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Empathy and mirroring: Husserl and Gallese

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Back in 1994 I defended my doctoral dissertation on *Husserl und die transzendentale Intersubjektivität* with Bernet as my supervisor. One of the central claims in this early work of mine was that Husserl’s distinct contribution to a phenomenology of intersubjectivity – in particular when compared to later phenomenologists – was to be found in his analysis of the constitutive significance of intersubjectivity, and that Husserl’s mature phenomenology could consequently be seen as an explicit defence of what might be called an intersubjective transformation of transcendental philosophy. By focusing on constitutive intersubjectivity I more or less stayed clear of a question that had preoccupied much of the secondary literature on Husserl’s phenomenology of intersubjectivity up to then, namely the question of whether Husserl’s concept of empathy implied a direct or mediated access to others (cf. Zahavi 1996, 15).

The focus of my current contribution will be on Husserl’s theory of empathy. My reason for choosing this topic is not merely a wish to fill what some might see as a lacuna in my earlier work, but is also and primarily motivated by the fact that there in recent years has been a renewed interest in the topic. Interestingly, and perhaps also slightly surprisingly, the impetus for this interest stems from empirical research, and from the discovery of the so-called “mirror neurons”, i.e., neurons which respond both when a
particular motor action, say grasping an object with the hand, is performed by the subject and when the subject observes the same goal-directed action performed by another individual. To illustrate, let me provide a few examples:

- Though warning against any facile “empirical confirmation” of phenomenology Jean-Luc Petit, in an early article from 1999, claims that the discovery of the mirror neurons amply justifies Husserl’s view “that our empathic experience of the other is an internal imitation of the movement accomplished by the other” (Petit 1999, 241).

- In a 2001 paper Evan Thompson suggests that “the mirror neuron findings support Husserl’s position that our empathic experience of another depends on one’s ‘coupling’ or ‘pairing’ with the other” (Thompson 2001, 9), rather than on various inferential processes.

- In a paper entitled “Phenomenology, Neuroscience, and Intersubjectivity” published in 2006, Ratcliffe argues that interesting parallels can be drawn between the mirror system and claims found in Husserl (2006, 341). According to Ratcliffe, the core of Husserl’s proposal is that empathy involves a pre-reflective, non-inferential “analogizing apperception” which is achieved through a passive “pairing” of certain aspects of self and other, and as he continues, work “on mirror neurons can lend some support to Husserl, by illustrating what such a relation might consist of and how it is possible” (Ratcliffe 2006, 348).

- Finally, to just mention one further example, in a 2008 paper, De Preester writes that it is easy to translate the core of the mirror neuron hypothesis – that we understand actions when the visual representation of the observed action is mapped onto our motor representation of that action – into a “Husserlian terminology: the visual perception of the body of the other is mapped onto our own kinaesthetic representation, or the Körper is mapped onto the Leib (and receives the latter’s status). Thanks to this identification, an understanding of the other arises” (De Preester 2008, 139).

The aim of the following contribution will be to reconsider Husserl’s account of empathy in order to assess whether this link to neurophysiology is warranted. Is it really true that “the neurological discovery of mirror
neurons is of eminent importance for the phenomenological theory of intersubjectivity” (Lohmar 2006, 5).

Before turning to Husserl, however, let us first take a look at the work of Vittorio Gallese, one of the principal defenders of the mirror neuron hypothesis.

1. Embodied simulation and mirroring

In order to survive and prosper in a complex society, we need to be able to recognize, understand and respond to others. But how do we accomplish that? The traditional answer in cognitive science has been that we employ a Theory of Mind. According to one popular model, mental states attributed to other people are conceived of as unobservable, theoretical posits, invoked to explain and predict behavior in the same fashion that physicists appeal to electrons and quarks to predict and explain observable phenomena. According to Gallese, however, recent findings in neurobiology suggest that our capacity to understand others as intentional agents might draw on other and more primitive sources than various linguistic and mentalistic abilities, namely those involving mirror neurons (Goldman & Gallese 1998, Gallese 2001, 34, 2009, 522). Empirical studies have shown that there are neurons in the premotor cortex that are activated not only when the subject executes goal directed actions, but also when the subject observes similar actions performed by other individuals (Gallese 2001, 35). By contrast, neither the sight of the object alone or of the agent alone is effective in evoking the neuronal response. Why? The interpretation put forth by Gallese and colleagues is that action observation and in particular action understanding implies action simulation (Gallese 2001, 37). When we observe an action, our motor system becomes active as if we were executing the very same action that we are observing, that is, we simulate the action. And our ability to understand observed behavior as intentional, as mind-driven, is precisely dependent upon this link between observed agent and observer. In order to understand the action, the presence of the visual information is deemed insufficient. Rather, the motor schema of the observer has to be involved. That is, the observer must rely on his or her own internal
motor knowledge (provided by the mirror neurons) in order to translate
the observed movement, “in principle, devoid of meaning for the observer
– into something that the observer is able to understand” (Gallese 2009, 520-521). I understand the action of the other because it is an action I could
perform myself. If the observed behavior of the other cannot be matched
onto the observer’s own motor repertoire, the goal cannot be detected and
understood (Gallese 2001, 36).

Gallese isn’t merely arguing that action understanding relies on mirror-
resonance mechanisms. He ultimately claims that all kinds of interpersonal
relations including action understanding, the attribution of intentions, and
the recognition of emotions and sensations rely on automatic and uncon-
scious embodied simulation routines (Gallese 2003a, 517). The very same
neural substrate, which is activated when we execute actions or subjectively
experience emotions and sensations, is also activated when we observe
somebody else act or experience emotions and sensations. So, when we en-
counter somebody, and observe their actions, or their displayed emotions
or sensations, we don’t just see them. In addition to the sensory informa-
tion we receive from the other, internal representations of the body states
associated with the other’s actions, emotions and sensations are evoked in
us, and it is “as if” we were doing a similar action or experiencing a similar
emotion or sensation. It is because of this automatic, non-predicative and
non-inferential embodied simulation mechanism, it is because the activa-
tion of these neural mechanisms allows us to share actions, intentions,
feelings and emotions with others, that we are able to understand others
(Gallese 2001, 44-45, 2009, 527). It is against this background that Gallese
defines empathy as involving a form of simulation (Gallese 2003a, 519), and
argues that it allows for a direct experiential understanding of others, one
that doesn’t rely on cognitive operations or conceptual reasoning (Gallese
et al. 2004, 396).

Gallese has been interested in the early discussions of empathy, and he
refers favorably, not only to Lipps’ discussion of inner imitation (Gallese
2003a, 519), but also to Stein’s account, and to Husserl’s and Merleau-
Ponty’s understanding of intersubjectivity (Gallese 2001, 43-44). Indeed,
Gallese is quite explicit in arguing that his own notion of embodied sim-
ulation is akin to and a further development of the phenomenological proposal (Gallese et al. 2004, 397). More specifically, Gallese repeatedly makes use of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “intercorporeity,” which he takes to refer to the mutual resonance of intentionally meaningful sensorimotor behaviors (Gallese 2009, 523). He also, however, refers to Husserl’s discussion of empathy in Ideen II and Cartesianische Meditationen, where Husserl claims that the lived body is the constitutive foundation of any perception, the perception of others included, and argues that we on Husserl’s account don’t have to employ anything like an inference from analogy in order to understand that others are similar to us (Gallese 2005, 39, 2008, 774). Likewise, Gallese mentions Husserl’s notion of “Paarung” and sees that as exemplifying the idea that “the self-other identity at the level of the body enables an intersubjective transfer of meaning to occur” (Gallese 2003b, 175).

