

13 Imagination in Early Phenomenological Accounts of Empathy

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13.1 Introduction

In the nineteenth century, when the term “Einfühlung” was coined by Robert Vischer in the context of German aesthetics, it was used to refer to a particular form of engagement with an art work in which the imagination is actively involved (see Maibom 2020, 12, 105). Indeed, “Einfühlung” was translated into English by Titchener as “empathy” and literally means “feeling into”, referring to the human ability to project oneself into an object (broadly understood as encompassing animate as well as inanimate targets).¹ In the context of his Imitation Theory, Lipps employed the term “empathy” precisely in this sense of “feeling into” to explain how we engage with animate and inanimate objects. Lipps’s theory underscored the idea that empathy presupposes a projection into the target, an inner imitation of its feelings, and a resonance with it through the experiencing of these feelings. In accordance with this broad usage of the term, Lipps (1903, 96–223) distinguished between four main types of empathy: empathy of activity, empathy of mood, empathy into nature, and empathy into the sensuous experience of other human beings. As this taxonomy makes clear, empathy experienced a conceptual shift in Lipps’s work so that the term was employed to explain not only how we engage with aesthetic objects but also how we understand others. The meaning of empathy in terms of social cognition was further developed in the works of early phenomenologists such as Husserl and Stein and is now dominant in the current research.²

The intimate link between empathy and imagination is today preserved by the Simulation Theory, which was developed during the 1990s as an alternative to the Theory Theory. While in the Theory Theory, as discussed by Carruthers and Smith (1996), we infer what the other is experiencing thanks to a folk psychological theory of how her behaviour and her mental states are connected, in the Simulation Theory defended by Coplan (2011), Goldman (2006), and Stueber (2006), among others, empathy requires a

series of imaginative processes. We imagine the other's experience, adopt her perspective by projecting ourselves into it, re-enact a similar state in ourselves, and resonate with it.³ The Simulation Theory is often developed by taking Lipps's Imitation Theory – which is considered by many contemporary authors as a proto-simulationist account – as a point of departure. Yet, the Simulation Theory, like the other alternatives in the current debate, has been centred on empathy as a form of social cognition and has not investigated the possibility of empathy with inanimate objects, which was a central aspect in the inception of this concept in the late nineteenth century.

In the last decade, the Direct Perception Theory has gained momentum as an alternative to the Simulation Theory. According to the Direct Perception Theory put forward by Zahavi (2010, 2011; see also Krueger and Overgaard 2012), in empathy we directly perceive the other's experience.⁴ This theory has been inspired by the phenomenological accounts of Husserl and, most prominently, Scheler. In particular, the theory has taken as a point of departure the concept of "fellow feeling" (i.e., "Mitgefühl", which means literally "feeling with" the other, and "Mitfühlen", which indicates "co-feeling") developed by Scheler to refer to the immediate apprehension of the other's experience in his or her bodily expression. In contrast to the Simulation Theory, the Direct Perception Theory underscores the immediate character of empathy in terms of a social cognition and emphasizes its quasi-perceptual nature at the expense of the role of imagining. The strong focus of Direct Perception Theory on Husserl and Scheler has led to the impression that early phenomenology explains empathy mostly in terms of a perception-like state, downplaying or rejecting the role that imagining can play in it.⁵ This impression is reinforced by the fact that, in general, early phenomenologists such as Husserl, Scheler, and Stein were very critical of the Imitation Theory, which was mainly defended by Lipps.

My aim in this chapter is to counteract this impression by demonstrating that early phenomenologists understood empathy not only in the sense of a direct perception of the other's experiences but as also involving imagination. Indeed, in early phenomenology we can find not only proponents of what we call today the Direct Perception Theory but also authors working with a concept of empathy close to Lipps's, where empathy means "feeling into" animate as well as inanimate targets. In other words, beyond perceptualist models of empathy, we encounter imagination-based accounts of empathy in early phenomenology and these accounts are closer to the Simulation Theory than the Direct Perceptual Theory.

The chapter is structured as follows. It begins by exploring different usages of the term "empathy" in the phenomenological tradition and the role that imagining plays in each one of them (section 13.2). Next, I present and discuss Voigtländer's account of empathy with one's own

image, as developed in her book *Vom Selbstgefühl* (On the Feeling of Self-Worth) (1910) (section 13.3). I then proceed to examine Geiger's account of empathy with atmospheres, as developed in "Zum Problem der Stimmungseinfühlung" (On the Problem of Feeling into Moods) (1911) (section 13.4). Next, I examine Stein's account of empathy with others, as developed in her book *Zum Problem der Einfühlung* (On the Problem of Empathy) (1917/1989) (section 13.5). In the conclusion, I summarize my main findings and show their implications for our understanding of the role of imagining in accounts of empathy developed within the early phenomenological tradition (section 13.6).

13.2 Beyond Perceptualism: Radical and Moderate Imaginationists in Early Phenomenology

To develop my argument, in this chapter I will work with an idea already put forward in 2004 by Moran in his overview of empathy in the phenomenological tradition. According to Moran, in early phenomenology, "empathy" was used with two different meanings. The term is used to refer to the encounter with the other's self in his or her body as well as the projection of one's own self into an alien body (Moran 2004, 271). A look into the complete corpus of early phenomenological literature on empathy confirms Moran's view. Indeed, we find the former usage in Scheler's description of "fellow feeling" (Mitgefühl) and, to a lesser extent, in Husserl's and Stein's accounts of empathy in terms of "perception" of the other's experiences ("Fremdwahrnehmung") (see Moran 2022, 24), though these two authors acknowledge that empathy can also involve processes close to what we today call "imagining".⁶ The second usage of "empathy" can be found in authors such as Voigtländer and Geiger, both phenomenologists of the Munich Circle who worked close to Lipps, and who employed the term to refer to a process of "feeling into" inanimate entities, recreating their feelings, and resonating with them. Interestingly, in contrast to the concept of "fellow feeling" (Mitgefühl), Scheler's concept of "Nachfühlen" – usually translated as "vicarious feeling", which means literally re-living (what we would today call re-creating, re-enacting, or simulating) the other's experiences and which Scheler considered to be at work during our engagement with fiction – is closer to the second, rather than the first, usage of the term.

