conduct, expressive gestures»;
2. then ask questions that allow «the patient to explore themselves», thus listening to the patient's point of view on their condition;
3. finally, the therapist can refer to the written self-descriptions that the patient is able to give of their pathology, and that «can be used even without the author's personal knowledge» [Jaspers 1912/1963, 320].

The first of the means involves a relationship as immediate as possible with the other and has to do with what today is called «emotional empathy» [Smith 2009]: I feel the anger of the other, their pain or joy. It is an immediate feeling that is not very structured. But the other means indicated by Jaspers are connected to narratives and to the possibility they offer of sharing the experience of the other, learning to put ourselves in their place. This is a different level of empathy, one that refers to a more cognitive dimension. This empathic level forces us to abandon the dimension of immediacy and to reflect on the words of the other that make the feeling progressively more or less understandable. At this level it is therefore the narrative that makes it possible to put ourselves in the other's shoes; today we speak of «cognitive empathy». Finally, as already mentioned, there is a level that presupposes a further imaginative and hermeneutical effort on the part of the therapist: the one linked to written self-descriptions. Here the other is not present in the flesh (or at least not necessarily) and the therapist can only understand their experiences thanks to a knowledge integrated by the imagination. The therapist will have to make an effort to empathize with someone who is far in space and, in some cases, even in time.

Jaspers does not devote much space to these three levels of the empathic relationship, nor does he outline a real theory of empathy. However, it is very important – for the purposes of the present reflection – to recognize that these three ways of describing the empathic relationship can be thought of as a sort of stratification (I will return later on this point). Now, after making the empathic effort and collecting the phenomenologically ordered material, the therapist will face three different types of phenomena: 1. phenomena that are very common and with which it is easy to empathize (even the therapist, like anyone else,

has felt fear, anxiety or jealousy); 2. phenomena that can be understood with an extra effort on the part of the therapist: these are those experiences that are essentially «an increase, a decrease or a mix» [Jaspers 1912/1963, 321] of normal experiences; in this case, however, practice is very useful. Over time, the therapist learns to empathize with this type of experience, understanding its characteristics. Just think of some delusional forms of jealousy [see Jaspers 1910], which, in some cases, are an exaggerated and inadequate reaction, but manifest a feeling that we can all understand.

However – and this is the most interesting point – in the context of psychic pathology there are also 3. some incomprehensible phenomena, which can only be approached «through analogies and images. And we notice them in individual cases not through a positive understanding, but through the impact against this incomprehensible element that our understanding is experiencing» [Jaspers 1912/1963, 321]. An example of such inaccessibility is for example language, when it hinders the sharing of a common plan between patient and psychiatrist: Jaspers describes patients who complain about the impossibility of communicating their feelings due to the inadequacy of language, others that create new words, up to the case of the patient's total silence. So there are phenomena that cannot be understood, and in front of which subjective psychology must stop. Recognizing that some phenomena are «incomprehensible» helps us – in a methodological key – to refrain from attributing meaning to experiences we do not understand, but to acknowledge our difficulty instead [Donise 2015].

So, in our path of reflection on the validity of empathy as a tool to relate to the experience of others, we have encountered a limit: the experience of others cannot always be understood. The fact that there is a limit to the relationship means that empathy can be seen as an ability to get in contact with the other also in their difference. A theoretical model that understands empathy as a projection of one's own experiences on the other, on the contrary, would leave no room for the incomprehensible. At this point, one may wonder what the consequences are of this fact in terms of the therapeutic relationship. There are many possible readings of this collision against something incomprehensible: the «incomprehensibility» can also be interpreted in the sense of a rup-

ture of intersubjectivity, which may lead to consider Jaspers' system incapable of an adequate investigation of pathological subjectivity.⁹ Or it is possible to consider it the sign of a strong limit of the phenomenological method, which «already presupposes what it strives to achieve: the acquisition of a sufficiently developed degree of consciousness of the *Erlebnisse* and of critical self-awareness on the part of the patient» [Meo 1979, 37].

