

# Eidetics of Empathy: Intersubjectivity, Embodiment and Qualitative Ontology. Rediscovering Edith Stein's Account of Empathy

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## ABSTRACT

I focus on empathy from an eidetic perspective, that provided by Edith Stein in her work *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917) and which I call *eidetics of empathy*. I suggest that the eidetics of empathy allows us to inquire efficaciously into the structure of empathy, and therefore into the relation between empathy on the one hand, and embodied personal identity and intersubjectivity on the other. I argue that the eidetics of empathy sheds light on the complexity, heterogeneity and also fragility of the acts of empathy that we perform in our everyday life with respect to others, and provides us with the conceptual tools to address crucial questions such as: What is the specific and distinctive structure of empathy? What are the conditions of possibility of the performance of acts of empathy? Are there different fulfilment degrees of empathy? What role do living bodies play in the performance of acts of empathy? How is it possible to prevent and correct mistakes of empathy? I deal with these issues in making three points on the eidetics of empathy. My *first point* is that the eidetics of empathy allows us to understand empathy as *one type of acts* of perceiving others and their experiences directly and as a *whole* that is subject to variations of its *parts*—the limits of possible co-variations of its parts correspond to the essential structure of empathy. *Secondly*, I focus on the eidetic issue of the *possible co-variations of parts* of the empathy-type: the content and the degree of fulfilment and accomplishment of empathy acts, the layer of the person they address, the varieties of living beings with whom we can empathize. *Thirdly*, I argue that the eidetics of empathy exemplifies very well the ontologically qualitative issue of *degrees of existence* of any entity in relation to its *eidetic paradigm*, and it is a prime example of how phenomenological eidetics can be a *qualitative ontology* dealing with *qualitative issues* that are crucial in our everyday life.

## 0. From classical phenomenological account on intersubjectivity to eidetics of empathy

One of the most significant accounts that classical phenomenology provides on intersubjectivity and embodiment is grounded in empathy [*Einfühlung*]. It

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claims that it is in performing acts of empathy that we experience others as such, both as psychophysical and personal embodied subjects,<sup>1</sup> and that we constitute the world in which we live as a «common surrounding world», i.e. as an intersubjectively shared world. Indeed, in acts of empathy we directly experience others in perceiving their living bodies [*Leib*] as the zero-orientation point, as the field of psychophysical and personal feelings,<sup>2</sup> as the organ of movement and action and as the personally embodied space of position-takings – the living body is an «Ich-kann», as so called by Husserl (1912-28). In performing both unilateral and mutual acts of empathy we establish relations with others as individual persons who, like us, refer to, use, and create entities that are humanly significant – be they natural or cultural kinds –, and we constitute together with others a «common surrounding world» whose subjective pole are personal communities and collectives.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, acts of empathy ground the inter subjective and interpersonal relations that lie at the basis of the constitution of our world as a «common surrounding world»: a world full of shared human significations and of value-qualities of any kind – sensible, vital, practical, moral, aesthetical, religious, cultural etc. It is in the empathic encounter and relation above all with other psychophysical individuals and persons, but also with non-human animals, non-animal living beings, and socio-cultural entities, that in different ways every person constitutes her personal identity as an embodied and inter-subjective

<sup>1</sup> According to phenomenology, persons are entities characterized by a layered structure, that is by a psychophysical layer marked by causal connections (such as in neurobiological functions, sensations, moods) and the layer of personhood marked by motivational connections (e.g. such as in volitional acts, affective acts, position-takings), see Husserl 1912-28, Stein 1917 and 1922, Scheler 1913-23 and Scheler 1913-26.

<sup>2</sup> Phenomenology identifies different layers of feelings; there are the feelings that belong to the psychophysical level of the subject: «sensations of feelings» [*Gefühlsempfindungen*], also called «sensorial feelings» [*sinnliche Gefühle*], and «general feelings» [*Gemeingefühle*] both of the psyche and living body, also called feelings of life [*Lebensgefühle*], among which moods [*Stimmungen*]; and there are the feelings that constitute the sphere of the personhood [*Persönlichkeit*]: «personal feelings» [*geistige Gefühle*], see Stein 1917, III and IV Section, and above all Scheler 1913-26: § 8 “The Stratification of Emotional Life” [*Zur Schichtung des Emotionalen Lebens*]. On this point see *infra* § 4. *infra* §§ 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> See Husserl 1912-28: «The Constitution of the Spiritual World»; Husserl 1905-1920: «Gemeingeist II. Personale Einheiten höherer Ordnung und ihre Wirkungskorrelate», 192-204. On empathy as the fundamental act of intersubjectivity see also Zahavi 2014. On the «common-surrounding world» as a world constituted and inhabited by personal individuals and communities, see also Caminada 2019 and De Vecchi 2020.

identity in the «common surrounding world»: these are the encounters that characterize and pervade the existence of any person in her everyday life.<sup>4</sup>

Starting from this classical phenomenological framework on intersubjectivity, embodiment and personal identity, I would like to go further and focus on empathy in an eidetic perspective, that provided by Edith Stein in her work *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917) and that I call *eidetics of empathy*.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the eidetics of empathy – I suggest – allows us to inquire efficaciously into the structure of empathy and therefore into the relation between empathy on the one hand, and embodied personal identity and inter-subjectivity on the other. I argue that the eidetics of empathy enlightens the complexity, heterogeneity and also fragility of the acts of empathy that we perform in our everyday life with respect to others and on which our relationship with others is founded. The eidetics of empathy provides us with the conceptual tools to address crucial questions such as: What is the specific and distinctive structure of empathy? What does it mean to perform an act of empathy? What are the conditions of possibility of the performance of acts of empathy? Are there different fulfilment degrees of empathy? What is the role played by living bodies in the performance of acts of empathy? How is it possible to prevent and correct mistakes of empathy? What is at stake in acts of empathy is their mere performance or non-performance, or, also and above all, their being more or less successfully and adequately performed?