In my view, Moran's thesis about two meanings of empathy in the phenomenological tradition has gone unnoticed. Indeed, the current use of the term "empathy" to refer to a form of social cognition has led to a revival of those early phenomenological accounts of empathy which understand it as a form of encountering the other's self rather than "feeling into" it. This has led to a focus on Scheler's account of "fellow feeling" as the direct perception of the other's experiences, and on Husserl's and

Stein's explanations of empathy as involving perception-like states. And, in spite of the fact that some authors, such as Jardine and Szanto (2017) and Jardine (forthcoming), argue that in Husserl and Stein empathy entails perception- as well as imagination-like processes, the idea that empathy can also be understood in early phenomenology as "feeling into" inanimate as well as animate objects has received scant attention. Against this backdrop, my aim is to make more visible those accounts of empathy in which imagining plays or can play an important role. In so doing, I aim to show that the Direct Perception Theory of empathy is not "the" phenomenological theory of empathy but only one theory of empathy within the early phenomenological tradition.⁷

A focus on these imagination-based accounts will make it clear that, in some of them, as is the case in Lipps, empathy is not restricted to cases of social cognition in which we "feel into" others but is also used to refer to cases in which we "feel into" inanimate objects. Yet, independent of whether the imagination-based accounts employ empathy as social cognition in terms of "feeling into" others or "feeling into" inanimate objects, they underscore the role of imagining in empathy and, in this respect, entail aspects which are close to today's Simulation Theory. In particular, it is my contention here that we can distinguish between two kinds of Imagination-based accounts of empathy in early phenomenology:

a) Radical Imaginationists

According to "radical imaginationists", empathy can be explained in terms of a series of imaginative processes entailed in the idea of "feeling into". As developed by Lipps, this involves projecting oneself into an object (animate or inanimate), "imitating" its feelings, and thus experiencing the feelings of our target. I take Voigtländer's account of empathizing with one's own image and Geiger's account of empathizing with atmospheres to be paradigmatic of this kind of account.

b) Moderate Imaginationists

According to "moderate imaginationists", empathy might (but does not have to) entail imagining. Stein's account of empathy with others, according to which empathy is a three-step process which can (but does not have to) involve imagination-like states, such as transferring our own self into the other's situation and re-living what she is going through, is a good example of a moderate imaginationist account.⁸

An analysis of Voigtländer's and Geiger's radical accounts – which are not usually discussed in the current literature about empathy in the phenomenological tradition – and a more detailed analysis of the moderate role of imagining in Stein's account, not only provides a richer and more

comprehensive understanding of the usages of empathy in early phenomenology but also underscores the role of imagining as a counter to the recent emphasis put on empathy as the direct perception of the other's experiences.

13.3 Voigtländer: Empathy with One's Own Image

In her book *Vom Selbstgefühl* (1910), Voigtländer employs the concept of "Einfühlung" in a sense close to Lipps's "feeling into". In this book, written under the auspices of Lipps and presented as her dissertation thesis in Munich in 1909, she provides a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of feelings of self-worth (Selbstwertgefühle) and its main types.

Though the concept of "feelings of self-worth" had been briefly employed by Lipps to refer to self-feelings in which the subject senses her own value and its fluctuations, Voigtländer was the first to provide an exhaustive analysis of this phenomenon. In her book, she describes feelings of self-worth as "an affective valuating consciousness of one's own self which each of us has and which is subject to fluctuations" (Voigtländer 1910, 19 [own translation]). As examples of such feelings, she mentions confidence, self-affirmation, pride, vanity, shame, cowardice, haughtiness, remorse, embarrassment, ambition, self-abandonment, and self-esteem. In these feelings, we sense our own self as being either elevated or depressed and experience fluctuations of our value in accordance with our abilities, failures, and successes. For instance, in pride we feel elevated while in remorse we feel diminished in worth.

For the purposes of this chapter, Voigtländer's taxonomy of the feelings of self-worth is particularly relevant. To begin, she distinguishes between "vital feelings of self-worth" and "conscious feelings of self-worth". She characterizes the former as instinctive, natural, innate, and "unconscious", by which she means pre-reflective. Examples of this type are self-affirmation, courage, confidence, etc. These feelings are a natural affective orientation which is not related to our achievements (she describes them in quite biological terms). By contrast, the "conscious feelings of self-worth" involve an objective appreciation of our achievements and abilities. As such, they presuppose what she calls a "split of the self" (Voigtländer 1910, 21).

Regarding this latter type, which concerns "conscious feelings of self-worth", she distinguishes between "genuine feelings of self-worth" (eigentliche Selbstgefühle) and "non-genuine" or "mirror feelings of self-worth" (uneigentliche oder Spiegelselbstgefühle) (Voigtländer 1910, 22).⁹ While "genuine feelings of self-worth", such as pride, arise from one's own self, "non-genuine" or "mirror feelings of self-worth" emerge by way of joking, make-believe, pretending, acting as if we are moved by an affect, posing, attitudinizing, presenting oneself, and boasting, as well as

in imagining experiences, deceiving ourselves, living a lie, and experiencing ourselves from the perspective of a possible other (Voigtländer 1910, 94–95).

