

# **Dark and Bright Empathy:**

## **Phenomenological and Anthropological Reflections**

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**Abstract:** The aim of our contribution is to clarify the nature of empathy and its role in sociality. Taking issue with a recent proposal by Bubandt and Willerslev, we argue that their conceptualization and definition of empathy is confused, that they fail to distinguish sufficiently clearly between empathy and other forms of social cognition, and that their main claim, that empathy has a dark side to it, and can be used for nefarious purposes, far from being novel, was already recognized by leading empathy theorists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We then revisit and present core ideas from formative writings on empathy found in early phenomenology, we demonstrate the anthropological relevance of these ideas, and argue that phenomenologists such as Husserl, Stein and Scheler develop an account of the link between empathy, alterity and sociality that is considerably more refined and sophisticated than anything offered by Bubandt and Willerslev. In the final part of the paper, we engage with Geertz' highly influential claim that anthropologists can safely leave empathy behind and argue that empathy plays such a fundamental role in the fabric of social life that its use in ethnographic research is not only permissible, but unavoidable.

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As a challenge to the recent proliferation of anthropological interest in the study of “empathy” Bubandt and Willerslev have set out to defend in a recent article what they take to be a number of provocative and novel ideas concerning the nature and social function of empathy as a means to foreground its so-called *dark side* (2015). While Bubandt and Willerslev agree with recent anthropological work that has viewed the investigation of empathy as providing means to better understand the very condition of possibility of sociality itself (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015: 5), they argue that any such endeavor is hampered, however, by what they take to be the tacit assumption “that empathy is always a moral virtue” (2015: 6). More specifically, they begin by defining empathy as a “first-person imaginative projection, at once emotional and cognitive, of oneself into the perspective or situation of another” (2015: 5) and suggest that the alterity of the other rather than being minimized is precisely radicalized through empathy (2015: 7). Provocatively, they then argue that the existing literature on empathy has failed to realize to what extent this process is also active in deception (2015: 5). Indeed, Bubandt and Willerslev claim that it has been “almost entirely overlooked” (2015: 6) that empathy, or what they also call “empathic identifications with others” or “empathetic incorporation of an alien perspective” or the ability to “imagine how others see and experience the world” (2015: 6, 9), rather than aiming at mutual understanding, compassion, care, altruism and social cohesion, etc., can also be used for deceptive, manipulative, and violent purposes. What has to be realized, in short, is that empathy also has a darker side. It can also be used for nefarious purposes, and if one is to fully appreciate its fundamental role in sociality, these darker sides are no less important (2015: 6).

We happen to agree with a number of Bubandt and Willerslev’s central claims. We also think that empathy plays a crucial role in sociality, that it very much highlights the alterity of the

other, and that it can be used for deceptive purposes. These are, in fact, ideas that we have also discussed in the context of our own earlier work on the topic (e.g., Hollan and Throop 2008, 2011; Zahavi 2008, 2010, 2014; Zahavi and Michael 2018). Despite what is no doubt some substantial overlap between our perspectives, in the first part of our article, we nevertheless wish to raise two fundamental objections to Bubandt and Willerslev's account. First, we want to question Bubandt and Willerslev's conceptualization and definition of empathy. To assess fully their proposal, it is important to get clear about what exactly empathy is supposed to be. Rather than offering a clearly circumscribed definition of their own core concept, Bubandt and Willerslev offer a variety of different and at times conflicting definitions, which ultimately erodes the difference between empathy and other forms of interpersonal understanding (cf. Csordas 2008; Duranti 2010; Jackson 1998). Secondly, contrary to what Bubandt and Willerslev are claiming, it is by no means a new discovery that empathy is not necessarily pro-social. Rather, it is an idea that was clearly formulated already 100 years ago by early empathy theorists such as Husserl, Scheler and Stein. What we find in the writings of these early phenomenologists – whose decisive contributions to an investigation of empathy is left completely unaddressed in 'The Dark Side of Empathy' – is an account of the link between empathy, alterity and sociality that is considerably more refined and sophisticated than anything offered by Bubandt and Willerslev. In the second part of the article, we will then present our own alternative account, which in dialogue with classical phenomenology, holds that empathy is a *direct form of other-perception* that never collapses the various ongoing intersubjective and intercorporeal asymmetries that exist between an empathizer and empathizee.

### *1. What is empathy?*

How does Bubandt and Willerslev define empathy? As already mentioned, they offer a variety of definitions. Sometimes they claim that empathy amounts to a form of imaginative projection, sometimes they claim it involves an incorporation of the other's perspective, sometimes they state that it involves a process of identification. As a result, what we would argue are quite distinctive processes (empathic understanding, imaginative perspective taking, projection and identification), are mixed to a point of indistinction in Bubandt and Willerslev's account.

One recent theorist that Bubandt and Willerslev rely on is De Waal, who has promoted a Russian Doll model of empathy, according to which empathy has a multilayered structure reaching from a primitive base of emotional contagion to more advanced levels of sympathetic concern and perspective taking (De Waal 2008). One obvious problem with such an account, however, is that empathy risks being conceived so broadly that it ends up being indistinguishable from (various forms of) social cognition. It is an established fact that part of the empathy debate has indeed gone in this direction. This is, for instance, the case with those who favor the notion of cognitive empathy, and argue that empathy simply refers to the process by means of which one comes to know another's mental state, regardless of how theoretical or inferential the process might be (Ickes 2003). As Bubandt and Willerslev also note themselves, psychologists who have been interested in measuring "empathic accuracy" have linked it to "the ability to read other people's mind 'well'" (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015: 26). However, if this is the approach taken, one has abandoned from the start the attempt to assign any specificity to empathy when compared to other forms of social cognition. As we will argue (and have argued in the past), a proper account of empathy has to maintain and preserve its difference from emotional contagion, motor mimicry, sympathy, imaginative perspective taking and inferential mindreading.