According to the embodied simulation view defended by Gallese, mind-reading typically involves an attempt to replicate, imitate or simulate the mental life of the other. But in contrast to the standard account of simulation theory, as it has been developed by Goldman, Gallese primarily sees the simulation as automatic, unconscious and prelinguistic, and he argues that intercorporeity is more fundamental than any explicit attribution of propositional attitudes to others and that it remains the main source of knowledge we directly gather about others (Gallese 2009, 524).

To sum up, and to quote another mirror neuron theorist, the discovery of the mirror neurons has not only for the first time in history provided a plausible neurophysiological explanation for complex forms of social cognition and interaction (Iacoboni 2009, 5). Mirror neurons also seem to explain why, “existential phenomenologists were correct all along” (Iacoboni 2009, 262).

2. Imitation and empathy: Lipps and Gurwitsch

A noteworthy feature of Gallese’s reference to the tradition is his somewhat indiscriminate reference to Lipps and the phenomenologists. As we shall see in a moment, Lipps does indeed frequently talk of empathy in terms
of an inner imitation, but whether his account is in accord with the views
found in phenomenology is more controversial. Or to put it more bluntly,
his account was in fact one from which all the phenomenologists to varying
degrees distanced themselves.

Lipps’ theory underwent several changes in the course of his writings.
In the following I will only discuss the brief and concise account we find
in his 1907 article “Das Wissen von fremden Ichen.” In this article, Lipps
argues that our knowledge of others is a modality of knowledge sui generis,
something as irreducible and original as our perceptual experience of ob-
jects or our memory of our past experiences. It is a novum that in no way
can be explained by or reduced to some kind of analogical inference (Lipps
1907, 697-698, 710). In fact, Lipps launches a comprehensive – and quite
successful – attack against the argument from analogy. He emphasizes the
role of expression and argues that gestures and expressions manifest our
emotional states, and that the relation between the expression and what
is expressed is special and unique, and quite different from, say, the way
smoke represents fire (Lipps 1907, 704-5).

So far, much of what Lipps has had to say found approval among
later phenomenologists – indeed many of his points against the argument
from analogy reappear in various forms in Scheler’s Wesen und Formen der
Sympathie –, but the phenomenologists would be quite suspicious of his
own positive account. Lipps argues that we have a tendency to reproduce
a foreign gesture of expression when we see it, and that this tendency
also evokes the feeling normally associated with the expression. He talks
of this process as being instinctual in character. He speaks of an instinct
of empathy, and argues that it involves two components: a drive directed
towards imitation and a drive directed towards expression (Lipps 1907,
713). It is the feeling in myself evoked by the expression which is then
attributed to the other through projection. It is projected into or onto
the other’s perceived gesture, thereby allowing for a form of interpersonal
understanding (Lipps 1907, 717-19). Why is projection involved? Because

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1 For a detailed discussion of how the concept of empathy was employed by Lipps and
contemporary psychologists and philosophers like Siebeck, Volkelt, Wittasek and Groos, see
Geiger 1911.
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on Lipps’ account, we only know of anger, joy etc. from our own case. The
only mental states we have experiential access to are our own.

How did the phenomenologists receive this proposal? Gurwitsch ar-
argued that Lipps’ theory of empathy despite its explicit criticism of the
argument from analogy still belong to the same class of theories (Gur-
wright 1979, 20). It still accepts the following basic assumption, that what
we strictly speaking can be said to perceive is physical qualities and their
changes, say, a distortion of facial muscles, and that this perceptual input is
psychologically meaningless. It is only by animating what is phenomenally
given with what we know from our own case that we come to know that
something mental is given at all. It is only by drawing on our own inner
experience that we are able to move from the input to the actual ascription
of mental states, say, joy or happiness, to others. By contrast, for Gurwitsch
the phenomenological alternative is to insist that the phenomenally given,
namely the expressive phenomena in question, already provides us with
access to the mental life of others (Gurwitsch 1979, 32, 56). Gurwitsch
also observes that Lipps’ appeal to instinct is unsatisfactory in that it sets
aside the job of analysis (Gurwitsch 1979, 20). The most pervasive criticism,
however, is directed at Lipps’ claim that (inner) imitation constitutes the
basis of empathy. As Gurwitsch sees it, Lipps takes knowledge about the
mental life of someone else to paradigmatically be a question of being
infected by that life (Gurwitsch 1979, 24). But if someone is infected by
a certain feeling, he has that feeling, and for someone to have a feeling
oneself and to know that another has it are two fundamentally different
things (Gurwitsch 1979, 25). The former event does not per se entail either
knowledge about the origin of the feeling, or knowledge about the simi-
larit between one’s own feeling and that of the other, in fact, it doesn’t
lead to the mental life of the other at all. To put it differently, rather than
explaining empathy, that is, empathy understood as an experience of the
minded life of others, Lipps’ account is better geared to handle something

1It should be noted though, and this is an aspect of Gurwitsch’s proposal that I will be
unable to pursue further in this context, that Gurwitsch ultimately questions whether an
understanding of expressive phenomena constitutes the most fundamental dimension of social
cognition. In his view, such an understanding is founded on a more fundamental conviction
about the existence of others (Gurwitsch 1979, 32-33).
like motor mimicry or emotional contagion. There is consequently, as Stein puts it, a discrepancy between the phenomenon to be explained and the phenomenon actually explained (Stein 1989, 23).

3. Husserl

a. the preoccupation of a lifetime

It is now time to turn to Husserl in more detail. Before I can commence the assessment of whether or not Gallese’ proposal is in accordance with Husserl’s phenomenological account of empathy, I need to make a number of preliminary remarks in order to set the stage properly.

First of all, Husserl’s discussion of empathy is not restricted to a few select publications of his, say Ideen II or Cartesianische Meditationen. Rather, the most thorough treatment is obviously to be found in the research manuscripts contained in Husserliana XIII-XV, that is, in the three volumes on phenomenology of intersubjectivity. The timespan of these manuscripts covering the period from 1905 to 1937 makes it clear that empathy was a topic that Husserl worked on during most of his philosophical career. It is therefore also not surprising that many of his other works contain remarks and reflections on empathy. This includes not only works such as Die Krisis, Formale und transzendentale Logik, Phänomenologische Psychologie, or more recently published Husserliana volumes such as Einleitung in die Philosophie, Einleitung in die Ethik, Transzendentaler Idealismus or Die Lebenswelt, but also and perhaps slightly more surprisingly even works such as Logische Untersuchungen and Ideen I.

That Husserl remained preoccupied with the issue and considered it to be of particular importance is indicated by the fact that he chose to dwell on it in his very last lecture course, which he gave in the winter semester of 1928/29, and which carried the title “Phänomenologie der Einfühlung in Vorlesungen und Übungen.” But of course, the fact that he kept returning

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1Stein is also known for criticizing Lipps for conflating empathy (Einfühlung) with a feeling of oneness (Einsfühlung), i.e., of taking empathy to involve a complete identification of observer and observed. More recently, however, Stueber has argued that this specific criticism of Stein is based on a too uncharitable interpretation of Lipps’ statements (Stueber 2006, 8).
to the issue also suggests that it continued to remain a problem for him, and
that he was unable to reach a definite and (to his own mind) fully satisfying
solution.