Faced with the difficulty of understanding the other, which may arise from different cases, Jaspers' attitude is not a reaffirmation of understanding at all costs, but the admission of a limit, a limit that becomes a mark of the intersubjective relationship and of human nature itself.¹⁰ In this limit of the empathic attitude, there is room for a different approach to illness and, from a theoretical point of view, for the rejection of every methodological absolutism. Jaspers' reflection on incomprehensible phenomena constitutes a further piece of his methodological pluralism, which seeks to grasp the human being as a whole. But for us it constitutes the benchmark to understand the relevance of a stratified conception of empathy.

3. *The theory of stratification*

As emerges from the manuscripts, Husserl was working on a stratified conception of empathy (*Stufen der Einfühlung*) already in 1910 [Husserl 1973a, 62-76]. However, in the works destined for publication, the theme is only hinted at. In the investigation of empathy that we find in the second volume of *Ideas*, the difference between the passive dimen-

⁹ As Ballerini notes, this concept of «incomprehensibility» of some forms of delirium even caused Jaspers to be accused of racism «in the age of anti-psychiatry». Cf. Ballerini 2000-2001, 7.

¹⁰ But this experience of the impossibility of understanding the situation experienced by the pathological subject can be considered a concrete clinical example of what Jaspers would have theorized a few years later with the concept of «borderline situation». These «borderline situations» are moments in which we find ourselves experiencing situations «that do not offer [...] a fixed point, an absolute indubitable element, some support that gives firmness and stability to every experience and every thought». Cf. Jaspers 1919, 229. On this topic, see: Cantillo 2017.

sion and the active dimension of the *Einfühlung* is very marked and clear. The first type of empathy is dealt with in the section dedicated to the constitution of psychic nature, which lies outside of the spiritual dimension and in which nature is dominated by the law of association, understood as a law of nature that implies a passive adaptation to an alien subjectivity [Husserl 1973a, 455]. The second one concerns «the field of subjectivity, which no longer is nature» [Husserl 1989, 180], the personal I «posited as subject of its personal and thingly surroundings, as related to other persons by means of understanding, and mutual understanding, as member of a social nexus to which corresponds a unitary social surrounding world» [Husserl 1989, 240].

In this dichotomy, the authentic empathy is the spiritual one, so much so that Husserl, in a text written probably around 1920 [Husserl 1973a, 455; 438;],¹¹ distinguishes between authentic [*eigentlich*] and non-authentic [*uneigentlich*] empathy: «Inauthentic empathy is the passive associative indexing of foreign subjectivity, authentic empathy is letting oneself be motivated by an active co-suffering and co-operating with others» [Husserl 1973a, 455]. What in some cases is presented as a dichotomy (naturalistic empathy versus personalistic empathy) can be actually read as a stratification. Several clues support this interpretation: first of all, the very structure of the second book of *Ideas*, which presents the stratified constitution of subjectivity. Moreover, in a text dated 1931-32 Husserl discusses precisely the different levels of empathy: the first is that of the appresentation of the living body of the other as perception. The second level is that of apperceiving the other's body as it moves and is capable of «pushing or carrying something»; the third level captures the intentionality of the actions of others [Husserl 1973c, 434-435; Zahavi 2014, 138]. In some cases, Husserl goes even further and introduces another level in which empathy is connected to the ability to understand cultures and traditions far from one's own [Husserl 1973c, 436; cf. Husserl 2006a, 272-273; Zahavi 2014, 138].

However, the irrefutable fact remains that Husserl has not published a work dedicated to a stratified theory of empathy, nor can we find in his published texts a structured reflection on empathy and its levels. On the

¹¹ Instead, see Husserl 1973a, 410 for the distinction between direct and oblique empathy.

contrary, it is clear that, while recognizing the importance of an originary and passive level of empathy, Husserl's attention is focused on empathy with reference to the active dimension of the person [Yamaguchi 1982, 89]. Husserl will always be opposed to interpretations of empathy that give too much space to the instinctive and immediate level of the relationship, which seems to him to be a prelude to a failed recognition of otherness. Rather, he will think of empathy as an encounter between people within a shared world. In an important passage of the manuscripts, Husserl writes:

Leibniz claims that monads have no windows. But I think that every psychic monad has infinite windows, that is, every authentic perception comprising the living alien body is like a window. And every time I say «please, dear friend» and my friend answers me with understanding [...] a mutual understanding has established a real unity between us [Husserl 1973a, 473].