Occasionally, Bubandt and Willerslev also seem to aim for a more specific definition. They write that empathy is used in order to identify with particular bodily states and experiences of another, in order to mimic the senses and sensibilities of that other. Such an approach would very much emphasize the embodied character of empathy. At the same time, however, they also state that empathy is the ability to “imagine how others see and experience the world” (2015: 9) But do we need to mimic the bodily states of others in order to imagine how they see the world? Do I need to mimic Obama’s bodily postures, if I want to imagine what it must be like for him to leave office?

When Bubandt and Willerslev claim that internet scammers and everyday romantic Casanovas engage in forms of *tactical empathy* when they attempt to assume the perspective and affective stance of an avowed victim or desired subject and seek to base their actions on forms of mimicry that will allow them to fool or seduce someone else (2015: 8), one must again ask whether important differences are not glossed over. One issue that is completely ignored by Bubandt and Willerslev is the difference between forms of social cognition that occur in and through the embodied face-the-face encounter, and forms of social understanding that occur when the target of one’s understanding is absent. Had Bubandt and Willerslev kept onto that distinction, they wouldn’t have merged the case of the internet scammer that hardly ever sees the posture, bodily actions and facial expression of the victim he is trying to scam and the seducer who presumably does.

In the end, Bubandt and Willerslev offer no principled account of how these different determinations of empathy are supposed to be compatible and interrelated, and we are left with a number of different systematically unrelated and unclarified claims about the nature of empathy. Lacking a clear understanding of the concept’s historical lineage and its distinctive articulation in different traditions of thought, Bubandt and Willerslev’s analysis suffers key flaws in its lack of

analytic specificity. As a result, drastically different modalities of other-orientation are collapsed. To make headway toward developing a more precise analysis of empathy, let us revisit some of the early formative writings on the concept. We have in the past written extensively on this topic (Hollan and Throop 2008, 2011; Throop 2010a, 2012a; Zahavi 2001, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2017), so let us here just quickly summarize *some main findings*.

## 2. *Early theoretical articulations*

In their article, Bubandt and Willerslev claim that the idea that empathy is a human virtue that enables us to act ethically toward other people is a conception that can be traced all the way back to Hume and Smith (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015: 10). While perhaps some resonate ideas are discernible in such works, this particular claim is definitely wrong given that Hume (1711-1776) and Smith (1723-1790) wrote on sympathy and fellow-feeling and never used the term empathy (which had in fact yet to enter the English language). Empathy is an English translation of the German *Einfühlung*, which was originally used in discussions of aesthetics. The term was subsequently taken over by Theodor Lipps (1851-1914), who started to employ it in the domain of social cognition and used it as a label for our basic capacity to understand others as minded creatures. It was Lipps' notion that Edward Titchener (1867-1927) then translated as empathy in his *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Processes* from 1909.

For Lipps, empathy constituted a modality of knowledge *sui generis*. He argued that there are three distinct domains of knowledge: 1) knowledge of external objects, 2) self-knowledge, and 3) knowledge of others, and he took these domains to have three distinct cognitive sources, namely perception, introspection, and empathy (Lipps 1909: 222). Lipps initial discussion of empathy was

consequently quite epistemologically oriented. It was motivated by his preoccupation with the problem of other minds and by his rejection of the argument from analogy.

For Lipps, empathy is knowledge of others. But how does it actually work? Lipps emphasized the role of expressivity and argued that empathy involves mechanisms of imitation and projection. To exemplify, let us consider a case where I am coming to empathically understand another's expression of disgust. On Lipps' account, this requires that I in the past have myself been disgusted. Back then, I experienced an instinctual tendency to express the disgust. The expression was not experienced as something next to or on top of the disgust but as an integral part of the feeling. When I now see the expression elsewhere, I have an instinctual tendency to imitate or reproduce it, and this tendency will then evoke the same feeling that in the past was intimately connected to it (Lipps 1909: 229–30; 1907a: 719). When I experience the feeling anew, it will be linked to the expression I am currently perceiving and will be projected into it (Lipps 1907b: 359). In short, when I see a disgusted face, I will reproduce the expression of disgust, this will evoke a feeling of disgust in me, and this felt disgust, which is co-given with the currently perceived facial expression, will then be attributed to the other, thereby allowing for a form of interpersonal understanding (Lipps 1907a: 717–19)

One significant implication of Lipps' model is that there are rather strict limitations to what I can come to understand empathically of the other. The imitated expression can only evoke an affective state in myself that resembles the affective state of the other if I have had the affective state in question in the past (Lipps 1907a: 718-719). Consequently, I can only understand those of the other's experiences which I have already enjoyed myself, or to put it differently, Lipps' account of empathy doesn't allow me to recognize anything in the other that is new, anything that I am not already familiar with, anything that I haven't put there myself. This is also, why Lipps could write

as follows: “The other psychological individual is consequently made by myself out of myself. His inner being is taken from mine. The other individual or ego is the product of a projection, a reflection, a radiation of myself [...], a peculiar kind of reduplication of myself” (Lipps 1905: 17).

In the following decade, phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Max Scheler (1874-1928), and Edith Stein (1891-1942), reacted critically to the work of Lipps and offered their own comprehensive and profound analyses of empathy. Rather than simply using empathy as a common label for all forms of social cognition (which would approach Bubandt and Willerslev’s account), they instead took it to constitute a basic, perceptually based form of other-understanding, one that other more complex and indirect forms of interpersonal understanding presuppose and rely on. They consequently often used the term empathy (*Einfühlung*) interchangeably with terms such as other-experience (*Fremderfahrung*) or other-perception (*Fremdwahrnehmung*) (Husserl 1960: 92; Scheler 2008: 220). In their view, one can obtain an acquaintance with the other’s experiential life in the empathic face-to-face encounter that has a directness to it that is not shared by whatever beliefs you might have about the other in his or her absence. The phenomenologists also emphasized the immediate character of empathy. As Scheler and Husserl write,

For we certainly believe ourselves to be directly acquainted with another person’s joy in his laughter, with his sorrow and pain in his tears, with his shame in his blushing, with his entreaty in his outstretched hands, with his love in his look of affection, with his rage in the gnashing of his teeth, with his threats in the clenching of his fist, and with the tenor of his thoughts in the sound of his words. If anyone tells me that this is not ‘perception’, for it cannot be so, in view of the fact that a perception is simply a ‘complex of physical

sensations’, and that there is certainly no sensation of another person’s mind nor any stimulus from such a source, I would beg him to turn aside from such questionable theories and address himself to the phenomenological facts (Scheler 2008: 260).