What do all these phenomena have in common? Though at first glance we might think that Voigtländer is referring to self-deceptive states, on closer inspection it is clear that not all of them involve self-deception. For instance, this is not the case when our feelings arise in make-believe or while we are pretending. In fact, several of these feelings have their origins in the social and art worlds. In my reading, what mirror feelings of self-worth have in common is that they emerge when we experience ourselves from the perspective of a hypothetical other. It is in this respect that these feelings are non-genuine (*uneigentlich*) because they have their origins outside our self. In this particular case, they have their roots in the hypothetical other from whose perspective we experience ourselves. Voigtländer (1910, 76 [own translation]) writes that the mirror feeling of self-worth is “a feeling of self-worth experienced with regard to what one is in the imagination, in the opinion of others, to what refers to an “image” of oneself”. Thus, the term “non-genuine” describes how these feelings originate in the image that we think others might have of us. It is in this respect that they are “mirror” feelings, because they reflect the image (we think) others have of us.

It is precisely within the framework of this description of the “non-genuine” or – as I will refer to them to avoid misunderstanding – “mirror” feelings of self-worth that Voigtländer introduces the concept of empathy as a mechanism to explain how such feelings arise. Indeed, Voigtländer (1910, 86, [own translation]) describes this mechanism as a “kind of empathy (*Einfühlung*) with one’s own body, a non-genuine and figurative (*bildmäßiges*) experience of the same”. And she adds:

One has a consciousness of the positions and movements of the body not only in the skin, joint and muscle sensations and the consciousness of activity of the movement, but also in such a way that one has a “picture” of it and in such a way that one feels oneself into the movements and positions and experiences them quite similarly with their psychic content, as is the case with empathy in foreign movements.

(Voigtländer 1910, 86 [own translation])¹⁰

According to this “empathic” and “figurative experience” (*Einfühlungs- and bildmäßiges Erleben*), as she describes it, our feeling of self-worth experiences fluctuations. Importantly, for Voigtländer, given that these feelings arise from the perspective that we imagine others might have of us, they are not rooted in our own self but rather in the image of our self. Therefore, they are experienced as distant and as having a “coreless”, “airy”, and “playful nature” (1910, 97).

Voigtländer's description of the mechanism through which "mirror feelings of self-worth" arise in terms of an "empathic" and "figurative experience" requires some interpretation. In particular, it requires us to distinguish between the steps necessary for a "mirror feeling of self-worth" to arise. According to my reading, it is first of all necessary that we imagine ourselves from the perspective of the other, to whom I will refer here in terms of a hypothetical observer. Next, we have to adopt this observer's perspective about ourselves and for this to happen it is necessary that we project ourselves into him or her. Then, in the next step, we recreate or re-enact what the observer is experiencing toward us. In so doing, we resonate with it by undergoing a feeling which "mirrors" the other's feelings regarding ourselves. Importantly, this "non-genuine" feeling might influence the way in which we experience ourselves, leading to fluctuations in our feelings of self-worth, which might intensify or diminish.

In my description of these steps, I used contemporary terms to make clear that the particular "kind of empathy" involved in "mirror feelings of self-worth" is a "feeling into" the image that we imagine an observer might have of us. This involves – as it does in Lipps – what in the language of contemporary Simulation Theory we call perspective-shifting, re-enactment, and resonance with the other's experience. Insofar as empathy is understood as a "feeling into" an inanimate entity (the other's perspective), Voigtländer employs the term in a manner close to Lipps, though she does not discuss her allegiance to him explicitly. It is in fact unsurprising that she does not discuss other possible meanings of the term – in the sense of social cognition – because at the time, in the Munich Circle of phenomenology, "Einfühlung" was employed without this meaning. The usage of the term in the sense of social cognition was being developed by other authors in the phenomenological tradition, such as Husserl, Scheler, and Stein, but it was not yet the dominant way of thinking about empathy.

However, that being said, what I find particularly original in Voigtländer's account is, first of all, that we can empathize with a product of our own imagination and that we do so by means of different kinds of imaginative process. Indeed, we first imagine our own image from the point of view of a hypothetical observer, and then we "feel into" it. Thus, the entity we "feel into" is not only an inanimate entity but one of a particular kind: it is something we imagine. In addition, while at that time empathy started to be used to describe not only how we "feel into" inanimate others but also in terms of social cognition – how we "feel into" other living beings – with her account, Voigtländer leaves the door open for the case of "feeling into" hypothetical others, i.e., others who do not necessarily exist as such but whom we have imagined. More precisely, she explores the particular case in which we "feel into" a hypothetical other whom we imagine as having a hypothetical experience regarding ourselves. These important usages of the imagination in empathy are what

make the process she describes an “empathic” as well as a “figurative experience”. Finally, with the introduction of the mechanism of empathy as “feeling into” to explain “mirror feelings of self-worth”, she provides an explanation of a familiar experience: the fact that the way we feel depends strongly on the way in which we imagine others see us. We are not indifferent to the opinions of others. For instance, if a person imagines that others regard her as a bad thinker, a bad person, or ugly, this will have an immediate consequence in the way she feels. In so doing, Voigtländer makes us aware of our intersubjective nature: the fact that we can imagine ourselves from the point of view of a hypothetical observer and that this has an impact on how we feel. The form of empathy she describes presupposes the consciousness of the image others might have of us, or image-consciousness.¹¹

In this context, Voigtländer provides a further taxonomy within the “mirror feelings of self-worth”. In the first subtype, mirror feelings of self-worth arise when, in experiencing ourselves from the perspective of the hypothetical observer, we focus on our own experiencing self. This is the case with the thirst for recognition, ambition, honour, or glory. The second subtype concerns mirror feelings of self-worth which arise when we focus on the image that others have of us. This is the case with feelings of vanity or smugness, or those that arise when attitudinizing (the lack of such an experience is characteristic of modest or straightforward personalities). In my reading, this taxonomy indicates two possible forms of self-involvement when we “feel into” the hypothetical observer. In feeling into this observer, we can adopt the other’s perspective toward our own self but remain experientially centred in what we are going through (this is what occurs in the first case). However, we can also adopt the other’s perspective toward our own self and transfer the centre of our experience to this observer’s perspective (in which we have felt into). Unfortunately, the possibilities Voigtländer raises about empathizing with one’s own image have not been further developed in current research.