For this very reason, the aim and scope of the following analysis will
necessarily have to be limited. It will be impossible in a single article to give
an exhaustive analysis of Husserl’s theory of empathy. Indeed, there might
not even be one single coherent theory, rather during the years Husserl
pursued different directions. In the following, however, I will mainly focus
on ideas and themes that I take to be particularly prominent and pervasive.

This is the first preliminary point I need to make. The second concerns
an additional restriction. Husserl’s investigation of empathy is compli-
cated by the fact that two different research agendas are frequently inter-
twined. As Kern points out in his introduction to Zur Phänomenologie
der Intersubjektivität III apropos the specific presentation that Husserl
offered in Cartesianische Meditationen: “Handelt es sich um die reflexiv-
philosophische Fundierung (Begründung) des transzendentalen Fremden
und das transzendentale Verhältnis von eigener und fremder Monade oder
um die konstitutive Analyse der Fundierung (Motivation) der “natürli-
chen”, “weltlichen” Einfühlung? […] Die fünfte Meditation vermengt
diese beiden Gedankenlinien” (Hua 15/xix-xx). That Husserl’s main in-
terest in intersubjectivity was motivated by transcendental philosophical
concerns is a claim I have defended in extenso elsewhere (Zahavi 1996). In
this context, it is merely important to remember that this transcendental
interest also manifests itself in his analysis of empathy. This is why Husserl
in § 62 of Cartesianische Meditationen criticizes Scheler for having over-
looked the truly transcendental dimension of the problem, namely the fact
that intersubjectivity is involved in the very constitution of objectivity. Or
as he puts it, only constitutive phenomenology will provide the problem of
empathy with its true sense and proper method (Hua 1/173). A theory of
empathy consequently has far greater implications than one would expect.
It has ramifications for a transcendental theory of the objective world (Hua
15/5). But important as this dimension of the problem might be, it is one
I will by and large ignore in the following. My focus will squarely be on
the problem of how we experience others, since it is on this level that any
meaningful comparison with the proponents of embodied simulation must be situated.

b. Empathy and perception

In *Phänomenologische Psychologie* Husserl wrote as follows: “Die Intentionalität im eigenen Ich, die in das fremde Ich hineinführt, ist die sogenannte Einfühlung” (Hua 9/321). One of the recurrent questions that kept preoccupying Husserl was how to understand the intentional structure of empathy. On Husserl’s standard model, we have to distinguish between signitive, pictorial, and perceptual ways of intending an object: I can talk about a blossoming peach tree which I have never seen, but which I have heard is standing in the backyard, I can see a detailed drawing of the peach tree; or I can perceive the peach tree myself. Similarly, I can talk about how fantastic it must be to fly in helicopter, I can see a television program about it; or I can experience it myself. For Husserl these different ways of intending are not unrelated. On the contrary, there is a strict hierarchical relation between them, in the sense that the modes can be ranked according to their ability to give us the object as directly, originally and optimally as possible. The object can be experienced more or less directly, that is, it can be more or less present. The lowest and most empty way in which the object can be intended is in the signitive act. These (linguistic) acts certainly have a reference, but apart from that, the object is not given in any fleshed out manner. The pictorial acts have a certain intuitive content, but like the signitive acts, they intend the object indirectly. Whereas signitive acts intend the object via a contingent representation (a linguistic sign), pictorial acts intend the object via a representation (picture) which bears a certain resemblance to the object as seen from a certain perspective. It is only the actual perception, however, which gives us the object directly. This is the only type of intention which presents us with the object itself in its bodily presence (*leibhaftig*), or, as Husserl says, *in propria persona*. The tricky question is where to place empathy within this classification. The answer provided by Husserl is remarkably consistent throughout his career, though it is an answer that remains characterized by an important
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vacillation. Already in *Logische Untersuchungen* Husserl wrote that common speech credits us with percepts of other people’s inner experiences, we so to speak *see* their anger or pain. As he then goes on to say, such talk is to some extent correct. When a hearer perceives a speaker give voice to certain inner experiences, he also perceives these experiences themselves, but as Husserl then adds, the hearer doesn’t have an inner but only an outer perception of them (Hua 19/41). So on the one hand, Husserl argues that my experience of others has a quasi-perceptual character in the sense that it grasp the other him- or herself (Hua 13/24). On the other hand, Husserl also says that although the body of the other is intuitively given to me *in propria persona*, this is not the case with the other’s experiences. They can never be given to me in the same original fashion as my own experiences; they are not accessible to me through inner consciousness. Rather they are appresented through a special form of apperception, or to use a different terminology, they are co-intended and characterized by a certain co-presence (Hua 13/27). As Husserl puts it in *Ideen II*:


In the lecture course *Einleitung in die Philosophie* from 1922/23, Husserl again writes that I in ordinary parlance can be said to see and hear another, can be said to see that he is sad or happy. In fact, however, what I actually see is his body and bodily expressions, and founded on this perception, I can be said to empathically co-perceive his happiness, sadness or anger. Thus, if we talk about the whole human being, we might say that I see him, if we talk narrowly about the purely psychical, it is better to say that it is
What are the implications of this? Does empathy allow for a direct experience of the other, or is empathy necessarily indirect and mediated? These are the questions that Husserl kept struggling with. In some places, Husserl is rather unequivocal. He writes that empathy is a distinct and direct kind of empirical experience, one that allows the empathizing ego to experience the consciousness of the other (Hua 13/187). As it is formulated in *Ideen II*:

\[\text{Einfühlung ist nicht ein mittelbares Erfahren in dem Sinn, daß der Andere als psychophysisch Abhängiges von seinem Leibkörper erfähren würde, sondern eine unmittelbare Erfahrung vom Anderen (Hua 4/375).}\]

Husserl also claims that empathy is what allows the other to be present to me, perceptually present (Hua 15/514), and that the other is given to me originally in empathy, for what I see is not a sign, not a mere analogue, but rather the other (Hua 14/385, 29/182, 1/153, 15/506). Similarly, 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 (Hua 15/641). If I talk with another, if I look him in the eyes, I have the liveliest experience of his immediate presence. I am justified in saying that I “see him” qua person, and not merely qua body (Hua 4/375). Indeed,

\[\text{Es wäre Widersinn zu sagen, dass sie nicht, wie wir sagen, erfahren in der Weise dieser ursprünglichen Bekundung der Einfühlung, sondern erschlossen sei. Denn jede Hypothese eines fremden Subjektes setzt die „Wahrnehmung“ dieses Subjektes als fremden schon voraus, und diese Wahrnehmung ist eben die Einfühlung (Hua 14/352).}\]