Empathy is not a mediate experience in the sense that the other would be experienced as a psychophysical annex to his corporeal body but is instead an immediate experience of the other (Husserl 1989: 384-385, translation modified).

Along similar lines, Husserl speaks of how the other is given in his being-for-me (*Für-mich-sein*) in empathy, and how that counts as a form of perception (Husserl 1973b: 641). If I talk with another, if we see one another with our own eyes, there is an immediate contact, an immediately experienced personal relationship. We ‘see’ the other qua person, and not merely as body (Husserl 1989: 385). Indeed, when speaking of how we encounter foreign subjectivity, Husserl also writes that

It would be countensensical to say that it [foreign subjectivity] is inferred and not experienced when given in this original form of empathic presentation. For every hypothesis concerning a foreign subject already presupposes the ‘perception’ of this subject as foreign, and empathy is precisely this perception (Husserl 1973a: 352).

Empathy is on this account to be seen as an experiential encounter with the other’s embodied and embedded experiences and is indeed committed to a view of the mind that takes it to be fundamentally embodied. Moreover, empathy is not restricted to the affective domain. One can

empathically grasp the other's cognitive, affective and conative states as long as they are manifest in the other's expressions, expressive behavior and meaningful actions.

Some of the phenomenologists distinguish various levels or stages of empathic understandings (cf. Stein 1989: 10, Husserl 1973b: 435). At first, I might be confronted with the doubt or elation in the other's face, and I might have a vague and relatively empty comprehension of the other's experience. But if I then try to better understand it, if I try to explicate its character, I will no longer face the other's experiential state as an object. Rather, its intentionality will pull me along, and I will turn towards its intentional object. It is only after I have successfully accomplished this clarification, that I again will face the other's experience as an object, but this time with an increased comprehension. To exemplify, consider a situation where you come across someone who is angry. Empathy will allow you to discern the person's anger, even before you know *why* she or he is angry. But if your empathy goes deeper, it will seek to understand what it is that has upset them. Finally, after having grasped the reason for being angry, say, the fact that the person's car has been vandalized, you will again turn towards them, but this time with a better (and more fulfilled) understanding of what the experience of anger entails. Even when I follow the intentional and attentional pull of another's anger (cf. Throop and Duranti 2015), however, the anger is given to me in a quite peculiar manner. It is not felt as my own anger, nor as a remembered anger, let alone simply as an imagined anger. No, it is throughout given to me as the other's anger, as an anger lived through by the other (Stein 1989: 10).

What remains of utmost importance in this account of empathy is the fact that the empathically grasped other is given as a center of intentionality, as a different perspective on the very world that I also inhabit. Rather than facing the other as an isolated object, her intentionality will pull me along and make me co-attend her worldly objects. This is, of course, one reason why

our perception of others is so unlike our ordinary perception of objects. As soon as the other appears on the scene my relation to the world will change, since the other will always be given to me in a situation or meaningful context that points back to the other as a new center of reference. The meaning the world has for the other affects the meaning it has for me. In general, my own perspective on the world will consequently be enriched through my empathic understanding of the other. As Merleau-Ponty would later put it, “My gaze falls upon a living body performing an action and the objects that surround it immediately receive a new layer of signification: they are no longer merely what I could do with them, they are also what this behavior is about to do with them” (2012: 369). The phenomenologists are consequently emphasizing the interrelation between the experience of others and the constitution of a shared and potentially sharable world.

To further make clear what is distinctive about this approach as compared to the conceptually messy descriptions offered by Bubandt and Willerslev, it can be helpful to consider some distinctions that can be unearthed from several of the phenomenological analyses. On the one hand, we should distinguish our ability to empathically grasp the experiences of an other, i.e., our coming to experience that another is an experiencing being in the first place, from our ability to determine more precisely what another’s is experiencing. On the other hand, we should distinguish our ability to determine the current experiential episode of another from our ability to reason about that person’s past and future mental states and behaviors. Let us label these different achievements, the grasping of the *that*, the *what* and the *why* (cf. Hollan 2008). Consider to start with, that we in daily life often wonder whether others like us or not, find us trustworthy or not, or attractive or not. We wonder whether others are being truthful or deceptive, and whether others are motivated by greed or generosity. We very rarely wonder whether others are experiencing in the first place. In fact, this is something that is not only taken for granted when starting to inquire

into the meaning of another's action; it is also something the certitude of which is of a quite different magnitude than whatever certitude we might have regarding the ascription of specific experiences to others. Even if there is much about the other that is not readily accessible, although we might be uncertain about the specific beliefs and intentions of others, this uncertainty does *not* make us question that they are experiencing beings. Furthermore, consider the distinction between the *what* and the *why* question. It is one thing to determine what a person is experiencing or doing, say, being happy or distressed or reaching for a loaf of bread. But even if empathy might allow us to directly grasp (part of) what a person is experiencing or doing, this will not as such provide us with an understanding of *why* somebody is happy or distressed or performing the action in question. Empathy can be seen to work on a continuum. At one end of the scale, it should be understood as a basic sensitivity to others as experiencing beings. It can, however, also provide us with a direct acquaintance and grasp of the more specific character of the other's psychological life. But although we should recognize its importance, we also need to recognize its limitations. There is a limit to how far empathy (plus sensitivity to the immediate context) can get us. Our everyday understanding of others draws on other resources as well. If we wish to unearth *why* somebody is feeling the way he does or *why* he is acting the way he does, we might have to consider the larger social, cultural, and historical context and thereby go beyond the offerings of empathy.