I deal with these issues in making three points on the eidetics of empathy.

My *first* point is that the eidetics of empathy allows us to understand empathy as *one type of acts* of perceiving others and their experiences directly and as a *whole* that is subject to variations of its *parts* – the limits of possible co-variations of its parts correspond to the essential structure of empathy. Accordingly, empathy is a «*type of sui generis perceiving acts*» (Stein 1917: 20, En. Tr.: 1964: 11, revised) that is irreducible to external perception and other acts whose contents are originally given in *prima persona*.

*Secondly*, I focus on the issue of the *possible co-variations of parts* of the empathy-type addressed by the eidetics of empathy. Indeed, the eidetics of

<sup>4</sup> On the relation between different spheres of value-qualities and their sharing in intersubjective and collective experiences, see Scheler 1913-26. Among Scheler's taxonomy of intersubjective and collective experiences there is of course also empathy that Scheler calls *Nach-fühlen* or *Nach-erleben*, see Scheler 1913-23 and Stein 1917.

<sup>5</sup> Stein herself titles the second section of her book on empathy *The essence of acts of empathy* [*Das Wesen der Einfühlungsakte*]. See also De Vecchi-Forlè 2019.

empathy shows that acts of empathy are characterized by *degrees of accomplishment* corresponding to *fulfilment stages*, where every fulfilment stage involves a specific variation of parts of empathy, and consequently variations of acts of empathy. Moreover, the eidetics of empathy highlights that acts of empathy can vary with respect to the content and the layer of the experience they turn towards: sensations of feelings and general or vital feelings belonging to the psychophysical layer, on the one hand; volitions, positions-takings and personal feelings belonging to the sphere of the personhood, on the other. Therefore, acts of empathy are both acts of so-called «*sensorial empathy*» [*Empfindungseinfühlung*] and «*personal empathy*» [*Einfühlung in Personen*].

*Thirdly*, I argue that the eidetics of empathy allows us to tackle *qualitative issues* about empathy that are crucial in our everyday life, such as: the fragility of the fulfilment of acts of empathy; the possibility conditions of higher and lower fulfilment degrees of empathy; the felicity and infelicity conditions of correctly or mistakenly performed acts of empathy; the «essential possibilities» [*Wesensmöglichkeiten*] of the personal feelings to be expressed and grasped in empathy. So, the eidetics of empathy exemplifies very well the ontologically qualitative issue of «*degrees of existence*» of any entity in relation to its «*eidetic paradigm*» (De Vecchi 2016, 2018), and is a prime example of how phenomenological eidetics can be a *qualitative ontology*.

### 1. The type and the whole of empathy

I claim that Stein's eidetics of empathy is an application to the phenomenon of empathy of Husserl's eidetics: it is an analysis of the “essence and forms of acts of empathy” (paraphrasing Scheler 1913/23)<sup>6</sup> based on the eidetic concepts of “whole”, constituted by bounds to possible co-variations of its parts, and “foundation”.<sup>7</sup>

According to the eidetics of empathy, empathy is one single type of acts that, as a whole, is made up of parts that are subject to co-variations: the limits and constraints of such co-variations constitute the invariant and essential structure of empathy. In varying its parts, every single and contingent act of empathy exemplifies the empathy type, which therefore groups together single and individual acts of empathy that display modifications and

<sup>6</sup> The title of Scheler 1913-23 is just *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*.

<sup>7</sup> About Husserl's eidetics, see Husserl 1901 (in particular the *Third Logical Investigation* on “The Theory of Parts and Wholes”) and 1913; see also De Monticelli 2018.

variations of their parts. So, one of the crucial findings of the eidetics of empathy – I would like to highlight firstly – is that empathy acts are various and different: there is a multiplicity of acts of empathy, factual and virtual, that differ from each other in varying in their parts and that at the same time all belong to the empathy type as a whole. Examples of possible co-variations of parts of empathy acts are: the content and the degree of fulfilment and accomplishment of empathy acts; the layer of the person they address; the varieties of living beings who can be empathized with – not only human beings, but *in principio* all living beings.

Moreover, the eidetics of empathy points out the fundamental condition of the limits of possible co-variations of the parts constituting empathy as a whole. Indeed, the empathy type is exemplified by a multiplicity of acts of empathy, each of them is characterized by singular and contingent co-variations of its parts, but within the limits required by the type. The crucial point is that if co-variations of parts of empathy exceed their limits, then they become parts of phenomena that are similar to, but other than empathy, such as perception, sympathy and emotional sharing with respect to which empathy maintains relations of foundation. Therefore, empathy is one type of act that is irreducible to other types of acts, even those that are the most similar in the intersubjective and social landscape.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.1. A type of *sui generis* perceiving acts

Stein affirms that empathy is a «basic type of acts in which the lived experiences of the other are grasped» [*Grundart von Akten in denen fremdes Erleben erfasst wird*], and that it is a «type of *sui generis* perceiving acts» [*eine Art erfahrender Akte sui generis*] (Stein 1917: 13-14, 20, En. Tr.: 1964: 6, 11, revised). In what sense is empathy, as the act of perceiving others and their lived experiences, *sui generis*? This is a very crucial issue that precisely involves the relation between empathy on the one hand and intersubjectivity and embodied personal identity on the other. Let us focus on it.