Empathy is what allows us to know the experiential life of other, or as Husserl puts it in a text from 1909: “Nun verschwindet alle Schwierigkeit, wenn eben die Einfühlung als Gegebenheitsbewusstsein für fremdes Bewusstsein gelten darf” (Hua 13/20). At the same time, however, Husserl also says that even the most perfect empathy is indirect and that the perception of the psychical life of another lacks the originality of self-perception and he denies that it can give us the empathized experience itself in its original
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I proceed to carefully investigate the perceptual givenness of the other, I will realize that only his body is given perceptually to me. The foreign I and its experiences can never be perceived by me, but only be represented in a special co-presence, though Husserl then proceeds to emphasize that this empathic representation is completely unlike any other kind of representation (Hua 15/354). A similar train of thought is articulated in a longer passage from August 1930:


Whereas Husserl consequently denies that empathy provides me with an inner perception of the other’s experiences – i.e., although it doesn’t provide me with first-person access to the experiences in question, since if that had happened, the other’s experiences would have become the empathizer’s own experiences, and no longer remained the experiences of another (Hua 15/12, 1/139) –, he would claim that empathy involves a perception of the other (Hua 13/343, 13/187), i.e., that it amounts to a form of person perception, and that it furthermore would be a mistake to measure empathy against the standards of either self-perception or external object perception. Empathy has its own kind of originality, its own kind of fulfillment and corroboration and its own criteria of success and failure (Hua 6/189, 36/65, 36/122, 14/385, 13/225, 14/352).

To strengthen the claim concerning the perceptual character of empathy, Husserl occasionally compares the kind of interplay between presentation and appresentation that we find in empathy with the mixture of presentation and appresentation that we find in ordinary object perception. When I perceive an object, say, a sofa, the object is never given in its totality but always incompletely, in a certain restricted profile or adumbration. It is consequently never the entire sofa, including its front, backside, underside, and inside which is given intuitively, not even in the most perfect perception. Despite this, the object of my perception is exactly the sofa and not the visually appearing profile. Our perceptual consciousness is consequently characterized by the fact that we persistently transcend the intuitively given profile in order to grasp the object itself. That is, perception furnishes us with a full object-consciousness, even though only part of the perceived object is intuitively given (Hua 16/49-50). Husserl’s explanation for why we can be said to see more than what is given, for why perception involves a presence-in-absence, is well known. He argues that our intuitive consciousness of the present profile of the object is accompanied by an intentional consciousness of the object’s horizon of absent profiles. The meaning of the presented profile is, in short, dependent upon its relation to the absent profiles of the object, and no perceptual awareness of the object
would be possible if our awareness were restricted to the intuitively given.

Die uneigentlich erscheinenden gegenständlichen Bestimmtheiten sind mit aufgefaßt, aber nicht “versinnlicht”, nicht durch Sinnliches, d.i. Empfindungsmaterial dargestellt. Daß sie mit aufgefaßt sind, ist evident, denn sonst hätten wir gar keine Gegenstände vor Augen, nicht einmal eine Seite, da diese ja nur durch den Gegenstand Seite sein kann (Hua 16/55).

In other words: in order for a perception to be a perception-of-an-object, it must be permeated by a horizontal intentionality which intends the absent profiles, bringing them to a certain appresentation (Hua 9/183). Importantly, however, although object-perception involves such a mixture of presentation and appresentation, we still say that it is the object itself and not merely the intuitively appearing front that we perceive (Hua 13/26, 1/151). Moreover, what is presented and what is appresented are not given in separation and are not united by means of some inference. The same arguably holds true for our experience of others (Hua 14/332). Of course, this is not to say that there are not also important differences between empathy and object-perception. Not only do I, according to Husserl, in the face-to-face encounter grasp the other and what he or she is living through much more vividly than the backside of an object, which I don’t see (Hua 14/486). But more importantly, whereas the absent, and merely appresented, profiles of the object can in turn become intuitively given for me, namely if the requisite movements are carried out, this can never happen with the other’s experiences (Hua 1/139). This is an important qualification that also points to the limits of any comparison of other-perception and object-perception. But still, Husserl’s main aim is just to stress that even the simplest form of perception involves appresentation, and that this doesn’t jeopardize the existence of true perceptual experience.

But let us return to the issue of directness and indirectness. As mentioned, there is a certain tension, or uncertainty, in Husserl’s account. I think, however, that it is possible to reconcile Husserl’s different claims by means of some slight reformulations. Husserl’s occasional insistence on the indirect nature of empathy is obviously motivated by his worry that any claim concerning a direct experiential understanding of others would
amount to the claim that we have the same kind of first-personal access to
other people’s consciousness that we have to our own. But this worry is, I
think, ultimately misguided. It assumes that there is a single golden stan-
dard of what directness amounts to, and that a direct access to one’s own
mental life constitutes the standard against which everything else has to be
measured. In other contexts, however, Husserl has been careful to point out
that it is unacceptable to transfer the demands we put on evidence in one
domain to other domains where these demands are in principle incapable
of being realized (Hua 3/321). Employing that insight, one could respect
the difference between first-person and third-person access to psychological
states without making the mistake of restricting and equating experiential
access with first-person access. To put it differently, why not argue that
it is possible to experience minds in more than one way? Arguably, there
is no more direct way of knowing that another is in pain than seeing him
writhe in pain. By contrast, noticing a bottle of pain-killers next to his
bedside together with an empty glass of water and concluding that he is in
pain is an example of knowing indirectly or by way of inference (Bennett
& Hacker 2003, 89, 93). To put it differently, to experience (rather than
merely imagine, simulate or theorize about) another’s psychological states
is precisely to experience the intentional and expressive behavior of the
other.

The fact that I can be mistaken and deceived is no argument against the
experiential character of the access. ¹ Moreover, the fact that my experien-
tial access to the minds of others differs from my experiential access to my
own mind is not an imperfection or shortcoming. On the contrary, it is a
difference that is constitutional. It is precisely because of this difference,
precisely because of this asymmetry, that we can claim that the minds we

¹That we have an experience of others, and do not have to make do with mere inferences
or imaginative projections is also not to say that everything is open to view. As Husserl points
out, the perception of others is always partial and is always open for correction (Hua 13/225).
In fact, there will always be an indeterminate horizon of not expressed interiority (Hua 20/70),
and a complete knowledge of the other will forever remain impossible. Such knowledge would
for one require me to possess full insight into the other’s individual historicity and genetic
self-constitution, and this is something I can only ever disclose in part. Just as I for that matter
can only disclose part of my own, which is why my own self-knowledge will also always
remain partial (Hua 15/631-632).
experience are other minds. As Husserl points out, had I had the same access to the consciousness of the other as I have to my own, the other would cease being an other and would instead become a part of me (Hua 1/139). In addition, although I do not have access to the first-personal character of the other’s experience, the fact that the other’s experience has this elusive surplus is indeed accessible to me, as Husserl repeatedly emphasizes (Hua 1/144, 15/631). To demand more, to claim that I would only have a real experience of the other if I experienced her feelings or thoughts in the same way as she herself does, is nonsensical, and fails to respect what is distinct and unique about the givenness of the other. It would imply that I would only experience an other if I experienced her in the same way that I experience myself, i.e., it would lead to an abolition of the difference between self and other, to a negation of that which makes the other other. To quote Lévinas, the absence of the other is exactly his presence as other (Lévinas 1979, 89).