### 3. *Empathy as direct experience*

As central insight from phenomenology, and one that significantly motivates our critical engagement with Bubandt and Willerslev's conceptualization of "dark empathy," is the fact that interpersonal understanding comes in many shapes and forms. It differs in character depending on whether the other in question is bodily present, or rather removed from us in space or time, and a

single model cannot do justice to the whole variety. We should consequently be wary of any theory that claims that our understanding of others is solely a question of, say, direct empathic understanding, imaginative projection, analogical reasoning, or inference to best explanation. We need multiple complementary accounts in order to cover the variety of abilities, skills and strategies that we draw on and employ in order to understand and make sense of others. We might understand others in terms of their individual history or personality traits, we might employ typifications, we might predict from inductive generalization or if we know little about the others in question, we might simply predict from our self-experience, expecting them to act as we would do (Andrews 2009). It is thus important to underscore here that the phenomenologists are not claiming that all forms of social cognition can be explained by empathy, nor that all forms of intersubjectivity, all relations between subjects, are empathic in nature. They are not denying that we, in some cases, draw on imagination, memory or theoretical knowledge when attempting to understand others. They do insist, however, that empathy is the basic experiential source for our comprehension of foreign subjects and their experiences, and that this is what more complex kinds of social cognition rely on and presuppose.

But what do the phenomenologists mean by “basic” here? Such an orientation to others is basic in the sense that it is an ongoing and primordial way of being with other experiencing beings. When we see the happiness or anger in another’s face, we do not infer such experiences from the precise configuration of the other’s facial muscles, nor do we induce them from what we explicitly know about the details of another’s situated emplacement in a given lifeworld. Empathy as a form of direct experience is not a theoretical, interpretive, stepping out of the stream of lived experience in order to reflect upon another’s perspective on the world. It is rather a direct and ongoing experience of the dynamic expressions of another living being *qua* living being who is in the midst

of experiencing his or her shifting embodied engagements with that world. When oriented to another empathically, we experience the intensity, rhythm and pitch at which another is living through a given embodied situation. In this light, empathy constitutes an orientation to another as an immediately experienced disclosure of another's lived experience through time. Such basic empathic modes of responsivity are not rare or momentary affairs. They are continuously triggered moment by moment as ongoing, although variably prominent, aspects of every human encounter with other experiencing beings.

As an ongoing and primordial dimension of human existence that flows through face-to-face interactions, empathy as understood in this most basic of forms is also tied to other foundational dimensions of intersubjectivity. Such intersubjective processes, Duranti (2010: 10) explains, are arrayed along a gradient of orientations to others and objects that make a "shared and sharable – world possible" in the first place. There are indeed multiple existential and embodied ways that beings are responsive to each other, to other non-human entities, and to situations in the context of their everyday practical engagements with the world. A key point to emphasize in this regard is that such forms of responsivity may often arise alongside of, or in parallel with, empathic experience. For instance, as conversation analysts have documented, in the ongoing flow of interaction, communicative partners' verbal utterances and gestures are intimately attuned to one another regardless of the extent to which such acts are explicitly thematized in awareness (Goodwin 1994, 2000; see also Duranti 2010). Eye-gaze, the sequencing of turn-taking, pauses, overlapping speech, prosody, and communicative repairs, may thus flow alongside of, or even arise completely outside of, the focal horizon of a given participant's empathic orientation to his or her interlocutor(s).

To sum up, for the phenomenologists, empathy provides a special kind of knowledge by *acquaintance*. It is not first-person acquaintance, but rather a distinct other-acquaintance (cf. Zahavi 2014). The specificity of the access is due to the fact that it is basic and perceptually based, i.e., the empathized experience is given directly as existing here and now. Just as we ought to consider the difference between thinking about a zebra, imagining a zebra, and seeing a zebra, we also ought to acknowledge the difference between thinking about Victoria's compassion or sadness, imagining in detail what it must be like for her to be compassionate or sad, and being empathically acquainted with her compassion or sadness in the direct face-to-face encounter. In the latter case, our acquaintance with Victoria's experiential life has a directness and immediacy to it that is not possessed by whatever beliefs we might have about her in her absence.

It is important to underscore, however, that empathy is not restricted to visual modes of accessing and experiencing others. The entire sensorium, in various permutations, configurations, degrees, and intensities, is involved. There are most certainly tactile and haptic modes of empathy, in addition to visual and auditory varieties. In the manipulative medical tradition practiced by local healers in Yap (Federated States of Micronesia), for instance, such tactile modes of empathic orientation to others is explicitly foregrounded as central to their diagnostic and therapeutic skillset (Throop 2010b, 2012a, 2017). Through the use of touch, healers are able to discern the existence, trajectory, intensity and variety of pain that their patients are experiencing, even despite efforts their patients may make to conceal their pain from them (ibid). Moreover, the common expression that we may "taste" or "smell" fear, should also alert us to the possibility that olfactory and gustatory sensations (and perhaps kinesthetic sensations as well), are also potential sensory modalities through which empathic experiences may be variously disclosed. Such everyday expressions also foreground the potentially abusive and violating dimensions of empathy,

however, which may be used not only to help, align with, or console others, but also to harm them (see Hollan and Throop 2008). Consider, for instance, how fine-tuned empathic skills, the ability to detect the disclosures of subtle facial expressions, might aid an interrogator or a torturer whose aim is to inflict psychological harm on somebody. Given that empathy denotes a special kind of epistemic access, it is consequently crucial not to confound it with experiences of care, fellow-feeling, sympathy, pity, or compassion. Empathy can consequently not only be used to care for or help others, but can be directly implicated in efforts to harm others, cause them pain, humiliate, shame, embarrass, or violate them (Hollan and Throop 2008: 389). This is also why Scheler already in *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (i.e., 100 years before Bubandt and Willerslev) not only argues that it is possible to empathize with somebody while being indifferent to his plight, but also insists that cruelty presupposes empathy, and that the latter consequently is no hindrance for the former (Scheler 2008: 8, 14). So when Bubandt and Willerslev argue “anthropologists have recently begun this work of breaking apart the academic and Western folk assumption that empathy is necessarily tied to virtue and moral goodwill” (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015: 12) they are beating a horse long dead.