<sup>8</sup> On other acts, which are similar to empathy but are not empathy, see Stein 1917: 21-30; En. Tr. 1964: 12-18, and Scheler 1913-23. Moreover, on the different types of acts that are protagonists of the social reality, see De Vecchi (2014).

The crucial point Stein makes here is highlighting the specificity of the type of acts of empathy. Empathy is the type of act in which we realize that there are others, facing us: it is that type of acts in which we immediately perceive that there are others in the world (both as psycho-physical individuals and as persons, and even as living beings in general, e.g. plants) who are constituted by living bodies [*Leib*] and are subjects of experiences, just as we are (see Stein 1917: 12; En. Tr.: 1964: 6).

Indeed, other subjects and their experiences are the specific “field of competence” of empathy, so to speak, just as material objects and bodies [*Körper*] are the specific “field of competence” of external perception [*Wahrnehmung*]. But even though empathy is a type of «original» [*originär*] acts, as performed *in prima persona* by the empathizing subject, at the same time empathy is also a type of acts whose content is not originally given [*nicht-originär*] (Stein 1917: 15-16, 20; En. Tr. Stein 1964: 5, 7-8, 11, revised): it belongs to the other, since it is the lived experience of the other subject that I grasp in empathy, and not mine (Stein 1917: 20).<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, Stein claims that empathy is a type of acts of perceiving, but a *sui generis* one, since the content of such perceiving is the other and her/his lived experience. In empathy, we immediately perceive given data belonging to the lived experiences of the other, and this makes the perceiving *sui generis*, i.e. different from other acts of experiencing, in which the lived experience is my own experience, as it is paradigmatically in the external perception of material objects [*Wahrnehmung*].

<sup>9</sup> The fact that the lived experience of the other, which is perceived in empathy, is not originally given, does not imply at all that it is given to me in a mediated way; rather, empathy is an act of perceiving the lived experience directly, *hic et nunc* – without the need of inferences and simulation processes. According to Stein, empathy as well as perception of material objects [*Wahrnehmung*] «[h]ave their object itself there, and meet it directly where it belongs, where it is anchored in the context of its being [*Seinszusammenhang*]. They need not represent it in order to draw it close» (Stein 1917: 31; En. Tr. 1964: 19, revised]. On this point, see also Stein’s arguments against both analogy and imitation theories of empathy (Stein 1917: 32-42). Stein mainly goes back here to the arguments presented by Scheler (1913/23: 43-66) on these issues. For a contemporary review and discussion of these topics and their connections to contemporary debate on intersubjective understanding, see Gallagher and Zahavi (2008, Ch. 9 *How we know others*), Krueger (2012), Overgaard 2012.

## 1.2. Experiencing in *prima persona* and living body

The phenomenological account of lived experiences precisely distinguishes lived experiences whose content is originally given (e.g. perception of material object, self-perception, value-perception [*Wertwahrnehmung*], eidetical perception [*Wesensanschauung*]), from lived experiences whose content is not originally given (empathy, imagination, memory, fancy, expectation), and points out that they have of course two different perspectives: *prima* and *secunda persona*, respectively.

In affirming that empathy is «a type of *sui generis* perceiving acts», Stein shows that any lived experience is originally embedded in the living body of a subject; and thus empathy, as the act of perceiving the lived experience of the other, is necessarily marked by a gap between me and the other. This is why in empathy the perceiving is *sui generis*: it is not the standard kind of perceiving, the one we usually have, which is in *prima persona*.

This point of Stein's eidetics of empathy is extremely important with respect to my arguing for the essential relation between empathy, embodiment and personal identity, since it preserves the boundary between the empathizing subject and the empathized subject, correctly, and shows that such boundary corresponds exactly to that between my living body and the living body of the other.

But there is another aspect highlighted by Stein's eidetics of empathy that is very perspicuous: this is the difference in the quality of the experience, which is more intense and vivid [*lebendig*] in the case of originally given contents, and paler and shadowy [*schemenhaft*] in the case of not originally given contents (see Stein 1917: 28; En. Tr. Stein 1964: 17).<sup>10</sup> So, Stein's suggestion is that empathized experiences are less intense and vivid than experiences lived in *prima persona* just because others' experiences, which we live in empathy in *secunda persona*, are experiences that belong to the living body of others and not to mine. This is a very precious insight provided by Stein about our contemporary social world, where our interactions with others in social media and digital platforms are characterized by modifications of the role played by the living body and even by a possible evanescence of the living body. Then, in considering Stein's point, we should ask ourselves whether such interactions are

<sup>10</sup> I argued that this point is also important for distinguishing empathy *de vivo* and empathy in fiction (see De Vecchi-Forlè 2019).

still empathic acts, and if so, what kinds of modifications of the empathy-type they involve.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.3. Experience vs. mere information