As already mentioned, Husserl struggled with these issues throughout the years. What he wrote early on in Ideen I remains pretty representative:


My only concern about this phrasing is that it might ultimately have been more consistent if Husserl instead of trying to combine the view that empathy does provide us with access to the experiences of others, but not originarily, had instead said that empathy gives us the experiences of others themselves originarily, but then simply made it clear that empathic understanding (and correlatively the empathic givenness of others) has its
own distinct optimality, and shouldn’t be measured against the originary
givenness of self. This would, I think, have been the natural step to take.

Some might consider this a mere terminological fix to a serious philo-
sophical challenge. By simply stipulating that we in the domain of social
cognition ought to operate with a deflated notion of experiential access,
one that entitles one to say that one is directly acquainted with another’s
psychological state simply by perceiving it in the other’s intentional and
expressive behavior, phenomenologists mistakenly think they can avoid
the threat of solipsism and circumvent the problem of other minds. I don’t
think this objection is justified, but my main concern for now is merely to
emphasize that any phenomenological claim concerning a direct experien-
tial access to another’s psychological state is not in any tension with the
important point that we do not have access to other people’s states “as if
they were our own”. We must respect the difference between self-ascription
and other-ascription, between a first-person perspective and a third-person
perspective, but we should also conceive of it in a manner that avoids giving
rise to the mistaken view that only my own experiences are given to me
and that the behavior of the other shields his experiences from me and
makes their very existence hypothetical (Avramides 2001, 187).¹

c. Pairing and analogical transference

Claiming that we in empathy enjoy a direct, experiential, understanding
of others is not to say that we should take empathy as a primitive and
unanalyzable factum brutum, as Husserl accused Scheler of doing (Hua
14/335). It is no coincidence that Husserl labeled Lipps’ appeal to funda-
mental instincts a “refuge of phenomenological ignorance” and considered
it a poor substitute for a proper analysis of the phenomenon in question
(Hua 13/24). To put it differently, and to paraphrase A.D. Smith, Husserl is
not trying to explain our awareness of others by appeal to empathy, rather
the term is a label for an accomplishment, and the task Husserl sets himself

¹For further reflections on how the phenomenological analysis of empathy complements
and challenges core assumptions in contemporary discussions of social cognition, see Zahavi
is to explain how empathy is possible as an intentional achievement (Smith 2003, 213).

One of Husserl’s recurrent ideas is that our empathic understanding of foreign subjectivity involves an element of apperception or interpretation, though he is also adamant that the apperception in question is neither an act of thinking, nor some kind of inference (Hua 15/15, 1/141). Occasionally he speaks of the process as involving what he calls analogical transference, and it is in this context that the central notion of pairing is introduced (Hua 15/15).

What is pairing? According to Husserl’s general account of intentional patterns of understanding are gradually established through a process of sedimentation and they thereby come to influence subsequent experiences (Hua 11/186). What I have learnt in the past doesn’t leave me untouched. It shapes my understanding and interpretation of any new objects, by reminding me (in a completely tacit manner) of what I have experienced before. My current understanding of x will in short be aided by my previous experience of something analogous (Hua 13/345), and ultimately all apperceptive connections, all interpretations, might be said to rely on such analogical links to past experiences (Hua 1/141). To exemplify, after first having learned the function of a scissor, the next time a child sees a scissor, the child will immediately apprehend its functionality. It will do so, without performing any inference and without explicitly having to think of or recall the first scissor. According to Husserl, the apprehension of the new scissor as a scissor contains an associative reference to the original scissor, which is established passively (Hua 1/141). Similarly, assume that you for the first time have seen and touched a guava. Next time you see one, your prior familiarity with its tactile qualities will infuse your experience of the new fruit. If you then happen to also taste the new exemplar this new experience will in turn affect your apprehension of the first fruit. Now, the relevance of these examples for empathy is seemingly straightforward. When I encounter another, my prior self-experience will serve as a reservoir of meaning that is transferred onto the other in a purely passive manner. As a result of this, a phenomenal unity is established. As Husserl writes, Mit der ersteren Eigentümlichkeit hängt nahe zusammen, daß ego
und alter ego immerzu und notwendig in ursprünglicher Paarung gegeben sind. [...] Erläutern wir zunächst das Wesentliche der Paarung (bzw. Mehrheitsbildung) überhaupt. Sie ist eine Urform derjenigen passiven Synthesis, die wir gegenüber der passiven Synthesis der Identifikation als Assoziation bezeichnen. In einer paarenden Assoziation ist das Charakteristische, daß im primitivsten Falle zwei Daten in der Einheit eines Bewußtseins in Abgehobenheit anschaulich gegeben sind und auf Grund dessen wesensmäßig schon in purer Passivität, also gleichgültig ob beachtet oder nicht, als unterschieden Erscheinende phänomenologisch eine Einheit der Ähnlichkeit begründen, also eben stets als Paar konstituiert sind (Hua 1/142).

Alter ego refers to ego – and vice-versa (Hua 14/530). The latter point is crucial. The transfer of meaning occurring through the process of pairing is not unidirectional. We are dealing with a reciprocal transference (Hua 15/252), or as Husserl puts it in *Cartesianische Meditationen*, there is a “mutual transfer of sense” (Hua 1/142, cf. Merleau-Ponty 1964, 118).\(^1\) In coming to understand the other, I draw on what I know from my own case, but through my encounter with the other, my own self-experience is also modified. In fact, not only that but Husserl even speaks of “a mutual awakening” where both are overlaid with the “sense of the other” (Hua 1/142) thereby suggesting that the reciprocal transfer happens simultaneously. The fact that the transfer of meaning is bidirectional speaks against the suggestion that we should be dealing with a simple form of projection, where I ultimately only find in the other, what I have put there myself. The latter implication would also go against Husserl’s repeated insistence that empathy allows us to encounter true transcendence, and that our consciousness in empathy transcends itself and is confronted with, as he puts it, otherness of a completely new kind (Hua 14/8-9, 14/442). Indeed, throughout his writings on this topic, Husserl insists again and again on the absolute otherness of the other. As he writes in a text from 1908, your consciousness is for my consciousness absolute “Aussensein” and so is my consciousness for you (Hua 13/6).

\(^1\)See by comparison Theunissen’s more critical reading (1977, 62), as well as Yamaguchi’s reply (1982, 87).
Husserl’s insistence on this latter point occasionally makes him question whether analogy really plays as fundamental a role as he is wont to claim. After all, as he admits, a process of analogizing doesn’t lead to the apprehension of anything truly new (Hua 4/168). As he even writes in a text from 1914-15, “es findet […] keine Analogisierung statt, keine Analogieschluss, keine Übertragung durch Analogie […]. Es wird ohne weiteres die “Apperzeption” des fremden Seelenlebes vollzogen” (Hua 13/338-339).

Criticizing what might count as a version of simulation theory, Husserl also insists that it is nonsense to claim that I in order to understand that the other is angry must experience anger myself, and that my own anger should somehow function as analog for the other’s anger. Empathy is precisely not a kind of reproduction or reduplication of oneself (Hua 13/188, 14/525).

As Husserl also points out, to experience the other is not like experiencing a transformation of oneself, like what might take place in imagination. Such imaginative transformation only provides me with myself as different (Hua 15/314). It doesn’t provide me with the other. Furthermore, although it is true that we sometimes imagine what it must be like for the other, what the other must be going through, it is simply unconvincing to claim that every act of empathy involves such imagination. When we empathically understand the other we do so immediately and often without any imaginative depiction, and in those circumstances where we do depict the other’s experience imaginatively, we precisely consider that an exception (Hua 13/188).