#### 4. *The anthropology of empathy*

As anthropologists, Bubandt and Willerslev focus a great deal of their attention on a detailed description of two rich ethnographic cases – hunting practices in Siberia and forms of political violence in Indonesia – in order to foreground “the proposition that empathy is shaped and delimited by the cultural ontology within which it exists” (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015: 29). Having established what Joel Robbins has termed elsewhere the so-called *cultural point* about empathy (Robbins 2013), they also suggest, however, that their comparative juxtaposition of these

otherwise quite distinctive cases reveals what may arguably be deemed “the same basic and universal mechanisms of empathy – the oscillation between stepping into and stepping out of the perspective of the other” (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015: 29). As they suggest, “this oscillation entails an inescapable ambivalence: empathy strives toward identification, yet does so while (re-) producing radical alterity” (2015: 29). This is indeed an interesting and provocative point. And yet, empathy’s putative ambivalent oscillations, from an anthropological perspective at least, should not be much of a surprise to anyone familiar with the history of the discipline.

Practically from its inception, anthropology is a discipline that has been haunted by such ambivalent oscillations arising between the interplay of similarity and difference. On the one hand, anthropologists have long made efforts to discern the distinctive ways in which the lifeworlds of various communities around the globe are differently constituted by various culturally patterned institutions, practices, habits, dispositions, desires, propensities, capacities, assumptions, and forms of understanding. In emphasizing difference, alterity, and otherness, what anthropologists have sought to explore through the lens of cultural analysis are thus the variable ways that individuals and communities orient to self, other, and world, and in so doing, formulate distinct possibilities for being, including possibilities for being with and alongside others (whether those others be considered human, animal, and otherwise). As Bronislaw Malinowski phrased it almost a century ago, from this perspective the goal of ethnography is thus “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world. We have to study man, and we must study what concerns him most intimately, that is, the hold which life has on him” (1922 [1984]: 25).

On the other hand, anthropology as ethnography is also necessarily recognized as a practice that entails living with and learning from other human beings with whom fieldworkers share some

fundamental properties including intelligence, emotions, embodiment, sociality, language, and reflexivity. Anthropology in this view is seen as a discipline founded upon efforts by humans to understand other humans in the context of concrete social encounters and situations. This is in fact a central premise of one of the defining methods of the field, what Malinowski called “participant observation.” As participant observers, anthropologists must not only observe their consociates in their everyday comings and goings – living through what Malinowski termed the “inponderabilia of actual life” (1922: 18) – they must also be able to engage with, and actively participate in their lives as a way of gaining an understanding of the particularities of their *point of view* and the *hold which life has upon them*. Such engagement and active participation thus assumes some basis of interplay between the ways of being embodied by the ethnographer and the individuals that she or he is learning from and living with in the field (cf. Throop 2012b, 2018; cf. Dyring 2015).

This tension, and its relation to issues of “empathy” in anthropological theorizing and practice, took on a particular polemical cast in Clifford Geertz’s influential article, “‘From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding” (1983). The article, which explicitly focuses upon Malinowski’s method in light of the posthumous publication of his controversial field diaries (in which Malinowski expresses, in often demeaning racialized and sexualized terms, the various frustrations, dislikes, and disgusts that arose for him in the context of his fieldwork), offers a trenchant critique of the anthropological reliance upon empathy as a basis from which knowledge can be generated in the context of fieldwork. What is evident in the contrast between Malinowski’s scholarly writings and his personal diaries, Geertz argues, is the fact that empathy – which Geertz characterizes as a form of “psychological closeness,” “transcultural identification,” “inner correspondence of spirit,” “communion,” and “ego-effacement,” that putatively allows the

ethnographer the possibility to “swim in the stream” of another’s experience – was not the basis from which Malinowski (or arguably any other ethnographer for that matter) was able to develop an understanding of the so-called “native’s point of view.” The asymmetries of perspective and feeling evidenced in such encounters – for instance the anthropologist’s disgust toward practices that are desired and valued by Trobriand islanders – is clear evidence, Geertz claims, that empathy could not have played any role in Malinowski’s efforts to approximate the “native’s point of view.” Malinowski’s understanding of Trobriand lifeworlds must have thus arisen, Geertz suggests, *without* empathy, thus begging the question, “If we are going to cling—as, in my opinion, we must – to the injunction to see things from the native’s point of view, where are we when we can no longer claim some unique form of psychological closeness, a sort of transcultural identification, with our subjects? What happens to *verstehen* when *einfühlen* disappears?” (Geertz 1983: 56). Geertz’s answer to this question is, simply put, that ethnographic research is not grounded on empathy but instead upon hermeneutic analysis.

It is important to highlight here that Geertz’s critique of empathy in ethnography completely overlooks the distinctive forms of asymmetrical *other-acquaintance* that phenomenological analyses reveal to be basic to empathic experiences. When Geertz speaks of “empathy” he is referring to an imaginative process whereby one is able to subjectively “merge” or “switch places” with another – and in so doing putatively perceive or experience the world just as others do. As a case in point, in reference to some of his own ethnographic work on notions of selfhood in Java, Bali, and Morocco, Geertz maintains that “in each case, I have tried to get at this most intimate of notions not by *imagining* myself someone else, a rice peasant or a tribal sheikh, and then seeing what I thought, but by searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms – words, images, institutions, behaviors - in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves

and to one another” [emphasis ours] (1983: 58). As opposed to the forms of imaginative perspective-taking or fusion that Geertz problematically attributes to “empathy,” it is an anthropologist’s hermeneutic switching between so-called experience-near (insider) and experience-distant (outsider) interpretive perspectives (both defined in terms of publicly discernable symbolic media) that is held to lie at the heart of anthropological efforts at understanding others. Accordingly, the trick, says Geertz, “is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants... [it is instead] to figure out what the devil they think they are up to” (1983: 58).