Moreover, it is worth noticing that the fact that empathy is an act of perceiving implies that it is an act in which we *experience* [*erfahren*] the given data of others and their lived experiences, and it is not a «*mere knowledge*» [*bloßes Wissen*] or mere information about others and their lived experiences. The difference between “knowing about the other” and “perceiving the other” is a fundamental one: it distinguishes empathy from other acts by which we are informed about what the other is living – Maria tells me that Bill is sad. Unlike empathy, these signitive acts are lacking in given data: indeed, they are not acts of perceiving. This is a mark that distinguishes empathy essentially.<sup>12</sup> Then, we should also wonder whether social networks and digital platforms vehicle experiences or mere information and news – if any, i.e. not fake ones –, and even how individuals can live others’ experiences and share experiences with each other in contexts that *in principio* do not require the “presence of the living bodies”, so to speak, and the usual role that living bodies have in “real life”. The issue that should be raised concerns precisely the modifications of the personal identity as dis-embodied or less embodied or differently embodied, and possibly the loss of sovereignty of personal individuals together with the loss of the

<sup>11</sup> On the modifications of intersubjective experiences lived on social media and digital platforms, see Cianferoni 2019.

<sup>12</sup> This point is grounded on the phenomenological topic concerning the distinction between «intuitive content» of acts of experiencing (the given datum), on the one hand, and conceptual-propositional content of signitive acts. The distinction goes back *in primis* to Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* (Husserl 1901). Stein deals with the difference between «perceiving the other» and «knowing about the other» in Stein (1917, § 4. *Der Streit zwischen Vorstellungs- und Aktualitätansicht*, 30-33; En. Tr. 1964: 18-20). This mark is also very relevant in relation to fiction: we can perform genuine acts of empathy in fiction just because fiction, if it is well built, is not a sequence of information about this and that character but, rather, is a narrative work in which we can perceive characters and their lived experiences, just as we do with persons in the real world. In a previous paper (De Vecchi-Forlè 2019), we argued for the thesis that also in fiction, and not just in the real world, we can directly perceive characters, without the need *in principio* to integrate empathy with imagination, inferences, simulation processes. In other words, empathy in fiction is one of possible modifications of the empathy-type, a modification that preserves the essential features of its type, including, of course, the fundamental trait of direct perception.



centrality of their living bodies for the constitution of personal identities: how can digital identities still be personal identities?<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Possible co-variations of parts of the empathy-type as a whole

What are the possible co-variations of parts of the empathy-type as a whole? There are several examples of such co-variations. I limit myself here to focussing on the following: the different fulfilment and accomplishment degrees of empathy acts; the different layers of living beings and human persons addressed by acts of sensorial and personal empathy: the psychophysical and vital layer, and the layer of the personhood. These are all examples of the variety of acts of the empathy type: indeed, each of these variations is a possible co-variation of the empathy-type as a whole.

### 2.1. Fulfilment and accomplishment degrees of empathy

Now I focus on one of the core arguments grounding the eidetics of empathy. Empathy is a unique and specific type of acts, subject to modifications corresponding to the possible co-variations of the parts that constitute empathy as a whole, in virtue of the fact that there are different «accomplishment degrees» [*Vollzugstufen*] of empathy that constitute variations of parts of empathy as a whole.

Indeed, empathy is a type of act that can have different accomplishment degrees that correspond to different fulfilment stages of the act of empathy. The empathy-type includes different acts of empathy that are subject to different fulfilment stages, in which the empathizing subject grasps the other's lived experience at different stages: from less-defined and vaguer to better-defined and fine-grained given data. These different fulfilment stages of the act of empathy are variations of the parts of empathy as a whole.

<sup>13</sup> This is a new field of research that philosophy, in general, and in particular phenomenology should deal with. Indeed phenomenology, unlike other philosophical traditions, has the best and most suitable tools for taking it into account. I cannot deal with this issue here, in this paper, for reasons of space. I found interesting, even though not conclusive, reflections on the relation between digital technologies and (dis)embodiment, and on the issue of whether virtual reality and cyberspace involve dis-embodiment or only modified embodiments in Richardson-Harper (2001), De Preester (2011) and Boler (2007) – and I thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper for referring me to these articles. On a non-phenomenological perspective about the modifications of “personal identity” in the so-called “info-sphere”, see Floridi 2016.

But what does it concretely mean that the empathizing subject can perceive the given data of the lived experience of the empathized subject at different fulfilment degrees? This is a crucial question that concerns the possibility conditions of the act of empathy, its felicitous accomplishment, its possible mistakes and even its possible corrections – all aspects that are at stake in our relation with others in everyday life.

Stein suggests that the different empathy fulfilment stages of the lived experience of the other – more or less fulfilled – are grounded on different degrees of grasping the meaningful unity between the experience of the other and the context in which it is connected – causally connected in sensorial empathy and motivationally connected in personal empathy. The more the empathizing subject grasps this meaningful unity between the lived experience of the other and the context from which it emerges, the higher the degree of fulfilment of her act of empathy, and its degree of accomplishment. Stein identifies *three degrees* of fulfilment.

The *first* and basic *degree* consists in the «arising of the lived experience» [*das Auftauchen des Erlebnisses*] of the other: for instance, «the sadness I see in another's face». At this first grade of empathy, I (the empathizing subject) have only a vague and empty perception of the lived experience of the other, «which faces me as an object». This is, so to speak, an experience of “low definition” of the lived experience of the other.