13.4 Geiger: Empathy with Atmospheres

The second early phenomenological account which works with the concept of empathy in terms of “feeling into” was developed by Moritz Geiger, an author who, like Voigtländer, belonged to the Munich Circle of early phenomenology around Lipps. Here I will focus in particular on his usage of the term *Einfühlung* in “Zum Problem der Stimmungseinfühlung” (1911).¹²

In this work, Geiger focuses on a particular kind of empathy already noted by Lipps: “Stimmungseinfühlung”, which can be translated as “empathy into mood”. However, we should be cautious about how we

interpret this expression. Neither Lipps nor Geiger aims at describing how we empathize with another person's moods, and neither is interested in using empathy to refer to a form of social cognition. Rather, the term describes how it is possible to experience "life" in inanimate objects and, in particular, the arts. It describes how we happen to apprehend the cheerfulness of a landscape, the tranquillity of the colour blue, the festivity of a violet, the joviality of music, etc. In other words, here "mood" does not refer to the psychological state of a living being but to a particular kind of affective property which spreads over different objects, confers on them a specific glow, and expresses their character. To refer to this property, Geiger (1911, 28) employs terms such as "character" (Charakter), "feeling characters" (Gefühlscharakteren), and, occasionally, "atmospheres" (Atmosphären). In spite of the fact that Geiger rarely uses the later term, I will employ it here to translate "Stimmungseinführung" as "empathy with atmospheres". In so doing, my aim is not only to avoid misunderstandings, but also to offer a reading which makes it easier to connect Geiger's account to current research.

Geiger begins his paper by discussing and indeed rejecting two theories that were in vogue at the time: the Effect Theory (Wirkungstheorie) and the Animation Theory (Belebungstheorie). According to the Effect Theory, the landscape is cheerful because we feel cheerful and project our feeling into it. Yet, against this theory, he argues that we experience "atmospheres" not as a projection of our own mental states into the object but as a property of the object, independent of our own current psychological state. "Atmospheres" cannot be reduced to affective states such as moods or emotions, though we refer to them using the same terms we employ to describe our affective states. In brief, for Geiger, the cheerfulness of the colour should not be assimilated with the affective state of being cheerful. The colour is not cheerful because I am cheerful. In fact, I can apprehend the cheerfulness of the colour even if I am in another state.

By contrast, according to the Animation Theory, there is a kind of feeling in the landscape and this feeling is apprehended in a manner similar to how we apprehend feelings in the other's expression. Against the Animation Theory, he argues that the way in which we apprehend atmospheres differs from how we apprehend the bodily expressions of emotions. We apprehend the cheerfulness of a colour as a property of that colour in a similar way to how we apprehend its intensity and quality.¹³ As such, it differs from the way in which we apprehend the cheerfulness of a face, which expresses the emotional state of a person but is not a property of the other's face. In other words, for Geiger, "atmospheres" are presented as having phenomenological objectivity. Thus, in spite of the fact that we refer to our own moods and atmospheres with the same names, according to Geiger we are dealing with two phenomena that are distinct in kind.¹⁴

Geiger develops his own position independently of these two theories but in accordance to the philosophy of affectivity which was being developed at the time by early phenomenologists. For Geiger, the apprehension of “atmospheres” as affective properties which spread over different objects occurs by the same means as the apprehension of values as evaluative properties. In this regard, while Scheler (1973, 259) and Reinach (1989, 295) argue that values as evaluative properties are apprehended by an intentional feeling (Fühlen), Geiger argues that atmospheres are apprehended as affective properties in a similar way. This intentional feeling is a *sui generis* mental state irreducible to emotion or perception and, for Geiger, it is responsible for making atmospheres accessible to us. We apprehend atmospheres by “feeling” them.

For Geiger, it is the attitude we adopt while apprehending atmospheres that is crucial in determining the kind of experience we will undergo. As he argues, atmospheres can be apprehended while we are in different attitudes (Geiger 1911, 27). A first distinction is traced between a “contemplative attitude” (betrachtende Einstellung) and an “immersive attitude” (aufnehmende Einstellung). While in the former we contemplate the cheerfulness of the colour and experience it as something objective, in the latter – the one in which Geiger is mostly interested – we apprehend the atmosphere but are also immersed (versenken) in it. In particular, the “immersive attitude” might adopt four different forms: objective, positional, sentimental, and empathic.

First, when the immersive attitude is “objective”, we open ourselves to and experience the atmosphere (Geiger 1911, 39–40) but we do not actively adopt any stance toward it. This experience might lead us to interpret the grasped atmosphere as our own mood, yet the atmosphere is a property of the object. In the second kind of immersive attitude, we apprehend an atmosphere and “adopt a stance toward” (stellungnehmend) it. Here, we take a stance toward the sadness we apprehend in a landscape and thereby influence the way we further apprehend this atmosphere. In this case, there is an interdependence between the atmosphere and one’s own affective state. The third kind of immersive attitude is the “sentimental”. Here, rather than apprehending the atmosphere as a property of the landscape, the subject is interested in the effects that the atmosphere has on her. In consequence, the boundary between the atmosphere and her own affective state vanishes. For the purposes of this chapter, the fourth type of immersive attitude – which Geiger describes as “empathic” – deserves separate attention. According to Geiger, it is possible to empathize with an atmosphere. In this case, we are completely absorbed by the atmosphere and become one with it (eins werden) (Geiger 1911, 39). As we shall see, the term empathy is here used in line with Lipps to refer to “feeling into” the atmosphere and has nothing to do with the idea of social cognition.