Despite these occasional misgivings, Husserl does, however, normally stress the importance of analogy. When I, for instance, apperceive a foreign body as a lived body, we are, on his account, dealing with an analogical apperception that draws on and involves a re-presentation of my own self-experience (Hua 13/251). Indeed, insofar as the apprehension of the other involves re-presentation, the latter necessarily points back to a proper presentation, which is constituted by my own immediate self-experience (Hua 13/288). As Husserl puts it in various texts, “subjectivity” is primordially present to me in virtue of my self-experience and is only then apperceptively carried over to the other (Hua 9/242, 1/140, 8/62, 14/295). To that extent bodily self-experience constitutes a foundation for the perception of
embodied others, which is why I first have to have a perception of my own body, before any experience of other subjects can arise (13/333), though Husserl also points out that we are not dealing with a temporal genesis, and that the self-experience in question doesn’t have to be temporally antecedent (Hua 1/150). Moreover, the self-experience that needs to be in play is a “Durchgangserfahrung” and not a terminating experience (Hua 14/468). It is not a question of actively comparing the two of us, nor does my body first have to be an object of attention, but there must be some form of self-givenness, otherwise no transfer of meaning could occur (Hua 13/336).

At this stage, however, Husserl does voice a concern. Even if it is true that I always enjoy a bodily self-experience, the only thing that could motivate an analogizing apprehension or apperceptive transfer of sense would presumably be a perceived similarity between the body over there and my own body (Hua 1/140). But it is hardly true that I originally observe my own body in the same way I perceive the body of others. Originally, I don’t perceive my own lived boy as a spatial object. But isn’t this what is required (Hua 13/344, 15/661)? Moreover, occasionally Husserl seems to claim that I only learn of the identity between my own lived body and my externally appearing body through the other, i.e., by adopting the other’s perspective on my own body (Hua 13/420). As he puts it in a text dating from 1921, the apprehension of my own body as an object and as a physical thing is a mediated and secondary experience. It is one I only acquire through the other (Hua 14/61, 14/63, 14/238, 14/322). But if this is correct, his argumentation would seem to involve a vicious circle and consequently fail.

Husserl does, however, suggest a few possible ways out. First of all, although he considers a thorough objectification of the body to be something intersubjectively mediated, he also speaks of the lived body as a continuously externalizing interiority, and claims that this exteriority is co-given as part of self-experience (Hua 14/491). Consider for instance the following intriguing consideration, where Husserl faults his original account of empathy for having failed to consider the grundwesentliche Rolle der Verlautbarung in der eigenen selbster-
To put it differently, one of the issues frequently emphasized in Husserl’s phenomenological analysis of the body is its peculiar two-sidedness. My body is given to me as interiority, as a volitional structure, and as a dimension of sensing, but it is also given as a visually and tactually appearing exteriority. And the latter experience, according to Husserl, is precisely what is needed for empathy to be possible (Hua 4/165-166, 15/652). One reason why I am able to recognize other embodied subjects is that my own bodily self-experience is characterized by this remarkable interplay between ipseity and alterity (Hua 8/62, 14/457, 13/263). This might be what Husserl was referring to when he wrote that the possibility of sociality presupposes a certain intersubjectivity of the body (Hua 4/297).

Secondly, when speaking of the resemblance between own body and the body of others, we shouldn’t only focus on the presence of similar visual appearances. As Husserl writes, the other body also behaves similarly, it moves and acts in similar ways (Hua 14/280, 13/289), and my continuous experience of it as a foreign subjective body is precisely conditional upon my experience of its continuous and harmonious behavior (Hua 1/144). More important for the pairing might consequently be the resemblance of intentional behavior and expressive movements, a resemblance arguably detected by some form of cross-modal perception.¹ In fact, Husserl even writes, and this does sound remarkably like formulations found in Gallese,

¹If this is correct, it would qualify a recent claim by De Preester. In her 2008 paper, she argues for the following significant difference between Merleau-Ponty and Husserl’s account of pairing: Whereas the mediating term between ego and alter ego for Husserl is bodily similarity, it is for Merleau-Ponty the intended object of action to which ego and alter ego are equally directed. De Preester consequently claims that only Merleau-Ponty holds the view that it is by having the same intentional object and by trying to accomplish the same goal that I come to understand the other’s actions (De Preester 2008, 136-137).
when I perceive the movement of the foreign body, it is as if I were over there, as if I were moving my limbs (Hua 15/642, 4/164). When I see the foreign hand, I feel my own hand. If I see the other hand move, I am inclined to move my own hand. My own kinesthetic system is affected by my perception of his moving body and by my anticipation of his future movements (Hua 14/527, 15/642). But as Husserl is then careful to add, this doesn’t entail that I project what I experience in myself into the other (Hua 13/311).

How should we reconcile Husserl’s various statements? On the one hand, he emphasizes the involved transfer of sense and the role of analogy, on the other he questions its relevance, outright rejects the centrality of projection and repeatedly accentuates the transcendence of the other.

One way to reconcile Husserl’s thoughts on this issue, at least to some extent, is as follows. When Husserl insists that the original givenness of my own lived body, the Urleib or primal body, constitutes the reference-and anchor point for any experience of other bodies, and when he claims that every apperception has an origin which prescribes a certain norm of meaning, and that this necessary Urnorm or primal norm is the foundation of every experience of others, which necessarily involve an intentional modification of the norm (Hua 13/57, 14/125-6), one might understand the notion of Urnorm in two different ways. Either one can understand it as a kind of matrix that I rely and draw on when understanding others. On this reading, Husserl would claim that the subject interprets others in terms of a sense of mentality that it has first grasped in foro interno and which it then projects more or less successfully onto others. Another possibility, however, is to see the self-experience in question as a necessary contrast foil on the basis of which others can be experienced as others. To put it differently, the other might be a self in his/ her own right, but the other can only appear as another for me in relation to and contrast to my own self-experience. But in this case, my self-experience doesn’t constitute the model; rather it is that against which the other’s difference can reveal itself. To put it differently, although Husserl would insist that (bodily) self-experience is a precondition for other-experience, there is a decisive difference between arguing that the former is a necessary condition
(and that there would be no other-experience in its absence) and claiming that self-experience somehow serves as a model for other-experience, as if interpersonal understanding is basically a question of projecting oneself into the other. As already pointed out, I am not convinced that Husserl defended the latter view.

d. The object of empathy

So far, the discussion has suggested that empathy for Husserl is a unitary concept and that its object is the other. Both assumptions must be modified. An important and often overlooked aspect of Husserl’s account of empathy is precisely his careful distinction between various levels of empathy. As Husserl points out in his criticism of Lipps, one of the problems with Lipps’ account was that he exclusively linked empathy to the understanding of expressions (Hua 13/70). Not only was Lipps’ analysis, according to Husserl, too coarse grained in that it failed to distinguish sufficiently between different types of expressions, say, the expression of temperament, character, resolution or anger. That is, Lipps didn’t observe the difference between, say, the way temperament is expressed in the timing of bodily gestures and the way intentions are expressed in bodily movements, or between the facial expression of specific emotions, such as anger or fear, and the linguistic expression of thoughts. In all cases, we are dealing with expressions, but of quite different kinds (Hua 13/76). But even more importantly, according to Husserl, in order to even apprehend something as an expression, let alone apprehend that which is expressed in the expression, one must first have apprehended the perceptually given body as a lived body, i.e., most fundamentally as a sensing body (Hua 13/70, 13/66).
This is why Husserl argues that the perception of the other presupposes an understanding of the other’s body (Hua 13/74), and why he claims that the most fundamental form of empathy is one that targets this somatological level (Hua 13/440, 1/148). It is a process that happens passively and associatively, and which might also be called a form of animal apperception or experience of animality (Hua 13/455, 13/476). Husserl then contrasts this kind of empathy with a more active form that targets the understanding of that which is expressed in bodily expressions, namely beliefs, decisions, attitudes (Hua 13/435). In a manuscript from 1931-32, he operates with even more levels. The first level of empathy is the apper-
und sind im Wechselverständnis geistig beieinander, in Berührung.