Conversely, at the *second grade* of empathy the empathizing subject has a full experience of the lived experience of the other: a “high definition” experience, so to speak. This is the moment of the fulfilling perception of the lived experience of the other, the one of its «fulfilling explication» [*erfüllende Explikation*]. At this stage I (the empathizing subject) see the specific ontological status of the lived experience of the other, and grasp its being something subjective that does not present itself to me as an object anymore. I perceive the lived experience of the other in its meaningful unity, in its motivational connection with the situation with respect to which the other is living that experience. This is why Stein calls this moment «fulfilling explication» of the lived experience of the other: it represents the point of highest proximity of the empathizing subject with respect to the empathized subject, the point where the empathizing subject is, so to speak, «pulled into» the lived experience of the other, and, from this new emplacement can turn to the object of the lived experience of the other, placing himself at [*bei*] the empathized subject (Stein 1917: 19, En. Tr. Stein 1964: 10).

Finally, the *third degree* of fulfilment of acts of empathy is the moment of the «comprehensive objectification of the explained lived experience», in which, «after successfully executed clarification, does the lived experience again face me as an object» (Stein 1917: 19, En. Tr. Stein 1964: 10, revised), and the empathizing subject comes back to his initial distance from the empathized subject.

The crucial point of Stein's analysis of «degrees of accomplishment» [*Vollzugstufen*] of acts of empathy is that they represent different «modalities of accomplishment» [*Vollzugsmodalitäten*] of these acts. Indeed, when we perform an act of empathy, we do not always perform all of these degrees, and we «are often satisfied with one of the lower ones» (Stein 1917: 19, En. Tr. 1964: 11). Consequently, empathy is not merely a type of acts that we may or may not perform, but it is rather a type of acts that, if performed, can be accomplished in different modalities: either realizing all three stages of the performing process or limiting itself to the first one. In other words, we can perform acts of empathy that are fully achieved or partially achieved.

The fact that empathy is a type of acts that is subject to various degrees of fulfilment and modalities of accomplishment is a new and very important point for the ontological status of empathy and its key role in intersubjective and interpersonal relations. When we encounter others in the social landscape, we perform both complete and partial acts of empathy: sometimes we follow up on the lived experience of the other, which we have previously only grasped vaguely and emptily (first stage), and thus we fully perceive her/his lived experience in its motivational context, in its meaningful unity (second stage).<sup>14</sup> In other cases, we interrupt the process of accomplishment of acts of empathy, and stop the encounter with the other at the first step of empathy; in this case we have only a very rough perception of the lived experience of the other. In both cases, however, even when it is limited to the first and lowest level of accomplishment, empathy is the type of acts by which we encounter others directly. The encounter with the other may then have a follow-up and be developed and transformed into

<sup>14</sup> In saying that in the second and highest degree of empathy achievement the empathizing subject fully perceives the experience of the other, I do not claim, of course, that he/she has an exhaustive and complete experience of the other. Indeed, the empathized subject, as perceptual object, always has a transcendence, an excess of being, with respect to what we can experience of him/her.

an interpersonal and interactive relation, be it an extemporaneous or stable one, in virtue of iterated and mutual acts of empathy.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, in this perspective, it is plain that we do not just perform or not perform acts of empathy, but that, if any, we perform them as acts that can have different fulfilment stages and development phases in the intersubjective life of the persons.

## 2.2. Sensorial and personal empathy: differentiated, but unified acts of empathy

As already mentioned, the variety of acts of the empathy type also includes both acts of sensorial empathy [*Empfindungseinfühlung*] and personal empathy [*Einfühlung in Personen*]: the former are acts belonging to the psychophysical and vital level and are characterized by causal connections, while the latter are acts belonging to the sphere of the personhood and are marked by motivational connections.<sup>16</sup>

In acts of *sensorial empathy*, the empathizing subject realizes that is facing a living and sensitive body, a *Leib* – and not a mere material body, a *Körper* – that is a field of sensations and psychophysical phenomena that have their manifestation in the living body according to a causal connection. For instance, in empathizing I grasp the sensorial feeling [*sinnliches Gefühl*] of cold that the other is experiencing and I realize that she is cold because of her trembling: the feeling of cold causes the trembling and so it manifests itself in her living body. Or, in empathizing I see that the other is walking with effort and looks tired or ill and grasp her vital or general feeling [*Gemeingefühl*] of malaise as they appear in her living body. In both examples the living body is the field of manifestation of sensorial and vital feelings. Moreover – as Stein remarks – I may see vital feelings, say «vigour and sluggishness, not only in human psychophysical individuals, but also in non-human animals, and even in plants (see Stein 1917, § 5, I, 78 «Vital phenomena»; En. Tr. 1964: 69).

In acts of *personal empathy*, on the other hand, the empathizing subject perceives the other's personal feelings [*geistige Gefühle*] as they are expressed – and not causally manifested – in her living body, and experiences the other as

<sup>15</sup> See Stein 1917: 30, En. tr.: 18; see also Husserl 1912-28: «The constitution of the spiritual World» and Husserl 1905-1920: «Gemeingeist II».

<sup>16</sup> See Stein 1917, both the Third Section “The Constitution of the psychophysical Individual” and the Fourth Section “Empathy as understanding of persons”.

an embodied personal subject. For instance, in empathizing, I perceive other's feeling of shame in her blushing, her rage in clenching her fist, her joy in her being jubilant. The crucial point is that the relation between personal feelings and their expression is a motivational one and is therefore completely different from the causal relation between psychophysical experiences and their causal manifestation in the living body.