The sentimental and the empathic attitudes should not be conflated. In the sentimental attitude, we regard the atmosphere as a mere means to evoke an affective state in ourselves. Moreover, here we are interested in the atmosphere only insofar as it can elicit a similar affective state in us.¹⁵ By contrast, in the empathic attitude, we apprehend the atmosphere, feel into it, and become one with it. Unlike what occurs in the sentimental attitude, our interest here is directed toward the atmosphere itself and not to the effects it can produce in us. While in the sentimental attitude, the atmosphere and the affective state elicited by it are presented as two different phenomena, in the empathic attitude, there is a convergence between the two. In brief, in both cases, we end up experiencing an affective state in tune with the apprehended atmosphere, but the way in which we relate to the atmosphere and our motivations for apprehending it differ substantially.

Though Geiger does not explicitly discuss the concept of “empathy” at work in his paper, he employs it in line with Lipps, as mentioned above. Indeed, empathizing with atmospheres must be understood in terms of “feeling into” atmospheres. This presupposes that we project ourselves into the atmosphere, re-live its character, and become one with it. The “feeling into” described in the case of the empathic attitude involves processes to which the Simulation Theory would today refer as perspective-shifting, re-enactment, and resonance.

Interestingly, Geiger employs empathy as “feeling into” to explain a phenomenon which has received particular attention within aesthetics. What Geiger calls “characters”, “feeling characters”, and “atmospheres”, were analyzed in early phenomenology by von Hildebrand (1977, 1984) in terms of “expressive qualities” (Gefühlsqualitäten) and in the *Neue Phänomenologie* in terms of “quasi objective feelings”, “half-things”, and “atmospheres” (Griffero 2014).¹⁶ In the Anglo-American tradition they are known as “expressive” or “emotional properties”, and, less frequently, as “atmospheric properties” (see, for instance, Wollheim 1987). Yet, while Geiger interprets our apprehension of atmospheres in terms of “feeling” and “feeling into” them, in the other accounts mentioned, which were developed in the phenomenological and the Anglo-American traditions, this apprehension has been explained using the model of “perception”.

13.5 Edith Stein: Empathy with Others

While Voigtländer and Geiger present radical imaginationist accounts of empathy and explore the particular cases of empathizing with one’s own image and with atmospheres, in her book *Zum Problem der Einfühlung* (1917/1989), Stein presents an account of empathy as a form of social cognition initiated by a perception-like state in which the imagination can play

a role. Unlike the two radical imaginationist accounts of empathy explored in the preceding sections, Stein's moderate imaginationist account has been the object of attention in recent research.

Stein begins her investigation with a distinction (found already in Husserl) between "re-presentative" and "presentative" acts.¹⁷ She observes that empathy, like fantasy, memory, and expectation, is a "re-presentative" (*vergegenwärtigend*) psychological state.¹⁸ In re-presentative states, an object is presented to consciousness "in image", while in "presentative" states, such as perceptions, the object is presented "in person". In this respect, she writes, the content of empathy, like the content of the other "re-presentative" states, is "non-primordial" or "non-original", i.e., it does not have its origins in our present mental state. However, what is particular about the contents of empathy in comparison to the contents of the other "re-presentative" states, such as memory, fantasy, and expectation, is that what is re-presented belongs to the other's experience and not to our own. Indeed, empathy is a form of "re-presentation" (*Vergegenwärtigung*) of the other's experience. As she puts it: "while I am living in the other's joy, I do not feel primordial joy. It does not issue live from my 'I'" (Stein 1989, 11).

In Stein's model, empathy as a *sui generis* "re-presentation" of the other's experience has a procedural nature. More precisely, she identifies three steps of the empathic process, which she describes as follows:¹⁹ "(1) emergence of the experience, (2) the fulfilling explication, and (3) the comprehensive objectification of the explained experience" (Stein 1989, 10). Stein considers that the first and third steps exhibit parallels with perception, while the second level is analogous to having the experience (though the content of this experience is – as stated above – "non-primordial"). Importantly, Stein argues that what we already call "empathy" is what occurs at the first step, without the second and third steps being necessary for the empathic experience.

Let us analyze each one of these steps in more detail. In Stein's model, empathy starts with the apprehension of what the other is going through and as such it has a perception-like character. At this stage, we can grasp the other's experience only vaguely. However, as Stein notes, it is often the case that empathy remains at this stage. In the next step, the other's experience is clarified through of a series of processes by which we come to fill in the gaps about what was first only vaguely grasped. It is here that what we today call imagination comes into play. According to Stein, this clarification takes place when the subject "transfers" (*hineinversetzen*) her "self" into the other's place and explicates the other's experience by re-living it. In Stein, this transfer and re-living takes place while maintaining the self-other differentiation. It is by means of this re-living that the subject experiences something close to the other's experience. There is no fusion with

the other, no becoming one with the other, in Stein's account of empathy. In the final step, the empathizer achieves a more comprehensive apprehension of the other's experience. At this stage, empathy has, like in the first stage, a perception-like character. However, while in the first step the apprehension of what the other is going through is still incomplete, here the empathizer has gained a better grasp of the other's experience and can reflect upon it.