Instead, in the 1923 second edition of the *Sympathienbuch*, Max Scheler explicitly declared the intention «to give an account of the development phases (*Stufen*) of the forms of sympathy» connected to the founding laws that regulate such forms. In Scheler's perspective, at the most primal level there is «emotional identification», an indispensable precondition to develop the empathic capacity. Emotional identification implies a fusion and a confusion between different selves, and has been an essential condition in our past, both ontogenetic and phylogenetic. It is precisely this identification that allows us to understand the peculiar characteristics of the relationship between mother and newborn, but also the various forms of totemic identification in primitive peoples. The adult contemporary person experiences emotional identification much more rarely, but this instinctive and primitive form is still present in «truly loving sexual intercourse» [Scheler 1923/2017, 173] or in certain forms of fusion that characterize mass events or hypnosis. Emotional identification is generally involuntary, automatic and unconscious. Only because man has experienced this identification in the past is it possible for him to experience «vicarious feeling» (*nach-fühlen*): «if such a (detached) reproduction of feeling is to be possible, I must at some time have gathered the quality of the emotional state thus vicariously felt» through emotional identification [Scheler 1923/2017, 340-341].

For Scheler, vicarious feeling is what today we could call empathy: the ability to feel and understand the experiences of others, without necessarily participating sympathetically in them. Finally, the last level of sympathetic experiences is that of fellow-feeling (*Mit-fühlen*),¹² the properly sympathetic act, in which we experience a sharing of the experience of others. These three levels, although founded one on the other, have very different characteristics and must not be confused.

4. The therapeutic potential of empathic stratification: the case of incomprehensible experiences

After mentioning, albeit briefly, the way in which Husserl and Scheler delineate a possible stratified theory of empathy, let us return to Jaspers and the therapeutic relationship. In Jaspers the theme of stratification, as we have seen, is only sketched. However, guided by the concrete reference to psychic pathology and to suffering, he captures a very relevant point for the construction of a stratified theory of empathic experiences. In fact, Jaspers differentiates the more immediate and emotional dimension («immersing oneself in the expressive gestures» of the other) from the more structured and cognitive one (asking questions and «guiding» the other in their self-investigation). This type of difference is very much present in the contemporary reflection on empathy and allows us to look at the theme of incomprehensible experiences starting from the theory of phenomenological stratification.

Indeed, Jaspers' phenomenological psychology offers a different theoretical path from what is traditionally considered the legacy of phenomenology in the psychological field. Sartre – to refer to an author who clearly theorised on this point – has argued that madness is only a «quantitative increase» of what he calls «emotional conduct» [Sartre 2004, 42].¹³ In this perspective, every psychotic or delusional world is

¹² In reality in Scheler we find two more levels of stratification: that of *Menschenliebe* and that of the *akosmische Person- und Gottesliebe*. These two levels, on which it would take too long to dwell here, have to do with Scheler's anthropological ethics and not directly with the theme of *Einfühlung*. On this topic, see Cusinato 2008.

¹³ Sartre maintains that the world of madness must be placed in continuity with the world of emotion and with the world of dreams. See Sartre 2004, 52.

«a possible world» like any other. For the *Daseinanalyse*, which tries to study the world of those affected by a psychic pathology, being mentally ill can simply mean *being in a different way*. One of the fundamental references here is Heidegger with his «existential analytic» [Heidegger 1927/1962] understood as a search for the constitutive ontological structures of Dasein. The anthropoanalyst considers «the worlds of the mentally ill on par with those of the ‘healthy’, as revelations of the man that may be» [Cargnello 2010, 140].