According to the eidetics of empathy account, empathy is one single type of acts that can address different layers constituting the living beings – be the living beings plants, non-human animals and human persons. As Stein affirms, «the comprehension [*Erfassen*] of others' lived experiences – be they sensations or feelings or what not – is a unified, typical, even though differentiated modification of consciousness and requires a uniform name» (Stein 1917: 78, § 5, c; En. tr. 1964: 60, revised). Therefore, Stein's claim is that we can perform acts of empathy with respect to all possible living beings: every act of empathy varies in its target and content – as they are parts of empathy as a whole –, according both to the specific living being it refers to and the kind of lived experience it grasps – sensorial feelings, vital feelings, personal feelings, etc.

I will come back to this issue shortly: indeed, the eidetics of empathy efficaciously shows how and to what degree of accomplishment and fulfilment our acts of empathy can have vis-à-vis different living beings: who and what living being can we empathize with and to what degree?

### 3. Possibility and felicity conditions of acts of empathy and qualitative eidetics of empathy

The eidetics of empathy allows us to identify possibility and felicity conditions of acts of empathy: the essentially necessary relation between personal feelings and their expression is for sure a condition of possibility of the performance of acts of empathy; moreover, other possibility and felicity conditions of acts of empathy are constituted by higher and lower degrees of fulfilment and accomplishment, and also by their greater and lower correctness. This point on the possibility and felicity conditions of acts of empathy is intrinsically connected – I suggest – to the qualitative feature that characterizes the eidetics of

empathy: it is a qualitative eidetics and represents a good example of phenomenology as qualitative ontology.

### 3.1. Feeling and expression: an eidetic relation

Stein's eidetics of empathy points out that the motivational relation between personal feelings and their expression is an essentially necessary relation: the feeling «terminates in an expression or releases expression out of itself», since «the feeling in its pure essence is not something complete in itself». As Max Scheler had also remarked, the relationship between feeling and its expression constitutes an essential «*expressive unity*» [*Ausdruckseinheit*] (Scheler 1913/1923: 261), a whole whose parts are the non-independent moments of a whole.

However, Stein makes a further point about this relation. She claims that the essentially necessary relation between feeling and expression can develop in different ways, so that there are different «essential possibilities» [*Wesensmöglichkeiten*] in which the feeling may express itself: acts of the will, actions, speech acts and bodily expressions. So these essential possibilities in which the feeling can be expressed are prescribed by the essence itself of feeling. This is a point that is crucial for understanding the nature of eidetic relations in general. Indeed, the feature of essential relations here pointed out by Stein is that essential relations are not only necessary but may also be possible relations, and this possibility is not a mere contingency but a possibility that belongs to the very essence of the entity concerned.<sup>17</sup>

«Feelings release or motivate volitions [*Willensakt*] or actions, so to speak. Feeling is related to the appearance of bodily expression in exactly the same way. The same feeling that motivates a volition can also motivate an appearance of expression. And feeling by its nature prescribes what expression and what volition can motivate. By nature [*seinem Wesen nach*] it must always motivate something, must always be expressed. Only different forms of expression are possible» (Stein 1917: § 4, d, 68-69; En Tr. 1964: 51-52)

<sup>17</sup> Another classical example of essential possibility is that constituted by the relation between the experience of the empirical individual as in the perception [*Wahrnehmung*] and the experience of the essential structure [*Wesenschau*], as Husserl argues for in a classical passage of his *Ideen I* (Husserl 1913: § 3)

Feeling by its nature [*seinem Wesen nach*] demands expression. The various types of expression are various essential possibilities [*verschiedene Wesensmöglichkeiten*]. Feeling and expression are related by nature and meaning, not causally [*Wesens- und Sinn-, kein Kausalzusammenhang*]. The bodily expression like other possible forms issuing from feeling and its meaning, is therefore also definitely experienced. (Stein 1917: 70; En. Tr.: 53)

Moreover, Stein mentions the interesting cases of the «surrogate of expression» and of the hiding of one's own feeling in fake expressions. From the eidetic perspective both cases represent “negative modifications”, so to speak, of the essentially necessary relation between the feeling and its expression: they involve variations of the parts of the whole feeling-expression such that variations overcome the limits of their possible co-variations. It follows that both the phenomena of the surrogate of the expression and of dissembling one's own feeling cease to constitute the whole of feeling and its expression.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.2. Possibility conditions of higher or lower fulfilment and accomplishment of empathy acts

As we have seen above, the eidetics of empathy points out that the accomplishment degree of empathy acts depends on their fulfilment degree, i.e. on the degree to which the meaningful unity of others' lived experience and its context of emergence is grasped. I suggest that the eidetics of empathy is also able to account for different possibility conditions of such fulfilment, both in the case of sensorial empathy and in the case of personal empathy acts.

#### (i) Sensorial empathy – Highest genus and eidetic singularity

According to the eidetics of empathy, in the case of sensorial empathy, the more similar the living species of the empathized subject is to the living species of the empathizing subject, the higher the degree of fulfilment – so

<sup>18</sup> On the “negative modification” of the whole of feeling and expression see also Scheler 1913-23: 245; En. Tr. 1973: 251, where he suggests that the repression of feelings, i.e. the impossibility of expressing them, modify feelings' ontological status qualitatively: «When joy or love are inhibited in their expression, they do not simply remain the same from the internal point of view, but tend to evaporate».

that the condition of possibility of the highest degree of fulfilment consists in the co-belonging of empathizing and empathized subjects to the same species. The fundamental eidetic claim here is that the «highest genus» “living being” constitutes the limit of empathy acts: we can empathize only with individuals that are living beings, and not with individuals that are mere material objects.<sup>19</sup> But, going top down, from the highest and supreme genus “living being” to lower and more particular species, such as plants or animals and human animals, the accomplishment and fulfilment degree of the act of empathy is higher, the more the empathized subject is a human being like me; and conversely, it is lower, the more the empathized subject is far from being a human being and also a non-human animal.