Stein's own example is instructive in illustrating each of these steps: "My friend comes to me beaming with joy and tells me he has passed his examination. I comprehend his joy empathically; transferring myself into it, I comprehend the joyfulness of the event and am now primordially joyful over it myself" (Stein 1989, 13). First, we apprehend the other's joy. Second, we clarify this joy by virtue of transferring ourselves into the other's situation and re-living their experience of joy. Finally, we get a more comprehensive grasp of our friend's joy. Note that in this particular example, at the final stage, Stein herself feels joyful. However, according to her account, to feel empathy it is not necessary that we feel the same as the other with whom we empathize. If that occurs in this particular example, it is because the other with whom she empathizes is her friend, but we do not always have to feel the same. Rather, for Stein, empathy requires another form of resonance, namely that we feel along with the other.

In Stein's account, empathy starts with the apprehension of the other's sensible expression, given to us as a living body with its fields of sensation, located at a zero point of orientation in her spatial world and as a field of expression of the experiences of the "I" (Stein 1989, 57). By means of seeing the other as a living body, I apprehend implicit tendencies in her movements. These tendencies are discerned through the empathic experience so that we come to experience what the other is going through. A very basic moment of the empathic process is what she calls "sensual empathy" (*Empfindungseinführung*) (Stein 1989, 65). Sensual empathy is possible because by virtue of being living bodies ourselves, we are able to apprehend other living bodies too. For Stein, sensual empathy occurs at different levels. Given that I have a body, empathy with another human body will be easier than with a non-human one. In this respect, it is easier for us to empathize with the pain that another human feels in his hand, than with a dog experiencing pain in its paw. I can see that the dog is in pain but my apprehension of the dog's experience will be less complete than the apprehension of a human being feeling pain. As she puts it: "the further I deviate from the type 'human being', the smaller does the number of possibilities of fulfillment become" (Stein 1989, 59).

Importantly, for Stein, by empathizing with the other as a living body and "transferring" ourselves into this body, we can adopt a new zero point

of orientation and obtain a new image of the world. This “transferring” and the “re-living” of the other’s experience leads the empathizer to a new orientation and image of the world. Yet, for Stein, this is not merely fantasized but “con-primordial, because the living body to which it refers is perceived as a physical body at the same time and because it is given primordially to the other ‘I’, even though non-primordially to me” (Stein 1989, 61–62). As a result, we empathize with the other’s outer perception so that empathy can enrich the way in which we experience the world and lead us to realize that my zero point of orientation is just one point among many. In this vein, in reiterated empathy, we gain new perspectives about the world. Thus, empathy is regarded as the basis for our intersubjective knowledge of the world. Again, here she writes about how the perspectives gained by means of empathy are different from perspectives about the world that are merely fantasized. In her words:

The world I glimpse in fantasy is a non-existing world because of its conflict with my primordial orientation. Nor do I need to bring this non-existence to givenness as I live in fantasy. The world I glimpse empathically is an existing world, posited as having being like the world primordially perceived.

(Stein 1989, 63–64)

Sensual empathy is only a stage in the apprehension of the other. We are also able to empathize with the other’s feelings. Though her concept of empathy does not restrict the object of empathy to the other’s affective states, feelings (in the broad sense) play an important role in her model because they enable us to understand the other as spiritual being. Stein is clear about this:

in every literal act of empathy, i.e., in every comprehension of an act of feeling, we have already penetrated into the realm of the spirit. For, as physical nature is constituted in perceptual acts, so a new object realm is constituted in feeling. This is the world of values.

(Stein 1989, 92)

Given that every feeling is related to values, in empathizing with the other’s affective states we also come to empathize with the way in which the other evaluatively apprehends the world.²⁰

It is clear in this description that Stein’s use of the concept of empathy differs from that employed by Lipps. To begin, unlike Lipps, Stein clearly remarks that the differentiation between self and other is a basic condition for empathy. Moreover, while for Lipps, empathy involves feeling into an animate or inanimate object, Stein uses this term for a specific form of

intersubjective encounter with the other in her bodily expressions. In addition, while the target of Lipps's empathy can be either an animate or an inanimate object, the target of Stein's empathy is a "foreign consciousness" (Stein 1989, 11). In fact, for Stein, we already perceive the other as a living body by means of sensual empathy and do not have to feel into the other in order to apprehend him or her as such. That said, it is also clear from the exposition of Stein's three steps of empathy developed above that empathy beyond the second step entails the processes of "transferring" into the other's experience and "re-living" it, which strongly resemble Lipps's idea of projecting oneself into the target and imitating inwardly what the other is undergoing. This makes Stein's account in some respects close to Lipps's idea of empathy as "feeling into". This similarity is particularly intriguing because in her book we can find passages where she explicitly dismisses some of Lipps's claims, in particular central aspects of his Imitation Theory (though as noted by Stueber 2006, 8, her account might be closer to Lipps than she thinks). Yet, as Svenaeus puts it, "Stein is both appreciative and critical of Lipps' theories of empathy and she makes use of them in discussions to characterize her own position" (Svenaeus 2016, 239). In short, to explain this tension, we might consider Stein's rejection of Lipps not as a rejection of processes which can be regarded today as imaginative, such as "transferring" and "re-living" (though Stein does not employ the term imagination; see Svenaeus 2016, 277).²¹ In fact, these imaginative processes can (though they do not necessarily have to) play into the empathic experience. For Stein, empathy entails perception-like states but it might also encompass imagination-like states as well.²² As a result, it can be said that her critique of some aspects of Lipps does not necessarily imply that she cannot be close to today's Simulation Theory. The similarity between her account and today's simulationist accounts concerns precisely the role of imagining in empathy. In particular, the imaginative processes mentioned resemble the simulationist perspective-shifting and re-enactment (in Stein's terms: transferring and re-living) (Moran 2022; Szanto and Moran 2020).