Sich wechselseitig in die Augen sehen, sich wechselseitig im wahrnehmenden Bewusstsein auf einanderbezogen vorfinden, füreinander originär dasein und erfassend, aufmerkend, sich wechselseitig geistig berührend aufeinander gerichtet sein (Hua 14/211).

When I seek to influence the other spiritually and not merely as a physical object, and when the other is aware that he is being addressed and when he reciprocates, we are dealing with communicative acts through which a higher conscious interpersonal unity, a we, is established, and through which the world acquires the character of a truly social world (Hua 15/472, 13/498, 4/192-194).¹

As for the question regarding the proper object of empathy, Husserl actually denies that I normally thematize the other as an object when empathizing.² Rather, when empathically understanding the other, I so to speak go along with his or her experiences, and attend to their object (Hua 36/617, 15/427, 15/513). It is consequently important to emphasize that the other, rather than being given to me simply as a nucleus of experiences, is given as a center of orientation, as a perspective on the world. To put it differently, the other is not given in isolation or purity for me, rather the other is given as intentional, as directed at the same world as I, and the other’s world, and the objects that are there for him, is given along with the other (Hua 14/140, 14/287, 13/411, 4/168, 1/154). This is of course, one reason why our perception of others is unlike our ordinary perception

¹As Husserl remarks in a well-known passage: “Leibniz sagte, Monaden haben keine Fenster. Ich aber meine, jede Seelenmonade hat unendlich viele Fenster, nämlich jede verständnisvolle Wahrnehmung eines fremden Leibes ist solch ein Fenster, und jedesmal, wenn ich sage, bitte, lieber Freund, und er antwortet mir verständnisvoll, ist aus unseren offenen Fenstern ein Ichakt meines Ich in das Freundes-Ich übergegangen und umgekehrt, eine wechselseitige Motivation hat zwischen uns eine reale Einheit, ja wirklich eine reale Einheit hergestellt” (Hua 13/473).

²By contrast, Husserl seems to think that our primary object in sympathy, care, and pity (Mitleid) is the other him- or herself and not the object of, say, his or her distress. To use Husserl’s own example, if the other is sad over the fact that his mother had died, I am also sad about this, and sad about the fact that he is sad. But it is his sadness which is my primary object, it only subsequently and conditional upon that that the death of his mother is something that saddens me (Hua 14/189-190, 37/194). More generally speaking, Husserl emphasizes the distinction between empathy and sympathy (just as he distinguishes both of these from emotional contagion). Whereas empathy is an epistemic attitude that doesn’t have to involve love, sympathy involves care and concern (Hua 37/194).
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. As Husserl puts it in Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität
II:

Husserl consequently wants to emphasize the interrelation between
the experience of others and the constitution of a shared world. As he
points out, the experience of experiencing others necessarily presupposes
accepting the validity of some of the others’ experiences. If nothing else,
my experience of the lived body of another necessarily presupposes that
the very same body I perceive externally is also sensed by the other (Hua
15/158-159, 13/252, 14/83), which is why he characterized the body of the
other as the first intersubjective datum, as the first object that is accessed
by a plurality of subjects (Hua 14/110). This is obviously an idea Husserl
draws on in his account of the constitution of objectivity, since he also
defends the view that my experience of the significance and validity of
objects changes the moment I realize that others experience the same
objects as I (cf. Zahavi 1996). At the same time, however, and this is of
particular importance in this context, Husserl also notes that I am part of
what the other intends. So again, when I experience others, I do not merely
experience them as psychophysical objects in the world, rather I experience
them as subjects who experience worldly objects, myself included (Hua
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To put it differently, through my experience of others, I also come to attain a new experience of myself. Occasionally, Husserl refers to such cases, where my self-experience and my experience of an empathized subject who empathize with me coincide, as a case of higher-order empathy (Hua 14/315). He claims that it is through this process of mediated self-experience, by indirectly experiencing myself as the one viewed by others, that I come to experience myself as human (Hua 4/167-9, 15/13, 15/665).

Why is this important? Because, as Husserl proceeds to point out, I am not what I am for myself, independently of the other, nor is the other independent of me. Everybody is for himself and at the same time for the other in an inseparable being-for-one-another. On occasion, Husserl does speak of empathy as involving a situation where one ego mirrors itself directly in the other (Hua 15/7, 14/300), and of the other as a reflection (Spiegelung) of myself, though as he then immediately adds, the other is not really a reflection (15/7). But on the basis of further analysis – and this is of course also in line with his account of pairing – he ultimately concludes, in a passage from the thirties, that we are not dealing with an ineffective mirroring (kraftlose Spiegelung), but that the being of self and other are constitutively intertwined (Hua 15/191).

4. Conclusion

Let me now turn to the question of whether Gallese’s notion of embodied simulation is in line with Husserl’s account of empathy. Can his proposal be said to constitute a further development and perhaps even a scientific vindication of Husserl’s phenomenological account? Unfortunately, the question is too complex to really allow for a simple yes or no answer.

On the one hand, there does indeed seem to be some striking similarities. For Husserl, the most basic form of empathy is one involving the pairing of self and other. The pairing in question takes place between acting and expressive bodies, it draws on a capacity for cross-modal matching, and it is passive in the sense of not being initiated voluntarily or as a result of deliberation or reflection. And as Thompson points out, this “pheno-
menological conception of the bodily basis of empathy can be linked to
the growing body of psychological and neurophysiological evidence for
coupling mechanisms linking self and other at sensorimotor and affective
levels” (Thompson 2007, 393). More specifically, and here I am quoting
Ratcliffe, “neuroscientific findings can provide support for Husserl and can
also be integrated into the interpretation of phenomenological descriptions,
by clarifying the kind of relation described and showing how it need not
be something mysterious or even impossible” (Ratcliffe 2006, 348).