According to these eidetic conditions, in principle, an empathy act with respect to a dog and its feeling pain in its leg has a lower possibility of reaching the highest fulfilment degree than an empathy act performed with respect to a human being and his feeling pain in his hand. Indeed, I have a greater likelihood of grasping the meaningful unity between the lived experience and the context from which it causally originates in the case of the human being and his painful hand than in the case of the dog and its painful leg.

Here the eidetics of empathy works on the classical eidetic relation between the singular and concrete individual, on the one hand, and the universal meant as the supreme genus (i.e. the most general kind) to which it belongs, on the other. As Husserl argues, the relation between the individual and its universal is realized passing through the so-called «eidetic singularity» and the intermediate kinds and species. The crucial phenomenological claim here is that any individual is an «eidetic singularity» since it exemplifies its species; in other terms, the factual features of any singular individual are contingent variations that are prescribed by its essential structure, i.e. they are possible co-variations of parts of a whole. For instance, this human being, whatever its particular characteristics, is an «eidetic singularity» and not a mere contingent individual, because it exemplifies in its contingent variations its essential species “the human being”, which in its turn belongs to the intermediate species “the animal”,

<sup>19</sup> Of course this claim raises the question of the possibility of empathizing with individuals who are not living beings, but who, nevertheless, present some of the fundamental features of living beings, i.e. having a body and being subjects of some kinds of experiences, as is the case for robots and in general for entities provided with artificial intelligences.



which belongs to the highest genus “the living being” (see Husserl 1913: Part One «Essence and Eidetic Cognition», Ch. 1, «Fact and Essence»; Stein 1917, Third Section «The constitution of the psychophysical individual»; De Vecchi, 2013).

(ii) Personal Empathy – The personal type

Also in the case of personal empathy, the possibility conditions of highest accomplishment and fulfilment of the empathy acts depend also on the similarity of the empathizing subject with the empathized subject. However, here it is no longer an issue of belonging to the same species, as in the case of sensorial empathy; indeed, in personal empathy the empathized other is necessarily a human being just like me, the empathizing subject; so both subjects belong already to the same species. Rather, the possibility conditions of empathy acts of highest degree depend upon the «personal type»: the more the empathized subject is a personal type similar to that of the empathizing subject, the higher is the possibility that the empathizing subject performs empathy acts of highest fulfilment.

What is the «personal type»? Stein suggests that it is constituted both by the hierarchy of values that structures and orients the person (her *ordo amoris* in Schelerian terms), and by her historical, social and cultural profile. The more the empathizing subject shares the values hierarchy, on the one hand, and the historical and socio-cultural profile of the empathized subject on the other, the greater the possibility that the empathizing subject will grasp the meaningful unity between the lived experience of the empathized subject and the axiological and socio-cultural context from which it originates, and therefore the higher the possibility that the empathizing subject may perform an act of the highest degree of fulfilment.

For instance, Stein discusses the case of the empathy act performed by an atheist with respect to the experience of faith lived by a religious person. This act of empathy – Stein argues – cannot be an empathic act of the highest fulfilment degree: indeed, the atheist cannot fully grasp the meaningful unity between the experience of faith lived by the empathized subject and the religious values that identify her personhood. Moreover, another significant case discussed by Stein is the following: my empathy act with respect to the historical and socio-cultural type “Gretchen” (the German country girl of the XVI century) can be more or less fulfilled according to my possibility of sharing this same profile: indeed, the greater possibility I have of understanding her

historical and socio-cultural profile, the higher the possibility of fulfilment of my act of empathy. We could transpose this example by changing the type of the little Grete with the type of “*Kill Bill* woman”, for instance: I have more possibility to perform empathy acts of highest fulfilment degree with respect to her than with respect to Gretchen because I co-belong much more to the social and cultural context of the woman protagonist of *Kill Bill* than to that of Gretchen.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.3. Possibility conditions of higher and lower correctness of empathy acts

The eidetics of empathy also indicates felicity conditions of acts of empathy, so to speak: possibility conditions of acts of empathy to be correct and even to be corrected if mistaken or objects of delusion.