A significant issue here, much like in the case of Bubandt and Willerslev’s interventions, concerns what appears to be Geertz’ analytic confusion over the phenomenon of empathy itself. As discussed above, for classical empathy theorists like Husserl, Scheler, and Stein, empathy is held to be a distinctive *form of other-acquaintance*, where we directly encounter the embodied and embedded experiential undergoings of another subject. Not only does this have nothing in common with fusion, emotional contagion, or imagining oneself in the shoes of the other, but empathy must also be distinguished from various more indirect, analogical and inferential forms of interpersonal understanding.

##### 5. *Empathy, alterity and sociality*

As we have seen, Bubandt and Willerslev repeatedly highlight the link between empathy and alterity. Not only do they argue that the alterity of the other is radicalized through empathy (2015: 7), they also claim that empathy is characterized by a constant oscillation between identification and differentiation (2015: 29). We disagree with the latter assessment. Our ongoing experience of social interactions might indeed be characterized by such oscillations, but it is not a feature of

empathy. Empathy does not involve any strive toward identification. To suggest that it does, is to conflate empathy with emotional contagion or to mistakenly see it as a question of putting oneself in the shoes of the other. Rather than seeing empathy in any way as being about identification, fusion or similarity, empathy must be seen as an experiential engagement with the other that *recognizes and preserves the self-other difference*. Indeed, rather than blurring the distinction between self and other, rather than leading to some kind of fusion or some sense of merged personal identities (Cialdini et al 1997), what is distinctive about empathy is precisely that the empathized experience is located in the other and not in myself:

The subject of the empathized experience ... is not the subject empathizing, but another. And this is what is fundamentally new in contrast with the memory, expectations, or the fantasy of our own experiences (Stein 1989:10)

Although empathy according to the phenomenologists gives us the experiencing other directly, non-inferentially, as present here and now (Stein 1989: 7), there will always, and by necessity, remain a difference between that which I am aware of when I empathize with the other, and that which the other is experiencing. There is thus a necessary asymmetry between the experiencing subject and the experienced subject. There is, in short, an irreducible alterity to the other. As Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) phrased it, the other with whom we are experientially intertwined always exceeds us (1987: 74-76).

Empathy is not about me having the same mental state, feeling, sensation, or embodied response as another, but about me being experientially acquainted with an experience that is not my own. Empathy targets foreign experiences without eliminating their alterity. In empathy, I am

confronted with the presence of an experience that I am not living through myself. If I empathize with your sadness, I have a sense of what it is like for you to be sad without being sad myself; I lack first-personal access to the sadness in question. To empathically grasp another's joy is not to be joyful oneself, but to recognize the joy as belonging to the other. This is, of course, why phenomenologists have standardly rejected proposals according to which empathy should entail that the other's experience is literally transmitted to me, or at least require me to undergo the same kind of experience that I observe in the other (say, being sad that you are sad).<sup>1</sup> This is also why phenomenologists have been dismissive of the idea that empathy involves some kind of reproduction or reduplication of oneself. To experience the other is not to engage in a kind of imaginative self-transformation, as Husserl points out, since that would only allow me to encounter myself as other and not to encounter a true other (Husserl 1973b: 314). On the contrary, empathy is, as Husserl puts it, that which permits us to encounter true transcendence, which is also why he writes that our consciousness in empathy transcends itself and is confronted with otherness of a completely new kind (Husserl 1973a: 8-9, 442). To that extent, empathy might indeed be said to be more a question of appreciating difference than of achieving similarity (Ratcliffe 2014).

To better understand the link between empathy and sociality, we now need to complicate matters considerably. So far, we have discussed empathy as if it was primarily a unidirectional link between the empathizer and the target. Such a one-sided form of empathy is, however, not the paradigmatic form, especially not when considering actual social interaction. In most face-to-face

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<sup>1</sup> There is an extensive debate in the social neuroscience literature about whether or not empathy requires matching states between empathizer and empathizee. For some, having empathy with someone precisely entails coming to have the very same kind of experiential state as that other person (de Vignemont & Singer 2006). It has been popular to appeal to mirror resonance mechanism as part of the explanation. It would lead too far to survey the relevant literature here, but in previous publications, one of us has explicitly engaged with and criticized the proposal in question (see Zahavi 2011, 2014, 2018). Let us here just mention one objection. Imagine that you are being attacked by somebody who is furious. How plausible is it to claim that you need to become furious yourself in order to recognize the fury in the other's expressive countenance and behavior?

encounters, empathy is bidirectional and reciprocal. What this means is that empathy in many cases is not simply an experiential encounter with another embodied and embedded subject. It is simultaneously an experience of being oneself encountered and addressed. Through my encounter with others, I can come to attain a new experience of myself. To that extent, empathy can function as an important source of self-knowledge. But this is not all. As Husserl points out in the following two quotes, what we find in reciprocal forms of dyadic interaction is the origin of *we-acts*, and thereby of both *socialization* (being constituted as full-fledged social beings) and *communalization* (being constituted as a member of a social group and a community):

A peculiar and very important instance of the kind of empathic experience, where the other is given to me as somebody who on his part is grasping another, is the case where I myself am co-experienced as this further subject, and where this indirect empathic experience coincides with my own self-experience. In this situation, I experience my counterpart as being experientially directed at myself. On the basis of this most fundamental form of being-*there-for-one-another*-reciprocally the most disparate *I-Thou-acts* and *We-acts* become possible [. . .] (Husserl 1959: 136-137)

I am not merely for myself, and the other is not standing opposed to me as an other, rather the other is my you, and speaking, listening, responding, we already form a we, that is unified and communalized in a particular manner (Husserl 1973c: 476).

Historically speaking, it is noteworthy that the phenomenologists soon moved from a concern with individual intentionality and dyadic interpersonal relations to an interest in larger social units. Not

surprisingly, many of them then went on to argue that their analysis of empathy could feed into and elucidate the nature and preconditions of diverse group formations and we-identities (cf. Zahavi 2016, 2018).