On the other hand, however, one shouldn’t overlook what might be
some important differences. First of all, as we have seen Husserl is very
explicit about the need for distinguishing various levels of empathy (and
interpersonal understanding). And although he would claim that the first
level is constituted by a passive and involuntary associative bonding of self
and other on the basis of their bodily similarity, he would never agree to the
claim that this amounts to the full range of interpersonal understanding.
If we turn to the defenders of embodied simulation, we will, however,
find slightly conflicting views regarding its explanatory scope. How much
can mirror-resonance mechanisms explain? Do they merely target the
foundations of interpersonal understanding, or can they more or less
explain every aspect of social cognition, from an understanding of the
movements and actions of others, to an understanding of their emotions,
sensations and intentions? It is here informative to consider a criticism
that Borg (2007) and Jacob (2008) have directed against what they take to
be the inflated claims made by some proponents of embodied simulation.
Borg and Jacob both claim that although mirror neurons might help us
decode another agent’s motor intentions, they cannot help us determine
his or her prior intentions. Or to put it differently, although they might
help us understand that the perceived movement is a goal-directed act of,
say, grasping, they can’t tell us why it happened. In response, Gallese has
defended a deflationary take on what it means to determine the intention
of others, and argued that determining why a given act is executed can be
equivalent to detecting the goal of the still not executed and impending
subsequent act (Gallese 2007a, 661-662). But even if one accepts this, and
a fortiori the claim that mirror neurons are involved in the detection of
intentions, there is obviously much more that needs to be in place before we can be said to fully understand the actions of others, their whys, meanings and motives, i.e., what others are up to, why others are doing what they are doing, and what that means to them (cf. Schutz 1967, 23–24). And it is by no means clear that mirror neurons are capable of providing that information. I cannot at this point assess Gallese’s claims regarding the role of mirror neurons in emotion understanding, but the point I want to make is merely that the plausibility of the mirror neuron hypothesis increases in reverse proportion to its alleged explanatory scope. It might not only be wiser to opt for a quite modest claim – and in fact, in some places Gallese does concede that an emphasis on the importance of embodied simulation in no way rules out that more sophisticated cognitive mentalizing skills might also be needed, and that the two are not mutually exclusive (Gallese 2007b, 10) – but doing so might also increase the compatibility between his proposal and Husserl’s account.

Secondly, Gallese is quite explicit in arguing that the mirror neuron system allows for a direct experiential understanding of others (Gallese 2007b, 9). At the same time, however, he explicitly and repeatedly aligns himself with simulation theory and, like Lipps, considers empathy a form of inner imitation (Gallese 2003a, 519). But isn’t there a tension here? Isn’t the reliance on and reference to inner imitation precisely premised on the assumption that we do not enjoy a direct experiential access to others? Isn’t it precisely because other people’s mental states are taken to be unobservable and inherently invisible that some have insisted that we must rely on internal simulations in order to make the leap from the perceptual input which is taken to be psychologically meaningless to the output, which is the ascription of mental states to the other. In short, isn’t the assumption precisely that we need internal simulation in order to supplement the input with information coming from elsewhere in order to generate the required output? This certainly seems to be Gallese’s view for as he writes the observer must rely on his or her own internal motor knowledge (provided by the mirror neurons) in order to translate the observed movement, “in principle, devoid of meaning for the observer – into something that the observer is able to understand” (Gallese 2009,
But if this is correct, it does seem to commit embodied simulation to a form of projectivism – where I ultimately only find in the other, what I have put there myself –, and as I have already indicated, I very much doubt this is in line with Husserl’s view.

Thirdly, and in direct continuation of this, what we find in Husserl is a recurrent emphasis on and respect for the otherness and alterity of the other. This is also partly why Husserl distances himself from the idea that the best way to conceive of the relation between self and other is in terms of a mirroring. Though, as we have also seen, another reason is that he takes mirroring to be too static a concept. It doesn’t capture the dynamic and dialectical intertwining between self and other. Husserl’s view on this seems in obvious tension with the persistent emphasis by mirror neuron theorists on the importance of mirroring. However, it is again important not to overlook that Gallese himself does recognize that there are limits to what the mirror neuron model can explain. He even concedes that imitation and self-other identity doesn’t really do the trick of accounting for interpersonal understanding, since there – in contrast to what is required in the case of emotional contagion –, has to be difference as well, that is, the other must preserve his or her character of otherness (Gallese 2007b, 11, 2009, 527). Furthermore, in a recent publication Gallese has even gone so far as to admit that the very mirror metaphor might be misleading, since it suggests the presence of an exact match between object and observer thereby disregarding individual differences (Gallese 2009, 531).

Fourthly, and most importantly, any comparison of Husserl’s phenomenological account of empathy with the attempt to explain empathy in terms of mirror-resonance mechanisms shouldn’t forget that we are dealing with accounts targeting a personal and a subpersonal level respectively, and

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1 For more on this topic, see Derrida 1967, Waldenfels 1989, Zahavi 1999.

2 Though it must also be noted that this distinction is one that is not always sufficiently respected by mirror neuron theorists. They describe embodied simulation as unconscious and automatic, but also as pre-reflective and experience-based (cf. Gallese 2003a, 521, 2007b, 10). Compare also, for instance, Iacoboni’s claim that Lipps’ work in retrospect points directly at a role for mirror neurons (Iacoboni 2009, 108). Iacoboni refers to Lipps’ famous example with the tightrope walker. On Lipps’ account, when people watch the acrobat on the wire, they feel themselves inside the acrobat. And as Iacoboni then continues, Lipps’ “phenomenological
as long as one is not so naïve as to believe in straightforward isomorphism
it is not at all obvious that such accounts can be compared in any direct
fashion. For the very same reason, it might be best to avoid the claim that
the discovery of the mirror neurons has confirmed Husserl’s phenomeno-
logical account or that the latter supports the mirror neuron hypothesis. A
more prudent and far more cautious claim would be that work on mirror
neurons as well as other neuroscientific findings can complement the phe-
nomenological description by clarifying the empathic relation described
and showing “how it need not be something mysterious or even impossible”
(Ratliff 2006, 336).

A final observation: Even if one went further than I have done and
ultimately concluded that there are in fact some substantial and perhaps
even remarkable similarities between the phenomenological proposal and
the mirror resonance hypothesis, this would still leave various questions
unanswered. First of all, are the proposals ultimately sound? To put it dif-
f erent ly, the presence of similarities is, of course, quite compatible with the
possibility that both accounts might be severely deficient or even outright
wrong. Secondly, would the presence of such similarities demonstrate that
Husserl’s phenomenological account – contrary to the claim made by some
of his defenders – is really a version of simulation theory, or would the right
conclusion to draw be the opposite, namely to question whether Gallese’s
proposal of embodied simulation is really a form of simulationism at all.
Let me emphasize that this isn’t simply a dispute about terminology. What
is at stake here is the question of whether a simulationist interpretation of
mirror neurons is the best and most coherent interpretation, or whether
Husserl’s phenomenological account might constitute a more adequate
framework for the conceptualization and interpretation of the role of these
resonance phenomena. Is it for instance better to talk of such resonance in
terms of a perceptual elicitation than in terms of a simulation (Gallagher
2007)?

As this last comment ought to remind us, our theoretical models and

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description of watching the acrobat is eerily predictive of the pattern of activity displayed by
mirror neurons that fire both when we grasp and when we see someone else grasping, as if we
were inside that person” (Iacoboni 2009, 108-109).
the way we conceive of, say, intersubjectivity obviously influence our
interpretation of the empirical findings. This is something we should not
forget when discussing the relation between empathy and mirror neurons,
and between phenomenology and neuroscience, and when we assess the
question that has been lurking in the background of this entire discussion,

namely the feasibility and desirability of a naturalized phenomenology (cf.
Zahavi 2010a).

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