This is not the case according to Jaspers. He also wonders if it is possible to identify «*psychopathological* transformations of the world, or the ‘*specific worlds*’ of psychoses or psychopaths» [Jaspers 1913, 236].¹⁴ In other words, the question is: is it possible for the psychopath to share his world with others? Can we hypothesize a constant that enables psychotic people to communicate their world and share it? Jaspers finds the attempt to identify psychotic constants very problematic, and seeks another way, trying to work on the issue of incomprehensibility. Speaking of incomprehensibility seems to confine the pathological subject to a dimension far from the shared one, but the stratification that Jaspers attributes to empathy can be useful to clarify what is here in question.

Let’s briefly recap the issue: based on Weber’s point of view, according to which one must abandon immediacy to achieve scientific knowledge, Jaspers considers some pathological experiences as «incomprehensible» and admits that there is a limit to the attempt to establish understanding relationships, thus excluding certain diseases from any therapeutic relationship or leaving them exclusively to an organicist explanation – to pharmacology, as we might say today. Jaspers, however, never spoke about experiences that cannot be «empathized with» but always of experiences that cannot be «understood», underlining the difficulty or impossibility of tracing those specific experiences back to classical cognitive categories, or within the conceptualization referred

¹⁴ A few years later, in 1919, Jaspers published a large work on the psychology of worldviews (*Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*). In particular, the concept of «worldview» elaborates in a theoretical key the conception of the psychic structure that emerged in his psychopathological works [Jaspers 1919]. On this topic, see Cantillo 2017. Moreover the first volume of *Philosophy* [Jaspers 1932/1969-1971] is dedicated to the Philosophical World Orientation.

to by Weber. In therapeutic practice it is fundamental to acquire full awareness of the differentiation of experience, but this differentiation comes from different paths, exists on different levels and also leads us to different levels of awareness and «understanding».

When we recognize that the experience of the other could be our own, we might be lingering in the immediate feeling and on the first of the «means» of empathy: the emotional and not very structured immersion in the other. A delirium or a psychotic crisis do not make it difficult to feel the experience of the other, but rather they tend to undermine the next level, the most cognitive of the empathic relationship: it is difficult to understand the world of a psychotic person, while it is not difficult to feel their emotions. In this perspective, the stratified conception of empathy that comes from the phenomenological horizon can be integrated into contemporary research. The unipathic and fusional dimension proposed by Scheler can be further investigated, starting from the recognition of a common dimension of feeling that precedes the distinction between selves. The relevance that Husserlian reflection attributes to the body in the intersubjective relationship and in the constitution of subjectivity can help us recognize one important thing: feeling the other also through our common body movement in space can allow us to come into contact with parts of ourselves and of the other, parts which are common but differentiated. Moreover, with Jaspers, distinguishing between a purely emotional capacity, which leads us to feel the other, and a more cognitive one in which we start from our knowledge about the other to enter into relationship with them, is useful to establish different relationship channels.

The therapist does not intend to deny the incomprehensibility of the delusional experience from the point of view of normal understandable connections. However, starting from the patient's strictly emotional experience, they will be able to learn to treasure this feeling and use it to pass directly to a more «imaginative» level of the empathic relationship, being willing to follow the patient in their own world, striving to get out of reality and following – through imagination – the patient's narrative, even if delusional. In so doing, the therapist follows Husserl, who already in his lessons on «The natural concept of the world» [*natürlicher Weltbegriff*] noted that «not every empathy» can be understood as a ca-

capacity for which we «picture to ourselves the other person's mood», but «fantasy-pictures» must also take place in our relationship with the other.¹⁵ Jaspers himself, in delineating the third of the empathic «means», the one linked to self-descriptions in written form, highlights the possibility for the therapist to imagine the experience of the other even without having them there in person. The goal of such a therapeutic practice, which works on different levels of empathy, is to enter the world of the suffering subject.¹⁶

This theme is thus limited to the therapeutic relationship, but it is evident that it also tells us something about the intersubjective relationship in general. The incomprehensibility theorem obliges us to recognize that the other can never be grasped and understood in their entirety. We can feel the other's emotions, but we cannot expect to always understand their meaning or motives. We can imagine their perspective on things, but we can also be radically wrong. The founding nucleus of the human intersubjective relationship – and therefore of culture, institutions, art and ethics – is right here in this incomprehensible nucleus, which must be taken as an essential and non-contingent datum. This essential opacity of the other is a theme that characterizes all phenomenological reflection on empathy: for authentic communication to take place, it is necessary to accept that one may not be able to grasp the other in their totality, assuming this difference as a central element.