Here is the being aware of the eidetics of empathy, i.e. of the eidetic relations that define empathy, and in general of the eidetic relation between any singular entity and its essential species, that makes the empathizing subject able to perform felicitous empathy acts. Stein claims that the empathizing subject performs acts of empathy that are much more felicitous, i.e. much more fulfilled, the more she/he is aware of being an individual who exemplifies an essential species, i.e. a whole whose parts are subjects to possible co-variations, and therefore she/he does not consider herself/himself as a «fixed type». In other words, the more the empathizing subject is aware of exemplifying in its individuality and contingent variations the essential species to which she/he belongs, the more her/his empathizing acts can be correct and not mistaken. Only on this condition of not being imprisoned in one’s own contingent features, is it possible to perform correct acts of empathy. For instance, if I, the empathizing subject, am endowed with normal eyesight – I am, say, neither daltonic nor blind –, I can perform correct acts of empathy with respect to an individual who has vision impairments, the more I consider my vision abilities as parts of my being a psychophysical individual that can be subject to modifications. Only in this perspective I have far more chance of grasping the lived experience of the daltonic or blind vision as a lived experience of another

<sup>20</sup> See Stein 1917, Fourth Section “Empathy as understanding of persons”, in particular § b) “Personal Types and the Conditions of the Possibility of Empathy With Persons”. With the expression “*Kill Bill* woman” I refer to the protagonist of the same name movie by Quentin Tarantino, the “Bride”, code name “Black Mamba”.

psychophysical individual – and viceversa (see Stein 1917, III Section, “The Constitution of the psychophysical individual”).

Stein mentions another very eloquent case with respect to the fruitfulness of the eidetics of empathy and the eidetics in general: the understanding of empathy as a whole made up of parts subject to modifications allows us to see the connection between the psychic properties of the other that I grasp in my act of empathy and her/his character as the whole to which such psychic properties belong. It follows that just in considering such a relation between psychic properties and the character as the whole founded on the psychic properties as its parts, it becomes for instance possible for me, the empathizing subject, to doubt the content of my empathy acts and to correct it. For instance, it might be that in empathizing I see the other’s rage and aggressiveness; but, on the other hand, I know the other to be a gentle person. The eidetics of empathy here suggests that maybe my empathy act is mistaken, because the aggressiveness I grasped in empathizing cannot be a co-variation of the parts that as psychic properties constitute the gentle personal character as a whole. So the eidetic claim here is that in empathizing I overcame the limits of the possible co-variations of the psychic properties as parts that constitute that type of personal character, and that therefore it is likely that I was wrong in my empathizing act.

#### 3.4. Degrees of existence, qualitative ontology and eidetic paradigms

In stressing the different fulfilment and accomplishment degrees of empathy acts, the eidetics of empathy exemplifies the phenomenological issue of the «eidetic paradigms» and, more in general, of eidetics as qualitative ontology.<sup>21</sup> The fundamental claim is that, as with any other kind of entity, any single act of empathy can be more or less fulfilled with respect to its ideal being that consists in the bound-constraints that define the possible co-variations of its parts. In other terms: any entity is the entity it is according to its eidetic structure as a whole, i.e. according to the bound-constraints that define the possible co-variations of its parts. But any entity satisfies in its contingent way its own legacy: therefore, there are different accomplishment stages of its own being a certain type of entity, i.e. different ways of fitting, more or less adequately, its own eidetic paradigm, its own ideal being.

<sup>21</sup> I speak of «eidetic paradigms» and of «phenomenology as a qualitative ontology» in De Vecchi 2018.

Indeed, the general eidetic claim is that the essence of an entity is both its invariant structure, its being a whole made up of parts subjected to possible co-variation within the limits that define the structure of this entity, and its ideal structure that can be more or less adequately realized in any contingent individual that exemplifies it.

For instance, there are friendships that are more or less realized, that fit more or less the essential and ideal species “friendship”, i.e. the eidetic paradigm of the friendship. But, at the same time, the essence of friendship is the invariant structure that allows any interpersonal relation that fits the bound-constraint of the friendship as a whole to be an individual and contingent exemplar of friendship. In other terms, not only any particular case of friendship is such because it has the structure of friendship, but any individual case of friendship exemplifies the eidetic and ideal paradigm of friendship in different ways and degrees.<sup>22</sup>

Analogously, any single and particular act of empathy satisfies its essential legacy in its individually contingent way: in realizing its eidetic paradigm at different fulfilment stages – more or less adequately.

I suggest that the eidetics of empathy thesis, that there are different accomplishment and fulfilment stages of empathy, represents an impressive argument for qualitative ontology: the possible gradualness of achievement of empathy acts is an exemplification of the qualitative ontology issue about the gradualness of being, meant as gradualness of existence: the existence of any entity can be more or less fulfilled, more or less achieved, with respect to its eidetic paradigm.

In conclusion, I argue that Stein’s eidetics of empathy is a prime example of how phenomenological eidetics – far from being imprisoned in a hypostasized world – can fruitfully account for life-world phenomena and be a «qualitative ontology», where a priori and essential structures of entities not only combine with, but also enlighten the contingencies of entities that we experience in our everyday life. Stein’s qualitative eidetics of empathy reveals phenomenological eidetics to be a qualitative ontology that focuses on the gradualness of being, on the «vague essences» (Husserl 1901, 1913, 1936) and the «a priori necessities and possibilities» (Husserl 1911-1921: 215) that distinguish the entities we experience in our life-world. Indeed, this is a research

<sup>22</sup> The case of friendship and its relation with its essence meant both as invariant structure and eidetic paradigm is discussed by Husserl (1912-28: § 50).

field that is specifically phenomenological: starting from Husserl's idea that essences of the entities of our life-world are «vague essences» that, unlike mathematical and geometrical idealities, are qualitatively definable, phenomenology reveals itself to be definitely a «qualitative ontology».<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> On the «vague essences» see Husserl 1901: III Logical Investigation, § 9 and 1913: §72, 74. On the issue of phenomenology as qualitative ontology, see Lanfredini (2003), Lanfredini, R., Liberati N. et al. (eds. 2016), and De Vecchi (2016 e 2018).

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