#### *6. Empathy and its cultural entanglements*

When viewed as an intersubjective process, empathy is not only implicated in the experience of understanding another, but also the experience of being understood (see Hollan 2008). That individuals may actively seek out or solicit another's empathic responsiveness through talk, gestures, and/or embodied displays that make expressively available their experiential take on the world, is an often ignored dimension of empathy. Also often neglected in this regard are the various ways that individuals may actively attempt to hide or conceal their experiences from others by actively managing or muting their bodily, verbal, and expressive responses. As recent anthropological work on "mental opacity" in Pacific communities attest (see Hollan and Throop 2011; Robbins and Rumsey 2008; Throop 2008, 2010a & b), such concerns may also significantly extend to unquestioned epistemological assumptions about the inaccessibility of others' thoughts, intentions, beliefs, emotions, and moods. Empathy as mediated by various social processes may thus be significantly entangled with various cultural assumptions, habits, and practices.

As a case in point, a widespread and deeply held presumption throughout many Pacific communities is that it is "impossible or at least extremely difficult to know what other people think or feel" (Robbins and Rumsey 2008: 407-08; Hollan and Throop 2008, 2011). Directly impacting the way that individuals speak, act, emote, and think, such doctrines of mental opacity "matter to how people operate socially" (Robbins and Rumsey 2008: 414; cf. Ochs 1982). As evident in Bambi Schieffelin's work on language socialization in Bosavi communities in Papua New Guinea,

parent-child interactions are deeply impacted by such presuppositions of mental opacity to the extent that

...caregivers do not verbally expand child utterances, nor guess the meaning of unintelligible utterances. Clarification requests elicit repetition, making the child responsible for voicing what it is he or she wants. When talking to young children, caregivers do not propose possible internal states of their addressees. When a child whines or acts inappropriately, caregivers ask, “Ge oba?!” “what’s with you?!” If a child doesn’t eat, they pose a rhetorical question, “Ge mo:nano?!” “you don’t eat?!” rather than, “are you hungry? (Schieffelin 2008: 434; cited in Robbins and Rumsey 2008: 415).

When considered concretely in its context of intersubjective and dialogical engagements, the expressive, moral, and experiential dimensions of empathy are consequently culturally shaped. From this perspective then, the forms of empathy arising in the context of complex forms of interpersonal understanding must be understood as processual phenomena that are not only temporally arrayed and intersubjectively constituted but also patterned by deeply inscribed cultural assumptions, values, habits, and dispositions, which together conspire to shape modes of attention, perception, attunement, and responsivity to others and objects in the surrounding world. That ideas about the opacity of other minds may directly and differentially impact the structure of turn-taking, eye gaze, embodied and facial responses, or the grammatical framing of utterances (i.e. the necessary use of evidential markers when reporting on an other’s direct speech), foregrounds the multiplex ways that empathic experience may become significantly entangled with cultural forms.

As the anthropologist Irving Hallowell (1955) argued long ago, a further way that cultural processes may significantly impact empathic experience is in terms of the various ways that self-experience is itself constituted culturally. This is a point that Geertz also made in his efforts to provincialize understandings of empathy that pivot on Western conceptions of individuated, autonomous, agentive, and bounded selves (Geertz 1983). According to Geertz,

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures. Rather than attempting to place the experience of others within the framework for such a conception, which is what the extolled 'empathy' in fact usually comes down to, understanding them demands setting that conception aside and seeing their experiences within the framework of their own ideas of what selfhood is (1983: 59).

How might such putatively distinctive forms of self-experience be differently constituted? Whereas in Geertz' framework such differences are tied to differing hermeneutic frameworks, Hallowell traces the constitution of such distinctive forms of self-experience in different communities along a number of foundational orientations. These include orientations to: (1) the self itself as an object of experience; (2) objects-other-than self; (3) space and time; (4) motivations for action; and (5) various normative standards of judgement, morality, and value. With regard to the self's orientation to objects-other-than-self, Hallowell points out that there may be a range of objects, including other subjects, that are categorized as separate and separable from an individual's own self-experience. That a given self's orientation to objects other than self,

including what he famously termed “other-than-human persons,” is culturally constituted thus plays a crucial role in influencing perceptions as to which beings, or forms of being, may and may not be deemed capable of being “empathized” with. In this light, “the ‘social’ relations of the self when considered in its total behavioral environment may be far more inclusive than ordinarily conceived.... [such that the] self in its relations with other selves may transcend the boundaries of social life as objectively defined” (Hallowell 1955: 92). That such forms of life may be extended to objects that other communities would class as inanimate is a crucial insight of Hallowell’s that has direct bearing on thinking through the possible forms that empathy and empathic-like experiences may take cross-culturally. As Hallowell who worked with Ojibwa communities in Canada reports, “I once asked an old man whether all stones were alive. His reply was ‘Some are.’ Another old man is said to have addressed a stone; another thought that a Thunder Bird spoke to him [through it]” (1955: 109).

Hallowell’s perspective is one that significantly resonates with, and in fact directly inspires, some of Bubandt and Willerslev’s ontologically oriented claims. For instance, in an earlier article, Willerslev draws direct inspiration from Hallowell in arguing that for Siberian Yukaghir hunters, persons

...can take on a variety of forms, of which human beings are only one. They can appear in the shape of rivers, trees, and spirits, but it is, above all, mammals that Yukaghirs commonly see as ‘other-than-human persons’ (Hallowell 1960: 36). Moreover, humans and animals can move in and out of alien kinds of bodies. (Willerslev 2004: 629).

Through an ethnographic examination of the embodied mimetic ways that hunters attempt to “take on the bodies of animals when they go hunting” (2004: 632) so as to partially approximate their

prey's differing perspective on the world, Willerslev suggests that a hunter is able to take up a "double perspective" whereby he can assume the animal's point of view but still remain a human hunter who chases and kills the prey" (2004: 632). Willerslev suggests that such a "double perspective" is made up of a complex mixture of imagination, motivation, intention, and embodied movement. Holding together the hunter's predatory intention and the imitative embodied feelings of being-like the prey animal, a hunter is "aware not only of the prey animal, but also of himself being aware of the prey, to make sure that his perspective is neither that of a hunter nor that of the animal, but somewhere in-between or both at once" (2004: 641). This is not a simple act of imagining oneself to be like another species but is instead a mode of experience in which the hunter's embodied mimicry of the prey's movements triggers a response from the animal whose perception of the hunter as being potentially of its kind in part transforms the hunter's own self-perception. As Willerslev phrases it, "the hunter does not just see the elk walking towards him, he also sees himself from the 'outside', as if he himself were the elk – that is, he adopts toward himself the kind of perspective that the Other (as subject) has on him (as object)" (2004: 641).