In conclusion, empathy turns out to be a significant source of knowledge. Just like the senses, it can lead us into error, but this does not invalidate its value. To the question of the validity of the knowledge we obtain through empathy, Jaspers responds by identifying the *limits* of the empathic relationship, emphasizing the possibility of error and

¹⁵ Husserl clarifies that «Empathy is no more a consciousness of genuine picturedness than it is a re-remembering and a pre-remembering or any other kind of remembering. Rather, I hold that whereas empathy is akin to these acts, it is an act belonging to the largest group of presentifications» [Husserl 2006b, 83].

¹⁶ This is not an easy leap to make, however it is made possible by the awareness of the therapist, who learns to know the stratification and its characteristics in depth. Stanghellini's proposal of a «second-order empathy» can be read in this sense. Though I share Stanghellini's general view, it seems to me that Jaspers' insistence on the emotional, bodily and immediate dimension of the empathic relationship is not sufficiently taken into account in his perspective. Cf. Stanghellini 2013, 166-181.

above all the need to recognize that some emotional experiences cannot immediately become «valid scientific concepts». However, starting from this feeling and through the help of the imagination it is possible to try to enter in relation with the other,¹⁷ thus avoiding loneliness and closure, without fear of crossing large areas of incomprehensibility. After all, this approach falls within the «phenomenological method», which is preliminary to real understanding (genetic and psychological). For essential and non-contingent reasons, this preliminary method – characterized by the limit – is open to the need to look for other paths in the therapeutic relationship, and consequently wishes to avoid the methodological absolutism that Jaspers considered very risky in the psychopathological field. Phenomenology is thus a preliminary method which nevertheless remains unavoidable if we want to recover the therapeutic relevance of the subjective symptom and restore dignity to the psychiatric patient.

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¹⁷ An example of this empathic modality can be found in therapeutic relationships in which the psychologist chooses to «go with» the patient's delirium. Seconding the other can avoid forms of closure that are otherwise not easily reversible. Obviously these are experiences that must be managed through a sound therapeutic practice: see, for example, the systemic school that is identified with the second generation of Palo Alto researchers. One of the strategies used is that of paradoxical interventions, which consist in prescribing tasks or communicating ideas that are far from the common system, but in line with the *framework* of the system. In other words, the psychologist has to speak the «language of the patient». Cf. Watzlawick *et al.* 1974; Fisch *et al.* 1982.

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Keywords

Empathy; Husserl; Stratification; Phenomenology; Psychopathology

Abstract

The first aim of this paper is to outline some peculiar characteristics of Husserl's concept of «empathy», that is developed over the years through critical confrontation with Theodor Lipps. Husserl will always be opposed to interpretations of empathy that give too much space to the instinctive and immediate level of the relationship, which seems to him to be a prelude to a failed recognition of otherness. Rather, he will think of empathy as an encounter between people within a shared world. What in some cases is presented as a dichotomy (naturalistic and immediate empathy versus personalistic empathy) can be actually read as a stratification.

The second objective of this work will therefore be to outline a stratified theory of empathy, not only in comparison with Husserl, but also with Max Scheler. Surprisingly, however, we already find a first form of stratification, starting in 1912, in the writings of the young doctor Karl Jaspers on phenomenological psychopathology.

In the final part of the paper, I will highlight the therapeutic potential present in a similar stratified conception of empathic experiences, by using the Jaspersian theme of “incomprehensible phenomena”.

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