That said, there is an important difference between Stein's account and the Simulation Theory regarding the role of imagining. First, while the Simulation Theory works with the idea that empathy necessarily entails imagining, for Stein, imagination might produce a more complete empathy but it is not required to empathize with others (in fact, empathy often remains at the first stage, which is perception-like). Second, for Stein, what is apprehended in empathy is – as underscored above – how the other perceives the world, and this apprehension is not merely an imagining. Third, the Simulation Theory explains how the empathizer resonates with the other's experience in terms of an interpersonal similarity between the experience of both parties. There are different interpretations of how to understand this condition: on the one hand, some authors argue that an

“affective matching” (Coplan 2011) must take place, i.e., the quality of the empathizer’s state must be identical to that of the other, while for other authors a similarity between both states suffices (Stueber 2016). By contrast, for Stein, we come to resonate with the other’s experience by experiencing something alongside the other, but what we experience is not necessarily the same or something similar. In this respect, and as Svenaeus notes (2016, 243), for Stein, empathy can be improved by a personal concern for the other and it is precisely this feeling that guides the empathizer’s imagination. As Svenaeus argues, imaginative accounts of empathy are incomplete if they cannot explain what guides our imaginings (2016, 233). In his view, Stein suggests that such imaginings are motivated by a feeling toward and a feeling with the other with whom we empathize. Fourth, one of the crucial critiques of Lipps’s Imitation theory is still valid in relation to contemporary Simulation Theory (Burns 2017). Both theories presuppose what they aim at explaining. Indeed, to imitate or simulate the other’s experiences as experiences of a living body presupposes that we already regard these experiences as belonging to an animate entity. Therefore, we encounter the other as already a living body and not as a thing. These differences between Stein’s accounts and the Simulation Theory support Svenaeus’s claim (2018), according to which Stein’s model presupposes imagination rather than “simulation”.

That said, in Stein, the role of imagining is moderate in comparison with the two other accounts presented in the previous sections. Unlike in Voigtländer and Geiger, for Stein, the imagination is not necessary for empathy, though it can play a role in giving us a more comprehensive grasp of the other’s experience. Moreover, Stein works with a concept of empathy which is explicitly much closer to the model of perception than the model of imagining (as we have seen, the first and third steps are described in analogy with perception). In spite of this focus on perception, Stein cannot be regarded as defending a pure Direct Perception Theory. In fact, alongside the role that the imagination played in her account, as demonstrated in this section, Stein was very sceptical about certain aspects of Scheler’s direct perception account (2008), according to which we perceive the other’s consciousness as we perceive our own.²³

13.6 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have analyzed three imagination-based accounts of empathy in early phenomenology. I have divided these accounts into two groups. For radical imaginationists such as Voigtländer and Geiger, imagining is crucial in explaining empathy. Both authors use the term empathy in a sense close to Lipps’s “feeling into”: empathy might target animate as well as inanimate entities and it involves projecting ourselves into the

target, re-living its feelings, and resonating with it. By contrast, for moderate imaginationists such as Stein, empathy describes a form of social cognition in which we experience what the other is going through and in which the imagination might (but need not) play a role in making our perception of the other's experience more complete.

By way of conclusion, some implications can be extracted from the analysis elaborated in this chapter. To begin, while phenomenological accounts of empathy have experienced a revival in the current empathy debate, attention has been focused mainly on empathy as a form of intersubjective experience. Yet, as demonstrated in this chapter, a look into the usages of empathy in early phenomenology shows that the term was also employed to refer to "feeling into" inanimate objects, re-living their feelings, and resonating with them. In so doing, the understanding of empathy in early phenomenology goes beyond the direct perception account. As I have shown, taken as a whole, in the corpus of early phenomenological texts on empathy, the imagination is involved to either a radical or a moderate degree. Therefore, any analysis of empathy in early phenomenology should not lose sight of Moran's (2004) claims, put forward above, according to which there are two meanings of empathy in this tradition: empathy as understanding the other by seeing her expressions and empathy as projecting into the other to understand her.

Furthermore, while the critique of Lipps and the Imitation Theory found in the works of early phenomenologists such as Stein, Husserl, or Scheler, makes it easy to assume that early phenomenologists rejected his approach *tout court*, as we have seen, there is also a Lippsonian interpretation of empathy as "feeling into" in this work, particularly in less widely known authors of the Munich Circle, such as Voigtländer and Geiger.

Finally, the revival of early phenomenology in the debate on empathy has been focused on the potential of the analogy between empathy and perception as found in Husserl and Stein, and in particular of Scheler's account of "Mitfühlen" for the development of the Direct Perception Theory as alternative to the Simulation Theory. However, while Direct Perception Theory has been centred in a form of empathy close to "Mitfühlen", other forms of what we would today call empathy and which are at work in our engagement with fictional works, such as Scheler's "Nachfühlen" (and Geiger's "Nacherleben", mentioned in footnote 12), have received less consideration. Moreover, as I have demonstrated, a more comprehensive consideration of the early phenomenological works would enable us not only to find arguments in support of the Simulation Theory but would also contribute to exploring the value of this theory in explaining our engagement with inanimate objects, such as art works. In so doing, the concept of empathy would regain the explanatory force it had when it was introduced in the German Aesthetics of *Einfühlung* more than 150 years ago.