Given these ethnographic descriptions of the various ways that complex forms of interpersonal understanding, which include efforts to understand "other-than-human persons," are impacted by cultural orientations to self, other, time, space, and world, it is important to think through the places where empathy may discernably arise experientially and where it may not. As a distinctive and direct form of other-perception, basic empathy as the early phenomenologists described it, is an experience that per definition cannot arise in the context of relations with inanimate physical objects like rocks or rivers – regardless of whether or not such entities are conceived of, or oriented to, as persons. This does not mean that individuals may not have embodied engagements and orientations to such entities in ways that may foreground person-like

attributes, whether as conceptualized, imagined, fantasied, or dreamt. It does mean, however, that basic empathy is a phenomenon that arises only in the context of relations between fellow embodied expressive beings, which rocks or rivers, whether or not they are deemed to be somehow sentient from a particular ontological perspective, are not.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the complex self-other dynamics revealed in Willerslev's work with Yukaghir hunters and their prey, however, it is clear that empathy compositely flows throughout such interactions as hunters experientially confront the ongoing and shifting responses of the animals that they track, approach, and ultimately kill. What must be disentangled here however are the ways that non-empathic forms of interpersonal understanding –including, for instance, the hunter's imagining of his own self-transformation through the embodied mimicry of an animal's movements – are entangled with empathic orientations to their prey's unfolding experience of the world. Here direct forms of other-perception are entangled with other modes of other-orientation that include various imaginative, cognitive, reflexive, and affective dimensions.

Similar complexities are covered over in Bubandt and Willerslev's ethnographic efforts to trace the contours of so-called "tactical-empathy" in their analysis of a Siberian hunter becoming moose-like in an effort to kill his prey and an Indonesian letter-writer's use of forgery to incite political violence. From Bubandt and Willerslev's perspective, both are examples of "empathy" being "used to "identify with the particular bodily states and experiences of a significant other in order to mimic, with varying degrees of fidelity, the senses and sensibilities of that other" (2015:

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<sup>2</sup> The point here is not to automatically dismiss alternate ontological assumptions about what does and does not constitute a potential experiencing being. We would argue, however, that to truly "take seriously" (see Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) attributions of sentience to objects like rocks and rivers would necessitate a close experiential analysis of precisely what aspects of such objects are taken to provide evidence of experiential life for those who endorse such ontological views. Moreover, whatever such evidence might amount to, it will not feature the kind of dynamically embodied and embedded existential expressivity that, from the standpoint of a phenomenological analysis, is a crucial precondition for empathic other-understanding. In short, even if stones and rivers were sentient, we would not be able to empathize with them.

7). The purpose of such “deception by vicarious means” is to “turn the empathic faculty violently against that other” (2015: 7). Are the two examples really relevantly similar? Why do we at all need to appeal to empathy in order to understand the Indonesian case? Why did the letter-writer not simply use inferential mindreading or imaginative perspective taking in order to forge a letter from his or her enemy’s point of view? As for the Siberian case, forms of empathy understood as direct perceptions of foreign experience are arguably evident in the hunter’s efforts to entice (or “seduce”) his prey to come closer. But there are clearly also many other forms of other-orientation being deployed through the hunter’s practical and performative mimesis. Imagining oneself as a moose or moose-like, or alternatively moving, sounding, and responding in moose-like ways are not straightforwardly cases of empathy, even if such efforts might in different ways be enabled by and constituted in some active dialogue with past or present empathic encounters with living mooses. Even more distal from direct empathy is the mythic depictions of a young Yukaghir girl’s contemplations of an already dead moose’s head.

We consequently remain quite skeptical about the claim that Bubandt and Willerslev’s ethnographic descriptions contribute to a better understanding of empathy. In our view, they both exemplify significant confusions about the scope and significance of the phenomenon.

### *5. Conclusion*

In this article we have critically engaged with Bubandt and Willerslev’s provocative article in order to clarify what empathy is and what it is not. Following the early insights of various phenomenological philosophers, empathy is an immediate experiential encounter with another living being’s embodied and embedded experience in the world. As an experience of another’s experience of the world, empathy is thus necessarily an experience of foreign experience.

Moreover, although empathy is not per se pro-social, the phenomenological perspective that we have been discussing in the context of this article holds to the view that empathy and other forms of dyadic interpersonal relations play a foundational role in the constitution of larger social units, and are also crucial for our very communal being together (cf. Zahavi 2016, 2018). Finally, as a distinctive mode of other-acquaintance, empathy may also complexly interleave with other forms of social understanding that are not to be simply equated with it.

Given Bubandt and Willerslev's resonate interests in the relation between empathy, alterity and sociality, we find it unfortunate that they fail to engage at all with phenomenology. Indeed, as we have tried to show, discussions found in classical phenomenology provide us with a nuanced analytic for unpacking various modes of interpersonal understanding, including empathic ones, that come to constitute the contours of our engagements with others in the world. While there may be various reasons for Bubandt and Willerslev's bypassing of phenomenology, one likely reason may be their heavy reliance on Wispé's account of the history of the concepts of empathy and sympathy; a historical recounting that also manages entirely to circumvent the phenomenological discussion of empathy (Wispé 1986).

The difference to and similarity between the phenomenological proposal and the account offered by Bubandt and Willerslev should now be clearer. In addition, as our analysis should also have made evident, there are good reasons for challenging Geertz' highly influential claim that anthropologists can safely leave empathy behind. Empathy plays such a fundamental role in the fabric of social life, for both good *and* for ill, that its use in ethnographic research is not only significant and generative, but also simply unavoidable.

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