Notes

- 1 See, for an overview: Mallgrave and Ikonomou (1994), Matravers (2017), and Petraschka (2023).
- 2 The other kinds of empathy have not been the focus of attention in current research. See, for an exception: Currie 2011.
- 3 Not all proponents of the Simulation Theory regard simulation as involving perspective-taking.
- 4 See, for an overview: Szanto and Krueger (2019) and Schmetkamp and Vendrell Ferran (2019).
- 5 To be clear, Zahavi never claimed that this is the only account of empathy in the phenomenological tradition. However, the focus on the Direct Perception Theory as an alternative to Theory Theory and Simulation Theory for explaining social cognition might easily lead to this impression.
- 6 In contemporary philosophy, as Liao and Gendler (2019) put it, imagining is “to represent without aiming at things as they actually, presently, and subjectively are”. This usage of the terms makes projecting into and re-enacting forms of imagining as it is broadly understood.
- 7 When, in a recent paper, Drummond develops a phenomenological understanding of empathy based on Husserl, Scheler, Stein, and Zahavi (Drummond 2022, 345), he makes clear that this is only “a” phenomenological understanding of empathy, and not the only one. Here I adopt his take on the issue to underscore the main claim of this chapter.
- 8 Stein is not the only early phenomenologist who provided what I call here a moderate imaginationist account. According to Jardine and Szanto (2017) and Jardine (forthcoming), Husserl distinguished between a perceptual and an “intuitive” empathy.
- 9 What I call here genuine and non-genuine can also be translated as authentic and inauthentic. However, Voigtländer’s use of this notion must be distinguished from other accounts of authenticity and inauthenticity existing in the phenomenological tradition, such as those provided by Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.
- 10 This also involves the way that we dress because, in her view, our appearance and the way we feel about it differs according to the clothes we put on.
- 11 The idea of feelings which arise from an image-consciousness is not only present in Voigtländer but also in other authors, such as Scheler. In particular, in the appendix to his work on shame (Zusatz A, B, and C), he analyzes shame in regard to the feelings of honour and repentance, using the idea of an image-consciousness (Scheler 1987, 149). However, unlike Voigtländer, Scheler introduces neither the concept of “mirror feelings of self-worth” nor the concept of empathy to explain how we come to experience ourselves from the perspective of this image.
- 12 In “Das Problem der ästhetischen Scheingefühle” (1914), Geiger examines the way in which we engage with fictional characters in terms of “Nacherleben”. Today we would translate this term as “empathy”, but “Nacherleben” implies a particular usage of the imagination as that through which we re-live what the other is going through by experiencing something similar. In Geiger’s view, this “Nacherleben” generates in us an emotion-like state (to which he refers as “Scheingefühle”, a concept close to what we call today “quasi-emotion”). In this text, he also examines emotion-like states experienced by actors when they embody a character, when we apprehend the mood of a novel, drama, etc., and when we experience emotions evoked by fictional works, such as novels, dramas, etc. (Geiger 1914, 191–192).

- 13 Note that I write “similar” and not “identical”. Geiger argues that the character of the colour spreads over it and, unlike its intensity and quality, is not an element of the sensation. In fact, it is experienced as independent of the sensation of the colour.
- 14 Geiger’s explanation of why we employ the same terms for both phenomena is particularly intriguing. He distinguishes between two moments of the affective state, one subjective and the other objective, to which he refers as “feeling tone” (Gefühlston) (Geiger 1911, 18). For instance, in joy, we feel joyful (subjective moment) and at the same time our joy colours the objects it targets (objective moment). In his view, our affective states have the capacity to impregnate with a coloration (Färbung) the objects targeted (this objective moment of our affective states is usually overlooked). For Geiger, the “feeling tone” (Gefühlston) (objective moment of our affective states) and the “character” (Gefühlscharakter) (the property that spreads over an object and which I call here “atmosphere”) are qualitatively similar. This is the reason why we use the same terms for both.
- 15 In fact, Geiger argues that the effect that the object might have on us is the only aspect of it that interests us. The sentimental attitude in the arts will be object of critique in later writings: “Beiträge zur Phänomenologie des ästhetischen Genusses” (Contributions to a Phenomenology of Aesthetic Pleasure) (1913).
- 16 For an analysis of expressive properties in Austrian philosophy, see Mulligan 2015. I develop a comparison between Geiger and Wollheim in: Vendrell Ferran 2019.
- 17 The term “act” was employed in the phenomenological tradition from Brentano onward in a sense close to what we today call mental state. For the sake of clarity, I will employ this later term.
- 18 I translate the term “Vergegenwärtigung” as “re-presentation” to distinguish it from the term “representation”. In so doing, I underscore that Stein’s model has nothing to do with the representational theories of consciousness circulating in current research.
- 19 See, for a discussion of these steps: Dullstein (2013); Svenaeus (2016) and (2018); Szanto and Moran (2020).
- 20 The role of emotions in Stein’s account of empathy has been strongly emphasized in current research. However, given the importance of the lived body in empathy, emotional empathy is crucially intertwined with sensual empathy.
- 21 Note that what I call here “imagination” cannot be assimilated to “fantasy”. Indeed, while fantasy – as I mention above – refers to the re-presentative mental states in which we create a fictive reality, today’s usage of the term imagination is, as noted in note 6, much broader and involves a wide range of processes which do not necessarily have to do with the creation of new realities but rather with the recreation or re-enactment of existing ones.
- 22 See, for this view: Dullstein 2013; Jardine and Szanto 2017; Jardine forthcoming; Moran 2022; Svenaeus 2016; 2018; Szanto and Moran 2020; Vendrell Ferran 2015.
- 23 In particular, Stein argues against Scheler’s idea that there is an initial neutral stream of experience out of which our own and the other’s experiences are gradually configured. In fact, she argues that an “I-less” experience is difficult to demonstrate.

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